

THEBAN LEGION

According to Saint Eucherius, legion consisting of 6,600 Christian soldiers who had been recruited in Thebes (the Thebaid) in Upper Egypt as part of the Roman army.

Three detailed manuscripts tell of the martyrdom of the Theban Legion, mainly at Agaunum (Saint Maurice-en-Valais), during the reign of Emperor DIOCLETIAN (284-305) and his co-emperor Maximian (286-305). The first account, *Passio Agaunensium martyrum* (Paris, National Library, no. 9550), is by Bishop Eucherius, who was elected to the see of Lyons in 434 (d. c. 449).

The second account is anonymous, but we know it was written between 475 and 500 by a canon of the grave chapel that Bishop Theodorus (370-393) of Octodurum (Martigny) had erected on the site of the Theban martyrdom. This second account survives in two manuscripts: (1) the "Version X2," or *Passio sancti Mauricii et sociorum ejus . . .*, dating from the ninth century (library of the monastery of Einsiedeln, Switzerland, no. 256, fols. 357-380); and (2) a later manuscript (Paris, National Library, no. 5301, fols. 204v-207r), which contains many alterations.

In addition to these three manuscripts, there are other very early medieval narratives specifically dedicated to the lives and activities of certain legionnaires, and many later martyrologies and writings, such as the *Wahrhafte christli Histori* (1594) of Peter Canisius, in which the names of the Theban martyrs and the locations of their martyrdom are perpetuated. Also, in many towns and [villages](#) in northern Italy, parts of Switzerland, and down the Rhine [Valley](#) as far as Cologne, as well as in various parts of France, local traditions have given rise to many monuments and churches where relics are preserved and works of art are dedicated to saints from the legion.

Cologne, with its [numerous](#) churches throughout the city commemorating

Saint Gereon, is an outstanding example of local tradition related to the Theban legionnaires. Furthermore, a great number of religious foundations in this vast region commemorate members of the legion. Among them are Saint Maurice-en-Valais, Saint Moritz in the Engadine, the Monastery of Einsiedeln, Solothurn, Zuzach, and Zurich.

Actually there were two legions bearing the name “Theban,” both of them formed by Diocletian sometime after the organization of the original Egyptian legion, stationed at Alexandria. One of these two legions from Thebes was transferred from Egypt to Europe in order to assist Maximian in Gaul, and although we cannot be certain which legion was chosen, we do know that the titles and names of the principal officers were as follows: the commander (*primicerius*), Mauritius; the chief instructor (*campidoctor*), Exuperius (according to Version X2, he is called signifer, bearer of the banner); and the military senator (*senator militum*), Candidus (in Version X2, he is also called *princeps vel campidoctor*, commander of the middle-aged soldiers of the first cohort). Saint Eucherius further mentions Saint Ursus and Saint Victor as members of this legion, and the anonymous account adds Innocentius (Innozentius) and Vitalis (Vital).

At Agaunum, during Maximian’s campaign against the Bagaudae (c. 285-286), when the Theban troops disobeyed imperial commands to worship heathen gods (version X2), Maximian himself, stationed nearby at Octodurum, ordered the slaughter of every tenth soldier. According to Saint Eucherius, the cause of the decimation was their refusal to take part in shedding the blood of innocent fellow Christians. As the legionnaires, persisting in a resolute and constant confession of the Christian faith, steadfastly refused to obey Maximian’s directives, the latter angrily called for a second decimation.

However, the commander, Mauritius, strengthened by Exuperius and Candidus, continued to exhort the soldiers to be true to the faith and to follow the example of the Theban leaders rather than the Romans.

Ultimately, after a public confession, in which Mauritius reiterated his loyalty to the emperor but also stoutly proclaimed his [belief](#) in Christ, Maximian became so enraged that he commanded all the Christian troops to be martyred.

Although the early date of this Roman persecution of Christian soldiers has been rejected by some renowned scholars who have insisted that 302 is the first time for such violence, their opinions do not seem valid in the face of extant evidence concerning other early martyrdoms, such as those of Saint Maximilian of Tebessa (Algeria) in 295 and of Saint Marcellus, centurion of Tingis (Tangier) in 298.

As to the number of Theban legionnaires actually martyred at Agaunum, we have no definite figure. However, Johan Mösch, after comparing information from the various chronicles on the events and geography of the martyrdoms of the legionnaires, concluded that only a cohort was martyred at Agaunum. The remainder of the battalions were either on the march or already stationed along the Roman road that ran from Liguria to Turin and Milan, then across the Lepontine Alps to Agaunum, on to Salodurum (Solothurn), and down the Rhine to old Verona (Bonn) and Colonia Agrippinensis (Cologne).

Other scholars, who have studied this question from totally different approaches, have reached the same conclusion. For example, L. Dupraz and Paul Müller, by carefully examining the military titles and ranks of the legionnaires and thereby determining the total number of soldiers involved, estimated that the Thebans martyred at Agaunum consisted of but one battalion whose number did not exceed 520 men.

As for the other battalions of the legions posted along the military highway, large numbers were progressively and methodically massacred, mainly in Switzerland, Germany, and Italy.

Some of the most celebrated names of Theban legionnaires and saints

associated with Swiss cantons are the following: saints Mauritius, Exuperius, Candidus, Innocentius, Vitalis, and the rest of their cohort, martyred at Saint Maurice-en-Valais; saints FELIX, REGULA, and EXUPERANTIUS, at Zurich; saints Ursus, Victor, and sixty-six companions at Solothurn; and VERENA OF ZURZACH.

In Germany, we can trace among the Theban saints Tyrsus (or Thirsus), Palmatius, and Bonifatius at Trier; saints Cassius, Florentinus, and their cohort at Bonn; Saint Gereon and 318 others at Cologne; and saints Victor, Mallosus (or Mallosius), and 330 companions at Xanten.

In Italy we find these Theban saints: Saint Alexander of Bergamo, Saint Antonius of Piacenza; saints Constantius, Alverius, Sebastianus, and Magius from the Cottian Alps; Saints Maurilius, Georgius, and Tiberius at Pinerolo; saints Maximius, Cassius, Secundus, Severinus, and Licinius at Milan; Saint Secundus of Ventimiglia; and saints Octavius, Solutor, and Adventor at Turin. There are many lesser saints as well.

Saint Maurice, Mauritius, or Moritz of Agaunum is the most popular, with more than 650 places bearing his name in Western Europe, notably in France and Switzerland. He is the patron saint of the diocese of Sitten (Sion) and of the town that bears his name in the region of Valais, as well as of Saint Moritz in the Engadine. In Canton Appenzell Inner Rhodes, his feast is a cantonal holiday. Several European orders were established in his name. Foremost among them were the Order of Saint Maurice, established by Amadaeus VIII of Savoy in 1434, and the Order of the Golden Fleece, by Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy in 1429.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Mauritius was the patron saint of many communities and kingdoms: the Longobardi (Lombards), the Merovingians, the Carolingians, the Burgundians, and, at a later, the Savoyards. Some emperors are known to have been crowned at the altar of Saint Maurice in Saint Peter's Cathedral at Rome. In spite of his wide renown, Saint Maurice and his companions of the Theban Legion

remained unknown to the Copts in the land of their origin, and the Coptic Synaxarion includes no reference to their names.

Nevertheless, the Coptic descent of the legion appears to be proven by several pieces of evidence. First, early Coptic sources confirm several specific details related to Egypt in the local European repositories. Second, some personal names are not only of Coptic-Ptolemaic, but even of ancient Egyptian, origin. Maurice or Mauritius appears in the Greco-Coptic papyri as Maurikios and the derivative feminine as Maurikia. Maurikios is identical with the Roman name Mauritius, according to Heuser.

P. Müller suggests that the name may have been derived from Moeris, which is associated with the ancient lake existing in the Fayyum; indeed, this name appears in epitaphs of the Ptolemaic and Coptic periods, and it is identical with the name of this lake, which is still used as a personal name among the Copts. The name Chaeremon is ancient Egyptian and means Son of Amon. Verena could be identified as the popular Coptic short form of the Ptolemaic Berenice after replacing the suffix *ice* with *a*, a phenomenon often encountered among Coptic personal names. The name could also be of ancient Egyptian origin, a compound of the Coptic and ancient Egyptian words *vre* (seed), and *ne* (town, or *the* town, which meant Thebes), thus “seed of Thebes.” The name Victor is identical with the Arabic Coptic Buktor (the *B* in Coptic reads *V* when followed by a vowel, and *u* is pronounced *i*). Ursus is found in the Greco-Coptic papyri as Orsos, Orseus, and Orsis, the last of which means Horus, son of Isis. These are only a few examples of a subject that calls for further exploration.

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