

The Black Saint Maurice: African Saint in Early Europe (Photo Essay)

by

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One of the most exciting, inspiring and dynamic figures in European history is Saint Maurice. The name Maurice is derived from Latin and means "like a Moor." The Black St. Maurice (the Knight of the Holy Lance) is regarded as one of the great patron saints of the Holy Roman Empire and is one of my favorite personalities in the long history of the African diaspora in Europe.

Much of what we know about Saint Maurice is shrouded in myth. The earliest version of the Maurice story and the account, upon which all later versions are based, is found in the writings of Eucherius, Bishop of Lyons (ca. 450). According to Eucherius, St. Maurice was a high official in the Thebaid region of Southern Egypt--an early center of Christianity.

Specifically, Maurice was the commander of a Roman legion of Christian soldiers stationed in Africa. By the decree of Roman emperor Maximian, his contingent of 6,600 men was dispatched to Gaul and ordered to suppress a Christian uprising there. Maurice disobeyed the order. Subsequently, he and almost all of his troops were martyred when they chose to die rather than persecute Christians, renounce their faith, and sacrifice to the gods of the Romans. The execution of the Theban Legion occurred in Switzerland near Agaunum (which later became Saint Maurice-en-Valais) on September 22, either in the year 280 or 300.

During the second half of the fourth century the worship of St. Maurice spread over a broad area in Switzerland, northern Italy, Burgundy, and along the Rhine. Tours, Angers, Lyons, Chalon-sur-Saone, and Dijon had churches dedicated to St. Maurice. By the epoch of Islamic Spain, the stature of St. Maurice had reached immense proportions. Charlemagne, the grandson of Charles Martel and the most distinguished representative of the Carolingian dynasty, attributed to St. Maurice the virtues of the perfect Christian warrior. In token of victory, Charlemagne had the Lance of St. Maurice (a replica of the holy lance reputed to have pierced the side of Christ) carried before the Frankish army. Like the general populace, which strongly relied on St. Maurice for intercession, the Carolingian dynasty prayed to this military saint for the strength to resist and overcome attacks by enemy forces.

In 962, Otto I chose Maurice as the title patron of the archbishopric of Magdeburg, Germany. By 1000 C.E. the worship of Maurice was only rivaled by St. George and St. Michael. After the second half of the twelfth century, the emperors were appointed by the pope in front of the altar of St. Maurice, in St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome.

In Halle, Germany, a monastery with a school attached to it was founded and dedicated to St. Maurice in 1184. In 1240, a splendid African statue of St. Maurice was placed in the majestic cathedral of Magdeburg. The facial characteristics of the statue are described as follows:

“The relatively small opening in the closely fitting mail coif was sufficient for the Magdeburg sculptor to produce a convincing characterization of St. Maurice as an African. The facial proportions show typical alterations in comparison with European physiognomy. The broad, rounded contours of the nose are recognizable although the tip has been broken off.

The African features are emphasized by the surviving remains of the old polychromy. The skin is colored bluish black, the lips are red, and the dark pupils stand out clearly against the white of the eyeballs. The golden chain mail of the coif serves, in turn, to form a sharp contrast with the dark face (Gude Suckale-Redlefsen, *The Black Saint Maurice* [Houston: Menil Foundation, 1987], p.19)”.

A center of extreme devotion to St. Maurice was developed in the Baltic states, where merchants in Tallin and Riga adopted his iconography. The House of the Black Heads of Riga, for instance, possessed a polychromed wooden statuette of St. Maurice. Their seal bore the distinct image of a Moor's head.

In 1479, Ernest built several castles, one of which he named after St. Maurice--the Moritzburg. Under a banner emblazoned with the image of a Black St. Maurice, the political and religious leaders of the Holy Roman Empire battled the Slavs. The cult of St. Maurice reached its most lavish heights under Cardinal Albert of Brandenburg (1490-1545), who established a pilgrimage at Halle in honor of the Black saint.

Between 1523 and 1540, people from throughout the empire journeyed to Halle to worship the relics of St. Maurice. The existence of nearly three hundred major images of the Black St. Maurice have been catalogued, and even today, the veneration of St. Maurice remains alive in numerous cathedrals in eastern Germany. Indeed, it is extraordinary that a man of such obvious African lineage achieved such status and veneration in an overwhelmingly non-African part of the world.

I have been fortunate in having had the opportunity in Europe and the United States to document images of Saint Maurice and artifacts associated with Saint Maurice. It is my great pleasure to share some of them with you here.



This image is by far the greatest and the oldest presented here. It is a statue of Saint Maurice in the cathedral in Magdeburg, Germany done in 1240. This may be the first image of Saint Maurice portrayed unmistakably as a Black man.



1240 statue of Saint Maurice in the cathedral in Magdeburg, Germany.



Runoko Rashidi, standing in front of the statue of Saint Maurice in the cathedral in Magdeburg, Germany



Painting of the Christian martyrs Saint Maurice and Saint Erasmus in heaven painted by the German painter Matthias Grunewald around 1500 (location: Vienna, Austria art museum).



Christian martyrs Saint Erasmus (left) and Saint Maurice (right) in heaven.



I call this image “your knight in shining armor” created by Lucas Cranach the Elder, done around 1500, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.



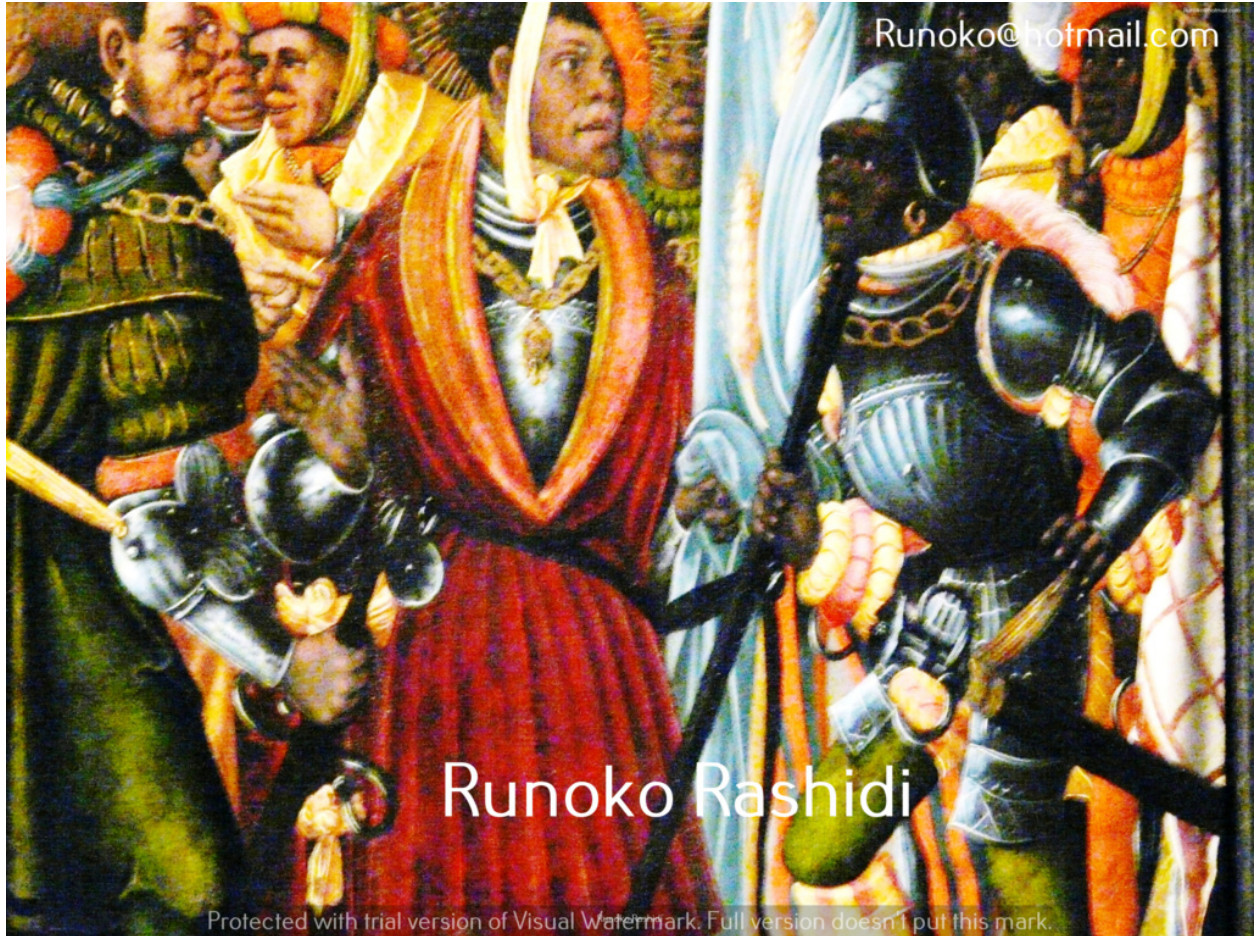
“your knight in shining armor”



This image is in the Gemaldegalerie in Berlin, one of my favorite galleries. This painting features, in addition to Saint Maurice in shining armor and the center, the Black king, so common in European Renaissance art, who came to pay homage to the Christ child in the manger in Bethlehem, and Saint George.



Saint Maurice in shining armor.



This image is indeed rare, from Germany. It depicts Saint Maurice and the Theban Legion. This painting is apparently in a private collection and was featured in a traveling exhibit on the African presence in the European Renaissance. I was fortunate to be able take a good photo of it. Like the three preceding pieces, it was done early in the sixteenth century.



I took this photo in Riga, Latvia (on the Baltic Sea at the mouth of the River Daugava) during a visit in December 2015. Saint Maurice standing with the flag is from the facade of the House of the Blackheads, a reconstruction from the original, done several hundred years ago. Saint Maurice was the patron of the European merchant guild known as the Brotherhood of the Blackheads. I have included here the image of Saint Maurice and the two heads of Moors above the image.



The image of Saint Maurice, and the two heads of Moors above him.



Image also from Riga, one of the most spectacular of all of the images depicting Saint Maurice, an altarpiece, several hundred years old, depicting Saint Maurice with sword and cross and on each side with splendid images of Moors on each side of him.



Saint Maurice with sword, facing left.



A scabbard sword, believed to be Saint Maurice's, now at the Imperial Treasury in Vienna, Austria.