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THE TREASURES OF ST. MAURICE

By
Kathleen Watts

St. Maurice, the oldest of the Swiss Abbeys is situated just in the angle where the River Rhône leaves the narrow Alpine valley in which it rises, and branches out into open country before it joins Lake Lemán. It is said that the period of sunshine increases from four hours to ten hours from solstice to solstice, so from earliest times the place has been sacred. The Gauls called it *Acaunum*, — The Rock, because of the great rock overhang that rises above the fields on the river bank; later the Romans established a customs post there — *Agaunum*.

According to the legend, St. Maurice and St. Candidus, Roman officers of a Theban legion, which was composed entirely of Christians, refused to sacrifice to the gods. The legion was surrounded and everyone was slaughtered near Agaunum by the orders of Maximian. That Maurice and Candidus and some companions were martyred at Agaunum seems certain; that a whole legion was massacred is unlikely. The bodies of the Theban martyrs were recovered by the first bishop of the Valais who built a chapel to shelter their remains.

It was not until the sixth century that under the orders of St. Avitus of Vienne the Burgundian King, Sigismund,

requisitioned monks from all parts of his Kingdom to organize the cult of the martyrs and so the Abbey of St. Maurice was founded at Agaunum.

The only comparable example in the West of Byzantine monks, the monastery of St. Maurice rendered ceaseless homage by night and day. This eternal song seemed so extraordinary that it was a real safeguard during all political upheavals. Nothing ever destroyed the monastery absolutely and during the years Kings and Princes restored and helped to maintain it. It was, however, a very isolated spot and this was dangerous. It is thanks to Hugh of Grenoble who in 1128 placed the Augustinian canons there as a regular order to look after the tombs of the saints and sing the divine liturgy, that it has remained intact.

It was this new religious life that expressed itself in works of art. Under the orders of rich and powerful patrons silver repoussé altar pieces were made, gilded and polychromed similar to those inscribed on the tympanums of cathedrals of the same epoch.

It was only in 1872 that Edmond Aubert revealed to the world the existence of the fabulous treasure of the monastery with a group of objects dating from before the year 1000 and creations from the XIIIth. century from a workshop as unknown as it is original. It is difficult for the experts to know from where these things came or who were the masters responsible for making them. Only one

reliquary, the bust of St. Candidus is still in its original state.

The institution of the *laus perennis* made the glory of the Theban martyrs shine throughout the world. Two objects remain as witness of this primitive glory, offered by the Merovingian princes in homage to the Abbey — the vase said to have belonged to St. Martin and the casket of Teuderic.

According to a legend which is illustrated in a tapestry in Angers, St. Martin, the famous bishop of Tours to whom the clergy of St. Maurice had refused to give relics, obtained by his prayers the miracle of a *rosée du sang* on the site of the martyrdom. However, his charity was such that he forgave them their meanness and presented a vase full of the saintly blood to the monks who guarded their relics too strictly. The vase of sardonyx of the Second or Third century AD is exquisitely carved showing various shades of blue; the base and the brim are of pale rose set with cabochons. The cameo the artist has composed is a funeral scene in the heroic style inspired, it has been suggested, by Virgil; it represents the rites of a libation at the tomb of Marcellus, nephew and son-in-law of Augustus. Going from left to right, first of all comes Octavia, the mother of Marcellus; Anchise comes next bearing the libation; Julia the daughter of Augustus and wife of Marcellus follows and last of all before the tomb of the young hero is Venus Genitrix.



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The Merovingian casket of Teuderic bears the name of the donor:

Teuderigus presbiter in honore sci Mauricii fieri iussit. Amen.

Nordoalaus et Richlindis ordenarunt fabricare. Udiho et Ello ficerunt.

No one really knows who these people were but conjecture leads it to be supposed possible that they were of the Souabe who received the cult of St. Maurice from Irish monks at the beginning of the Seventh century; the reigning family at the time had sealed their connection with the Abbey. The casket is in gold; the back and sides are ornamented with a lattice pattern interspersed with cabochons. Cabochons encased in gold, and pearl crosses which are definitely Christian in aspect adorn the front and lid, though the casket appears to be completely oriental.

The close relationship of Charlemagne with the Orient makes it possible to attribute the gift of a golden ewer of Byzantine conception to him. It is thought that this might have been made in Sicily. Brightly enamelled the design comes from Sassenian silk and portrays the garden of Paradise with its mysterious guarding dragons; on the other side are two lions.

The splendid bust in silver of St. Candidus, his Roman soldier's helmet and the collar of his coat studded with cabochons not only is in its original state



A detail from one of the cups forming part of the treasure of the Abbey of St. Maurice. Courtesy SNT0.



The interior of the Abbey of St. Maurice offers a haven of peace, calm and tranquillity as this picture (courtesy SNT0) shows.

but is practically undamaged. The strong and dignified lines of the face leave the onlooker in no doubt of the superiority of the man he must have been, or rather of the image in the mind of the artist. The lower half of the bust gives a detailed picture of the death of the saint with the simple inscription:

Candidus excepto dum sic mucrone litatur, spiritus astra petit: pro nece vita datur.

Coming also from the same Twelfth century workshop are three reliquaries; the reliquary of St. Maurice; the reliquary of the children of Sigismund and one of purely Byzantine origins. Nothing is known for certain but it is thought that the first two probably came from the same workshop as the bust of St. Candidus but were originally made as reredoses and were later pulled to pieces and transformed into reliquaries.

The reliquary of St. Maurice is particularly beautiful. Christ in Majesty adorns one end; on each side are two Apostles and two Angels. The lid tells the story of Adam and Eve — how they are judged and chased from the Garden of Eden and then Adam is shown toiling in the fields and Eve spins. Next comes the sacrifice of Abel followed by the sacrifice of Cain.

The technique of repoussé is mastered to perfection; the heads of the figures are executed in a rounded form of sculpture, more pronounced than the *haut-relief* of the knees. The work was evidently conceived with the idea that it

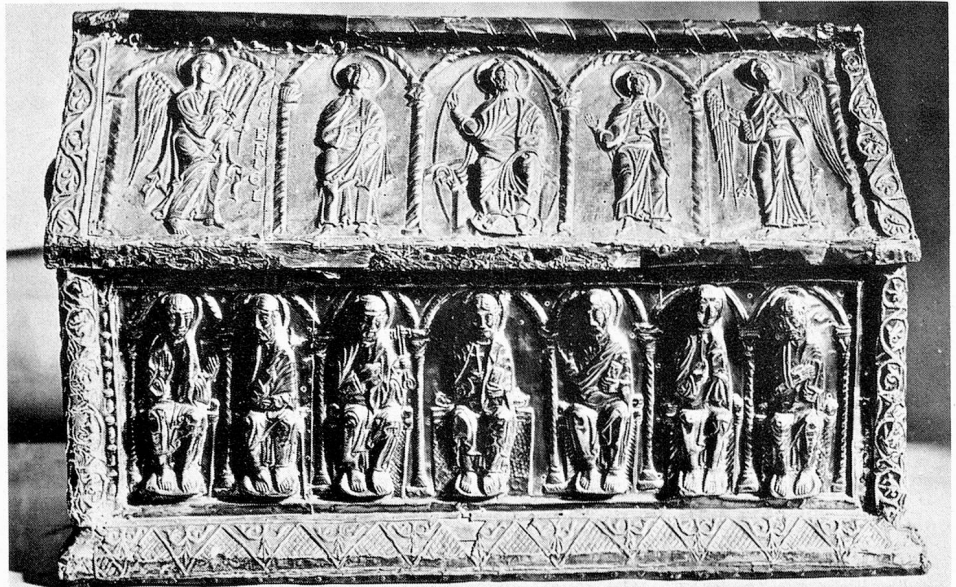
should be viewed from below and it is for this reason it is thought that it was originally it was intended as a reredos.

The reliquary of St. Sigismund is of interest almost as a historic document; the King is shown receiving feudal homage at one end; at the other is St. Maurice. Christ on the Cross and then in Glory is the subject of the lid and groups of Apostles adorn the sides.

But amongst the Treasure of the Abbey there are many objects of interest; chalices of gold and silver; a trefoiled and

jewelled cross of the Seventh century and votive offerings of various kinds.

The Abbey of St. Maurice has continued quietly existing until the present time; its Augustinian canons rendering ceaseless homage as in the Middle Ages and earlier. Perhaps the only change nowadays is that the Treasure is locked up behind an iron door, whereas fifty years ago it was kept in a cupboard with a rusty key but there is always a monk ready to show it to any tourist who is interested.



Some detail from a silver-gilt coffin in the Abbey of St. Maurice. Photo by courtesy of SNT0.



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