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Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage

St Maurice

(815 words)

The story of the martyrdom (see also [Martyrs](#)) of St Maurice and of the Theban legion is told by Eucherius, a bishop of Lyon in the middle of the fifth century. The text relates that, at the end of the third century, a legion constituted of 6600 soldiers under the orders of Maurice and coming from Thebes, in Egypt, stopped at Agaune, in Switzerland. The emperor Maximilian ordered their slaughter because the soldiers refused to sacrifice to the pagan idols; in another version of the story, the mass murder was due to their refusal to persecute a Christian tribe called the "Bagaude." A century later, the bishop Theodore found the remains of the corpses of Maurice and of the whole legion. He built a basilica at this place and many pilgrims rushed to venerate St Maurice. In 515, Sigismond, the king of Burgundy, founded the abbey of St-Maurice, whose order is governed by the *laus perennis* (perpetual prayer).

In 1225, the abbot Nantelme commissioned the making of a shrine to house the remains of St Maurice as attests the inscription on the roof. The construction of this shrine is very modest: an elongated house shape with a single roof. Narratives scenes are engraved in gold on a dark background. There are three scenes on each side framed by foliage-patterned bands. On one side of the roof, Maurice sits enthroned with Sigismond at his right and with Gundebald and Giscald, Sigismond's sons, at his left. Beneath, Maurice has his head cut off and four soldiers are about to suffer the same fate. To the left, Maximilien is ordering the murder. On the other side, the Church and the Synagogue flank the Crucifixion, and beneath are representations of the Annunciation, the Nativity. The three [Magi](#) are shown visiting the enthroned Virgin and Child on one of the smaller sides of the shrine, while Christ giving blessing is depicted on the other smaller side.

At an unknown date and for an unknown reason, the relics of Maurice were translated into a medieval reliquary called the "shrine of St Maurice," fashioned of pieces of a former *antependium*, as shown by Daniel Thurre. This altar frontal represented Christ, two angels, all

the apostles and two more figures, probably donors. Of those the Christ figure, the angels, and six apostles remain. The iconography is not as clearly related to St Maurice as that of the shrine of Nantelme. The reassembly occurred between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, judging by analysis of the wood. The gold and silver shrine has a more elaborate shape than the former one. On the base, on each side, we find four apostles in high relief, seated under arches. On the shorter sides, also in high relief, are a Christ in Majesty and a Virgin, originally holding the Child who is today missing. This figure of the second decade of the thirteenth century is later than the others, which can be dated to the third quarter of the twelfth century. Both shrines are conserved in the treasury of St-Maurice d'Agaune.

The cult of Maurice spread widely in German regions. In addition, some towns elsewhere began to venerate certain individuals of invented name among the 6600 soldiers of the Theban legion. In Xanten for example, a shrine in the shape of a little oval box, conserved in the treasury of the town's cathedral, testifies to this. Fabricated around 1160/70, probably in Cologne, of gold and silver, it is decorated by half figures in low relief. The shape is not common for the twelfth century but rather follows a Byzantine or Christian Antique type. Christ is in the middle on one side, surrounded by the martyrs of the Theban legion, supplied with tituli: Maurice, Victor, Géréon, Candidus, Mallosius, Florentius and Cassius. They are represented as soldiers. On the cover, the Nativity and the Annunciation to the shepherds are engraved in niello. The pilgrimage to Xanten was known from the early Middle Ages, legendarily (but dubiously) from the fourth century.

Giving the tremendous success of the cult of St Maurice, the abbey of Agaune fabricated objects prestigious enough to hold the remains of the saint in order to fascinate the numerous pilgrims. That is a typical example of a local saint's legendary success. Those cities lacking a local saint sometimes had to invent one, often drawing on the numerous unknown martyred soldiers, in order to create a new cult and multiply their pilgrimages.

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