

The **Theban Legion** (also known as the **Martyrs of Agaunum**)

figures in Christian hagiography<sup>[1]</sup> as an entire Roman legion — of "six thousand six hundred and sixty-six men"<sup>[2]</sup> — who had converted en masse to Christianity and were martyred together, in 286, according to the hagiographies of Saint Maurice, the chief among the Legion's saints. Their feast day is held on September 22.

### **The account**

According to the legend related ca. 443–450 by Eucherius of Lyon,<sup>[3]</sup> the garrison of the Legion was the city of Thebes, Egypt. There the Legion were quartered in the east until the emperor Maximian ordered them to march to Gaul, to assist him against the rebels of Burgundy. The Theban Legion<sup>[4]</sup> was commanded in its march by Saint Maurice (Mauritius), Candidus, Innocent, and Exuperius (Exuperius), all of whom are venerated as saints. At the Swiss town of Saint Maurice-en-Valais, then called Agaunum, so it was said, the orders were given— since the Legion had refused to a man, to sacrifice to the Emperor— to "decimate" it by putting to death a tenth of its men. This act was repeated until none were left.

According to a letter from Eucherius, bishop of Lyon written about 450, bodies identified as the martyrs of Agaunum were discovered and identified by Theodore (Theodulus), the first historically identified Bishop of Octodurum, who was present at the Council of Aquileia, 381 and died in 391. The basilica he built in their honor attracted the pilgrim trade; its remains can still be seen, part of the abbey begun in the early sixth century on land donated by King Sigismund of Burgundy.

The earliest surviving document describing "the holy Martyrs who have made Aguanum illustrious with their blood" is the letter of Eucherius, which describes the succession of witnesses from the martyrdom to his time, a span of about 150 years. The bishop had made the journey to Agaunum himself, and his report of his visit multiplied a thousandfold the standard formula of the martyrologies:

*"We often hear, do we not, a particular locality or city is held in high honour because of one single martyr who died there, and quite rightly, because in each case the saint gave his precious soul to the most high God. How much more should this sacred place, Aguanum, be revered, where so many thousands of martyrs have been slain, with the sword, for the sake of Christ."*

As with many hagiographies, Eucherius' letter to Bishop Salvius reinforced an existing pilgrimage site. Many of the faithful were coming from diverse provinces of the empire, according to Eucherius, devoutly to honor these saints, and (important for the abbey of Aguanum) to offer presents of gold, silver and other things. He mentions many miracles, such as casting out of devils and other kinds of healing "which the power of the Lord works there every day through the intercession of his saints."

### **The Roman Theban Legion**

- All 6600 Martyred for Jesus in 286 A.D.

*The Holy Lance was said to have been passed to  
Saint Maurice*

(See the amazing history of the Holy Lance [here](#))

In the year of Christ 286, a most remarkable affair occurred; a legion of soldiers, consisting of six thousand six hundred and sixty-six men, contained none but Christians. This legion was called the Theban Legion, because the men were Egyptian Christian Copts who had been recruited from and stationed in Thebias in Upper Egypt. The Theban Legion were quartered in the east until the emperor Maximian ordered them to march to Gaul, to assist him against the rebels of Burgundy. It was the custom of the Romans to move troops from extreme parts of the empire to avoid the problem of Roman-trained soldiers participating in uprisings to free their native lands.

*It should be noted here that the Egyptians or the Copts accepted Christianity so very rapidly to the extent that the Romans had to exercise a series of persecutions in an attempt to suppress the growth of a religion which openly defied the divinity of the Emperor. The Roman Edict of 202 A.D. decreed that Christian conversion should be stopped at all costs. The edict of 250 A.D. decreed that every citizen should carry at all times a certificate issued by the local authorities testifying that he had offered sacrifice to the gods. Those who refused to conform were tortured with unprecedented ferocity. Some were beheaded, others were thrown to the lions and others were burnt alive. All were subjected to even innovated veracious torture regardless of age or sex. The Catechetical School of Alexandria was closed by order of the authorities, though its members continued to meet in other secret places. At one time, the number of bishops was restricted by the State to three. The consummation of the age of persecution is considered by the Copts to be during the reign of **Emperor Diocletian (284-305)**. So severe was the mass execution and the savage torture of the Copts that they took the day of Diocletian's military election as Emperor to mark the beginning of the era*

*of the Coptic martyrs. That very day marked the start of the Coptic Calendar known in the Western world as Anno Martyrum (A.M.) or the year of the Martyrs.*

*The area around Thebes has always enjoyed a reputation for its strong, almost fanatical, Christianity. The first monks in the Christian tradition, known as "The Desert Fathers," contained a majority of Thebans, and Theban Christians celebrate many martyrs who have refused to yield their faith to the many persecutions in the first centuries of the church.*

The Theban Legion passed through the **Alps into Gaul**, under the command of Mauritius, Candidus, and Exuperis, their worthy commanders, and at length **joined the emperor. About this time, Maximian ordered a general sacrifice**, at which the whole army was to assist; and likewise he commanded that they should take the oath of allegiance and swear, at the same time, to assist in the extirpation of Christianity in Gaul. Alarmed at these orders, each individual of the Theban Legion absolutely refused either to sacrifice or take the oaths prescribed. This so greatly enraged Maximian, that he ordered the legion to be **decimated**, that is, every tenth man to be selected from the rest, and put to the sword. The names of the soldiers were written on papers and placed in the caps of the centurions, for 600 were destined to perish as examples. These embraced their comrades, who encouraged them and even envied their fate. The plain soon flowed with the blood of the martyrs. The survivors persisted in declaring themselves Christians, and the butchery began again; the blood of another 600 reddened the waters of the Rhone. This second severity made no more impression than the first had done; the soldiers preserved their fortitude and their principles, but by the advice of their officers they drew up a loyal remonstrance to the emperor. This, it might have been presumed, would have softened the emperor, but it had a contrary effect: for, enraged at their perseverance and unanimity, he commanded that the whole legion should be put to death, which was accordingly executed by the other troops, who cut them to pieces with their swords, September 22, 286.

*The Holy Lance was said to have been passed to Saint Maurice.* Down through the years it fell into the hands of Mauritius (Saint Maurice), the head of a 3rd century garrison of Roman soldiers called the Theban legion.

The Theban Legion was a Christian legion of soldiers during the reign of Diocletian. A legion of men consisting of 6,600 (some say: 6,666) soldiers were all Christian. Called Theban legion because there were all conscripted **from Thebias in Upper Egypt**; they were quartered in the east until they were ordered them to march to Gaul.

A traveler on the highway that leads from Geneva to Rome, will notice a small and a very old Swiss town called "Saint Maurice" (now Saint-Moritz or Saint Maurice en Valais or Saint Maurice d'Augaune) in Switzerland. This town was known in the Roman times as "Aguanum", an important communication center. It was there that a Coptic officer named Maurice and 6600 of his fellow soldiers died for the sake of Christ at the hands of the impious Emperor Maximian (285-305 AD).

The bodies of the martyrs of Aguanum were discovered and identified by **Saint Theodore the Bishop of Octudurm, who was in office at 350 AD.** He built a Basilica in their honour at Aguanum, the remains of which are visible until now. This later became the center of a monastery built about the year 515 AD on the land donated by King Sigismund of Burgundy.

The story of these martyrs, commonly known as the Theban Legion (Alkateeba alTeebia or Alkateeba al-sa'eedia) has been preserved for us by Saint Eucher (aka: Bishop Eucherius of Lyon), the bishop of Lyons, who died in 494 AD. The bishop starts the account of the martyrdom of these valiant soldiers by the following introduction:

***"Here is the story of the passion of the holy Martyrs who have made Aguanum illustrious with their blood. It is in honour of this heroic martyrdom that***

*we narrate with our pen the order of events as it came to our ears. We often hear, do we not, a particular locality or city is held in high honour because of one single martyr who died there, and quite rightly, because in each case the saint gave his precious soul to the most high God. How much more should this sacred place, Aguanum, be revered, where so many thousands of martyrs have been slain, with the sword, for the sake of Christ."*

Saint Eucher mentions that in his time (he died 494 AD), many came from diverse provinces of the empire devoutly to honour these Saints, and to offer presents of gold, silver and other things. He mentions that many miracles were performed at their shrine such as casting out of devils and other kinds of healing "which the might of the lord works there everyday through the intercession of His saints."

Under "Maximinus Daia" also known as **Maximian**, who was an Emperor of the Roman Commonwealth (Empire) with **Diocletian** as his colleague (co-Emperor), **an uprising of the Gauls** known as "Bagaude" **forced Maximian to march against them with an army of which one unit was the Theban Legion composed of 6600 men, in the Spring of 285. This unit had been recruited from upper Egypt** and consisted entirely of Christians. They were good men and soldiers who, even under arms, did not forget to render to God the things of God, and to Caesar the things of Caesar. Diocletian and Maximian transferred the Theban Legion, among other imperial units, to Gaul in an effort to crush the revolt. **Landing near Rome, the Theban Legion marched through northern Italy, across the St. Bernard pass, and encamped near the present-day town of St. Maurice.**

After the revolt was quelled, the Emperor Maximian issued an order that the whole army should join offering sacrifices for the Roman gods for the success of their mission. **Although these types of offerings were routine**, this offering was also tantamount to recognizing the emperor's claim to divinity. The order included killing Christians

(probably as a sacrifice to the Roman gods). Only the Theban Legion dared to refuse to comply with the orders. The legion withdrew itself, encamped near Agunum and refused to take part in these rites.

Maximian was then resting in a near-by place called Octodurum. When these news came to him, he repeatedly commanded them to obey his rules and orders, and upon their constant and unanimous refusal, he ordered that the legion should be "decimated". Accordingly, every tenth man was put to death. A second "decimation" was ordered unless the men obeyed the order given but there was a great shout through the legion camp: they all declared that they would never allow themselves to carry out such a sacrilegious order. They had always the horror of idolatry, they had been brought up as Christians and were instructed in the One Eternal God and were ready to suffer extreme penalties rather than do anything contrary to their religion.

When Maximian heard this news, he got angrier than ever. Like a savage beast, he ordered the second decimation to be carried out, intending that the remainder should be compelled to do what they hitherto refused. Yet they still maintained their resolve. After the second decimation, Maximian warned the remainder of the Theban legion that it was of no use for them to trust in their number, for if they persisted in their disobedience, not a man among them would be able to escape death.

**The greatest mainstay of their faith in this crisis was undoubtedly their captain (Commanding Officer) Maurice, with his lieutenants Candid, the first commanding officer, and "Exuperius" the "Compiductor".** He fired the hearts of the soldiers with the fervor by his encouragement. Maurice, calling attention to the example of their faithful fellow soldiers, already martyrs, persuaded them all be ready to die in their turn **for the sake of their baptismal vow (The promise one makes at his baptismal to renounce satan and his abominable service and to worship only God).** He reminded them of their comrades who had gone to heaven before them. At his words, a glorious eagerness for

martyrdom burned in the hearts of those most blessed men.

Fired thus by the lead of their officers, the Theban legion sent to Maximian (who was still enraged) **a reply** as loyal as it is brave:

They never resisted in any way. Putting aside their weapons, they offered their necks to the executioners. Neither their numbers nor the strength of arms tempted them to uphold the justice of their cause by force.

They kept just one thing in their minds, that they were bearing witness to him who was lead to death without protest, and who, like a lamb, opened not his mouth; but that now, they themselves, sheep in the Lord's flock, were to be massacred as it by ravaging wolves. Thus, by the savage cruelty of this tyrant, that fellowship of the saints was perfected. For they despised things present in hope of things to come. So was slain that truly angelic legion of men who, we trust, now praise the Lord God of Hosts, together with the legions of Angels, in heaven forever. **Not all the members of the legion were at Aguanum at the time of the massacre. Others were posted along the military highway linking Switzerland with Germany and Italy. These were progressively/methodically martyred wherever they were found.**

**Spring, 286, Maximian, who was Emperor of the Roman Commonwealth, ordered 10 Roman legions to gather to quell an uprising in Gaul (France).**

**As was common in that time, Rome knew that local legions would not fight their own people so a legion from one region would be assigned to serve in another region of the Roman Empire. Such as it was with this Roman Legion from Thebias, Egypt.**

As the Theban Legion arrived at Agaunum some of the soldiers were assigned duties along the road approaching their staging ground. When all of the legions arrived, Maximian sent word to all of the legion commanders to do three things.

The first was to perform a general sacrifice to Roman gods in accordance to the Roman edict of 250 A.D. that stated that in accordance to the Roman edict of 202 A.D. that made the conversion to Christianity illegal and to stop the spread of Christianity at all cost, that all citizens must carry a certificate issued by local authorities stating that the holder had offered a sacrifice to the

Roman gods. If someone refused they were tortured to death, thrown to the lions, or burned alive, regardless of age or sex.

The 2nd task was to pledge their allegiance to Emp Diocletian (284-305) and the Roman Empire.

The third task was to swear to exterminate all Christians in Gaul.

The Theban Legion was commanded by Mauritius, who had two lieutenants, Candidus, and Exuperis. When they received the above order for all three commanders this posed a difficult problem. There were over six thousand, six hundred soldiers that made up the whole of the Theban Legion who were all Egyptian Coptic Christians.

Coptic Christians are devout Christians from Egypt who were murdered by the hundreds of thousands during the rein of Emperor Diocletian. This period of mass murder was so extreme that the Coptic calendar marks the election of Emperor Diocletian as, year of the martyrs, "Anno Martyrum" (A.M.).

The commander, Mauritius, sent word to Maximian that they would indeed pledge their allegiance to the Emperor Diocletian and the Roman Empire, but with all respect due the Emperor, they could not sacrifice to the Roman gods, nor could they kill all Christians in Gaul.

Maximian became infuriated and ordered the decimation of the legion, which is every tenth man is killed (deci - ten). All of the names of the men were written down and it was decided by lot who the six hundred of the Theban Legion soldiers were to be immediately beheaded at the Rhone River. Once chosen these six hundred men said their farewells to their brothers-in-arms and went to meet the Lord in courage and honor.

After the decimation of the Theban Legion, Maximian sent word that the remaining soldiers were to perform the three demands. Unmoved by the decimation of their legion, Mauritius, once again, sent word to Maximian of their inability to comply with two of the three demands, with all due respect to the Emperor.

Maximian ordered a second decimation of the Theban Legion which was carried out immediately in the same fashion as before. The Rhone River now turned red with the blood of the Saints.

Mauritius and his two lieutenants went to meet with Maximian **to personally convey their position and to inform the Emperor of their respect and wish to serve faithfully the Emperor and yet not compromise their Christian faith by killing other Christians and sacrificing to Roman gods.**

Mauritius' message to the emporer was, "*Emperor, we are ...*

Maximian became maniacal and ordered all of the others legions to attack the remaining soldiers of the Theban Legion. Every soldier of the Theban Legion died that September day, 286.

It is written that not a single soldier fought back. Every man willingly laid down their arms and gave their neck to the sword of their executioner. The task was thoroughly finished as the other legions traveled the road to make sure that all of the members of the Theban Legion that were posted through out the area on watches and on the roads were also executed.

### ***Fascinating points about the Theban Legion...***

It is believed that Mauritius was the possessor of the Holy Lance, which is the lance that pierced the side of Jesus Christ while He was on the cross.

Anyone can travel the road from Geneva to Rome and see a small and a very old Swiss town called "Saint Maurice" (now Saint-Moritz or Saint Maurice en Valais or Saint Maurice d'Augaune) in Switzerland. This is where the mass murder of the Theban Legion occurred.

This town was called Aquanum during the Roman period. The bodies of the Theban Legion martyrs of Aquanum were discovered and identified by Saint Theodore the Bishop of Octudurm. He built a Basilica in their honor at Aquanum, the remains of which are visible until now. The Basilica became the center of a monastery built about the year 515 A.D. on the land donated by King Sigismund of Burgundy.

The story of the Theban Legion was preserved by Saint Eucher (Bishop Eucherius of Lyon), the Bishop of Lyons, who died in 494 A.D. Saint Eucher states that Christians came from many provinces of the Roman Empire to give honor to these Saints. The Christians offered presents of gold, silver and other things.

Many miracles happened at the shrine for the Theban Legion such as casting out of demons and many kinds of healing, "***...which the might of the Lord works there everyday through the intercession of His saints.***"

In the middle-ages Saint Maurice was the patron saint of several of the Roman dynasties of Europe, and later one of the Holy Roman emperors. In 926, Henry I (919-936 A.D.), ceded the present Swiss Canton (province) of Aargau in return of the lance of the saints.

Some Emperors were also anointed before the Altar of Saint Maurice in Saint Peter's Cathedral in Rome. The sword of Saint Maurice was last used in the coronation of the Austrian Emperor Charles as King of Hungary in 1916.

Saint Maurice's blood and ring, as well as the stone on which he was beheaded, are preserved in Saint Maurice en Valais, Switzerland, to this day.

### ***The Miracles...***

Many miracles happened during this martyrdom which caused many others to come to Christ. In Zurich, the three beheaded Saints Felix, Regula and Exuperantius miraculously rose, carried their heads on their own hands, walked to the top of a hill, where they knelt, prayed and at last lay down. A large cathedral was later erected on that spot. The three saints carrying their heads on

their hands appear on the coat of arms and seal of Zurich until today.

Saints Victor, Orsus and their fellow soldiers were barbarously tortured by Hirtacus, the Roman governor of Solothurn. During this torture, several miracles happened, the shackles suddenly broke open, the fire was instantaneously extinguished, and more. The witnesses were filled with wonder and began to admire the Theban Legionnaires, upon which the furious Hirtacus ordered their immediate beheading. Without the slightest resistance they offered the executors their necks. The bodies of the beheaded Saints then shown in glaring brightness.

The bodies of the Saints which were thrown in the river Aar, came back to the bank, stepped out, walked with their heads on their hands, then they knelt and prayed at the spot where the Basilica of St. Peter later arose.

## The Theban Legion



***"Emperor, we are your soldiers but also the soldiers of the true God. We owe you military service and obedience, but we cannot renounce Him who is our Creator and Master, and also yours even though you reject Him.***

***In all things which are not against His law, we most willingly obey you, as we have done hitherto. We readily oppose your enemies whoever they are, but we cannot stain our hands with the blood of innocent people (Christians).***

***We have taken an oath to God before we took one to you, you cannot place any confidence in our second oath if we violate the other (the first). You commanded us to execute Christians, behold we are such.***

***We confess God the Father the creator of all things and His Son Jesus Christ, God. We have seen our comrades slain with the sword, we do not weep for them but rather rejoice at their honor. Neither this, nor any other provocation have tempted us to revolt. Behold, we have arms in our hands, but we do not resist, because we would rather die innocent than live by any sin."***

