

# ST GEORGE: PATRON SAINT OF ENGLAND?

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## Introduction

Most of us are familiar with the legend of St George: he killed a dragon; he's the Patron Saint of England; and his Feast Day is 23 April. However, as well as the slaying of the dragon, there is also the earlier martyrdom legend, where George suffers terrible tortures rather than denounce his faith. He was a minor saint until the mid-fourteenth century when it appeared that invoking was apparently an effective ward against the plague. These days, although the Royal Wedding appeared to awaken feelings of patriotism, or perhaps it was patriotism made fashionable, it seems the cross of St George is most prominent during pivotal football games and in other ways that it can be exploited.



We cannot be totally blamed for not knowing St George's life and deeds: in 494AD, Pope Gelasius described him as 'one of those saints whose names are justly revered by men, but whose activities are known only to God'. This was before he outlawed writings about St George including the *Acta Sancti Georgii*, as well as the *Martyrium* and *Passio Georgii*, as heretical in the Gelasian Decree of in 496. Jeremy Paxman argues (or perhaps rather, sneers) that St George is 'a vague, workaday figure, of little spiritual or theological importance' (82); after all, over 100 medieval saints have been credited with the slaying of a dragon, and the rest of them were English (Stace 39). Nonetheless, George drew attention from numerous places and he is listed as patron saint of countries including Ethiopia, Portugal, Malta and Georgia, as well as cities including Barcelona, Antioch and Istanbul. So how and why has he become so popular in England?

## St George in England

Legends of George's sanctity circulated in England in the seventh century as he is mentioned in Bede's *Martyrologium* although Bede accepts the details of St George's Passion "are numbered among the apocryphal writings". There also exists an Anglo-Saxon Passion by Ælfric, Archbishop of York from between 1023 and 1051, describing George using local terms: he is an "Ealdormann" from the "scire" (shire) of Cappadocia (Hardwick

5). However, the legend of St George and the Dragon appears in England around 1100: the earliest imagery is on a tympanum in St George's Church in Fordington, Dorset, which had been hidden under a layer of plaster for many centuries. It depicts St George on horseback carrying a lance. To the right are two crusaders kneeling in prayer and to the left are two pagan soldiers, fleeing in panic (Budge 1930 26; Marcus 41; Riches 22–23). Thus, George is suppressing human enemies rather than a dragon. This carving is contemporary with times his spectral form was apparently seen in the first crusade, leading the knights in the sieges of Jerusalem (1096–99) and Antioch (1097–98), so George is depicted as a crusader knight. Later, a spectral St George led crusaders into a battle at the Siege of Acre during the third crusade in 1191. Later, William Caxton translated a history of the crusade, thus:



“Ffro the Mount of Olyvet appiered a knyght which was not knowen ne never might be founden. In another account, this knight is named as St George] This Knyght began to shake and meve his shelde ... and made signe to all peple that they shold now retorne and come agayne to the assault’ (cited in Hayward 48).

Dating from around the same time, in Conisborough, near Doncaster, is an image on a grave slab which appears to



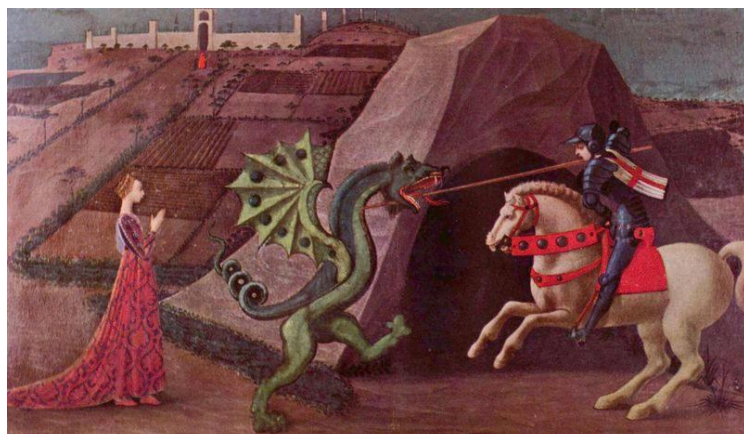
depict St George defending a bishop from a dragon (Riches 23, 26). The story of George and the dragon started to appear in Latin manuscripts



around the same time, although its inclusion in a collection of saints' lives called the *Legenda Aurea* (or *the Golden legend*) compiled in the 1260s by a Dominican prior named Jacobus de Voragine, helped cement its popularity. Jacobus's work was influenced by the *Gesta sanctorum* of Bartholomew of Trent which were collected around 1245 (Laborderie 40). The *Golden Legend* described saints' marvellous and miraculous deeds; whereby stories of folklore became interwoven with hagiographic tradition of the passion of St George and then superseded the original with the marvellous story of the dragon (Good 40). Jacobus describes how the name George derives from the words *geos*, meaning earth and *orge* meaning work, hence, earth worker or farmer. This explains how he is the patron

saint of agriculture, and his feast day, 23 April, is when crops are starting to sprout through most of Europe (Voragine I 238).

## St George and the Dragon



Uccello, St George and the Dragon (1470)

At the heart of the legend of George and the Dragon is the town of Silena, possibly Cyrene in present day Libya. The town is terrorised by a dragon who lives in a lake and who poisons the inhabitants with its breath. The townspeople appease the dragon by feeding it two sheep a day, but when they run out of sheep, they change the menu to one sheep and one man or

woman, drawn by lots. Eventually, the lot falls onto the king's daughter. The king protests, but the townspeople observe their own sons and daughters have been sacrificed: his own should be no different. As the princess reaches the place of sacrifice, George arrives and asks her why she is crying. As the maiden explains, the dragon rears its head out of the lake. After genuflecting, George wounds the dragon with his lance and then commands the maiden to throw her girdle around the dragon's neck, which subdues it (in another version of the legend, this is a single strand of the maiden's hair), so George can lead it back to the town. Although the townsfolk are overcome by fear, George assures them he will kill it once they have all converted to Christianity: this they do, and George decapitates the dragon. He is offered wealth for the service he has provided the town, but George refuses and instead oversees the building of a Church, from which a healing spring issues, before he leaves.

In other stories, the dragon slayer marries the princess; in the case of St George, the chaste knight cannot. However, the story soon develops so the focus on the story is a Christian allegory of George's military prowess in defeating the dragon, representing, at best, the Christian view of the disorder caused by the Pagan religions, or, at the other end of the scale, the epitome of evil. By coming out of the water, the dragon blocks the maiden and the townsfolk from baptism. The combat thus parallels St Michael's apocalyptic defeat of the devil in the form of the dragon, rather than divine intervention. Indeed, in some versions of the legend, the princess is called *Ecclesia*. In this way, George defends the Church in a manner corresponding with the image on the Conisborough monument where



he protects a Bishop who represents the Church; however, the legend has developed so George not only saves the maiden, but also the town.

Two places in England lay claim to being the location of the battle between St George and the dragon: Brinsop in Herefordshire, where the church is dedicated to St George – the neighbouring village is called Wormsley, *Wyrn* being Anglo-Saxon for Dragon. The other



location is at the base of the Uffington White Horse, where there is a natural mound known as Dragon Hill. On the top of this hill is a bare patch where the grass cannot grow, which is said to be the place where the dragon's blood fell. Indeed, some arguments suggest that the shape of the Uffington white horse has changed, and it had previously depicted a dragon (Simpson 87).

The slaying of the monster is neither a new, nor an exclusively Christian motif. It is plausible that the legend of St George saving the maiden and slaying the dragon was brought to England by crusaders who adapted two stories: the first is the story of Minos, who, every nine years, demanded tribute of seven youths and seven maidens from King Aegeus to feed to the Minotaur in the labyrinth (Ovid 176). There is also the story of Perseus saving Andromeda from the sea creature (Ovid 93–96). Perseus and the historical St George are both linked to Lydda in Palestine.<sup>1</sup> It is one of the places where St George is said to have been born and where his cult must initially have been localised; it is also the place where Perseus slew the monster. However, as Marcus argues, 'analogy is no proof of evolution' (Marcus 5), and it is a long time before a link is made between the Christian Martyr and the knight who vanquished the dragon. The motif of overcoming the monster goes considerably further back, for example the battle between Horus and Set in Egyptian mythology, or the Mesopotamian hero Marduk who defeated the dragon Tiamat. However, as Jonathan Good observes, while the symbolic precedents might be earlier, the story of George and the Dragon is a product of the Middle Ages (Good 41).

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<sup>1</sup> Lydda was considered important to the Christian Church: it is mentioned on four occasions in the Old Testament [1 Chronicles 8:12; Ezra 2:33; Nehemiah 7:37; 11:35]. In the New Testament it is visited by the Apostle Peter, when he healed a man named Aeneas who had been bed-ridden for eight years (Acts 9:32–35).

## Candidates for National Sainthood

In comparison with other patron saints of the British Isles, celebrations for St George's Day seem rather low-key. In Scotland, St Andrew's Day is an official Bank Holiday (but like St George in England, St Andrew never visited Scotland, although his relics were brought from Constantinople to Scotland by 'supernatural guidance'); whereas in Ireland, the feast of St Patrick, who drove the snakes out of Ireland and brought Christianity to the nation, is a Public Holiday. In Wales, Public celebrations for St David, the Welsh bishop, are becoming more commonplace. In 2007, the office of Tony Blair rejected a petition to make it a Bank Holiday, although the matter was raised by the Welsh Liberal Democrats once again in 2011. There was an argument in the House of Commons to make St George's Day a National Holiday, although, ministers have resisted amid concerns it would cost businesses millions of pounds (Daily Mail, 23 April 2010): even so, suggestions for a National Holiday on ALL Patron Saints' Days has been raised again (The Guardian, 23 April 2017). Politically, St George was a relative late-comer as a Patron Saint. Other European polities had established their patrons from as early as the tenth century. The role of St George in National patronage was part of a royal ideal from the mid-fourteenth century, but it did not become important in the minds of the polity until much later.

## Gregory the Great

Previous candidates for national patronage include Pope Gregory I – Gregory the Great – who was born in Rome around 540AD and died in 604. Gregory had always held the Angles (early settlers of the British Isles after the departure of the Romans) in high esteem. It is believed that, seeing pale-skinned boys in a roman slave market, he declared '*non angli, sed angeli*' – "not Angles, but Angels", and the event inspired him to send St Augustine to Canterbury to begin the conversion of the Angles. For a long time, Gregory was considered to be the general protector of the people, referred to locally as "our Gregory" by amongst others, Aldhelm, the Southumbrian poet who described him in the late seventh century as 'ours, who removed the error of filthy heathenism from our parents and handed over the rule of regenerating grace'. Bede (c.672–735) also used the form *Gregorius noster* (Hayward 26–27). In the tenth century Æthelwold, Bishop of Winchester, described Gregory as 'our holy patron', but despite this support, Gregory's role of protector was denounced by the Normans who had their own political agenda. In addition, various Englishmen were defaming Gregory in favour of their own saints, for example, St Augustine who carried out the conversion of the English, rather than ordering it (Hayward 22, 53).

Arguments against St George as National Patron observe that, unlike St Patrick, who brought Christianity to Ireland, George did not visit England (save for in a handful of later interpolations to the legend), let alone bring Christianity to its shores: this argument was posited by supporters of St Augustine of Canterbury. Nor was George an important monastic leader like Cuthbert of Lindisfarne, the Patron Saint of Northern England. Nor was he martyred on British soil, like St Alban – another contender for the role. Nor was he a royal saint, like St Edmund the Martyr (king of the East Angles from 855 until his death in 869) or Edward the Confessor (1003–1066), both of whom were also early candidates for the role of National Patron.

### **Edmund the Martyr**

According to legend, King Edmund of the East Angles chose to die a martyr's death at the hands of the Danish invaders, rather than renouncing Christ. So, he was shot with arrows so he 'resembled a porcupine'. His martyrdom is believed to be either in the Suffolk village of Hoxne or Helmsdon. Had he lived, Edmund would have been a puppet king for the Vikings. In certain *Vitae*, Edmund is an aggressive saint, which is rather different to the traditional portrait of Edmund afforded by history: the noble Christian martyr who wishes to avoid bloodshed and chooses to die for his people. Thus, although he is presented as a pious king, he is considered as a patron favoured by royalty, rather than a king of the people.

### **Edward the Confessor**

The other primary contender for National Patron is Edward the Confessor, who was the third king of England to bear that name and was given the epithet 'the Confessor' on account of his pious life and to distinguish him from Edward the Martyr (c. 962–979). Edward was considered Patron of England from the reign of Henry II to the time of Edward III (therefore, for two centuries from the mid-twelfth century), and is still considered the Patron of the British royal family. In addition, England was at relative peace during Edward's reign, which suggests either his peaceful nature, or his good fortune. Whatever the case, these were considered noble attributes to have as a *Royal* Patron. One legend concerning St Edward is that towards the end of his life, he was on his way to dedicate a shrine to St John the Divine at the church at Westminster – which stood at the location where Westminster Abbey now stands. Edward was stopped by a beggar, asking for alms in the name of St John. Edward could not refuse, but, carrying no money, he instead gave a royal ring to the beggar. Sometime afterwards, two pilgrims lost in darkness whilst travelling through Syria were attracted to a light. There they met an old man who claimed to be St John and charged them with returning the ring that Edward had given him.

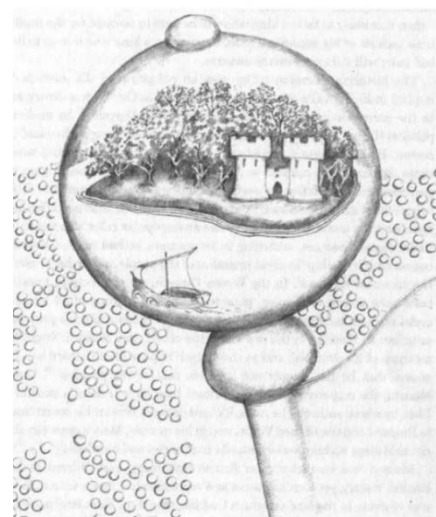
## The Royal Saints on the Wilton Diptych

The importance of the patronage of Edmund the Martyr and Edward the Confessor, as well as the stories associated with them, is shown in the Wilton Diptych of Richard II. The Wilton Diptych (so named because it came from Wilton House in Wiltshire), was commissioned by



Richard at the end of the fourteenth century (believed 1395–99). It is a two-panel religious painting which was a portable shrine for worship. In this image, Edmund carries the arrow of his martyrdom, while Edward carries the ring he gave to St John. The last of the three saints is John the Baptist, who was a personal patron to Richard. The left-hand panel

also depicts Richard kneeling as he is presented by three saints to the Virgin, the Christ-child and a host of eleven angels, all of whom wear the emblem of the White Hart – Richard's personal livery which are all shown on the right-hand panel. It is suggested these angels each represent a year of Richard's birth to when he ascended to the throne. In return, the Christ-child gives Richard a staff with the banner (or pennon) pennant of the Cross of St George which represents Christ's resurrection; at the top of the staff is an orb in which we can see a miniscule island.<sup>2</sup> Dillon Gordon sees this as Christ returning England to the king after receiving it as a dowry for the Virgin (Gordon 58), although Giles Morgan argues Richard is placing England in the care of the Virgin and Child (Morgan 34). One can perhaps see in this image the symbolism of the three saints as the Magi, whose Epiphany in recognising God the Son had been made manifest in Jesus Christ, fell on the same day as Richard's birthday, 6 January.



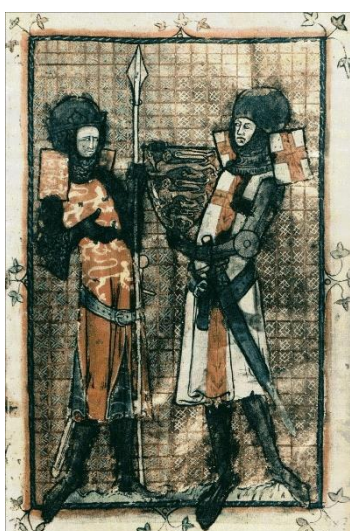
<sup>2</sup> Detail of the Wilton Diptych found in Sarah Jane Boss, *Mary* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 128.

The diptych was personal to Richard and is therefore a reflection of his devotional habits; his choice of John the Baptist as his personal patron is linked to the baptism of Christ which also occurred on 6 January, Richard's birthday. Also, Richard acceded the throne on 22 June, which was the eve of the vigil of the Birth of the Baptist (24 June); notably, John the Baptist is the only saint with whom Richard has physical contact. Richard also appears with John the Baptist in an image in Thurburn's Chantry in the chapel of Winchester College (Gordon 55)]. Edmund was a saint who was favoured by royalty because he was considered a model king: pious and willing to die rather than to compromise his moral values. However, Edmund was not popular as a national Saint. Edward the Confessor was a peaceful saint who appealed to Richard, for example, as a means of not continuing the war in France (Good 79).

### The Royal Exploitation of St George

Although other kings of England used the authority of St George to legitimise their claims to the throne, Good argues that Richard II did not have much affection for him: the only significant item he owned was an ivory mirror with a small carving of the saint. Saints were moral examples for living Christians and St George was considered the archetypical knight embodying the chivalric ideals of the Middle Ages, and earlier kings drew on a tradition of invoking him, particularly during times of war.

In 1188, King Phillip II of France accepted the English claim to the flag of the red cross on white, although by then it was recognised as a symbol of the crusaders. Prior to this, for example during the first Crusade, the French had been identified by the red cross and the English had complained that this was *their* St George Cross. In 1277, in a campaign against the Welsh, Edward I flew the banner of St George alongside those of Edmund the Martyr and Edward the Confessor as well as bracers and flags fixed to soldiers' lances bearing the 'arms of St George' (PRO E 101 3/15, cited in Good 53). Likewise, for his campaign in the 1290s, Edward's infantry wore armbands of St George: earlier his English soldiers had carried the red cross as a military emblem at the Battle of Evesham in 1265, although, these may not necessarily have been associated with St George (Good 53 n.2).



Edward III receives arms  
from St George – the  
*Milemete Treatise* c.1326/7

Around 1326, at the start of Edward III's reign, Walter de Milemete, the King's Clerk, presented to the king a treatise, intended to give instruction as to the duties and responsibilities of a king. In this treatise, Edward is shown as receiving his arms from St George, who wears a tabard of his traditional red cross. Edward's tabard bears his



own arms. St George is presented here as the quintessential example of chivalry, and Edward should follow his example (Morgan 93; Riches 104-05).

As St George was neither king, martyr nor Englishman, he did not conform to any of the requirements of traditional candidates for National Patron. However, he was noted for his military prowess, and this contributed to the most important aspect of his elevation to Patron Saint in 1348 when Edward III created the Order of the Garter. This Order was a group of chivalric knights whose renown was to parallel King Arthur's Round Table. The Order met at St George's chapel, Windsor which had been a chapel dedicated to Edward the Confessor, but was rededicated to St George. According to an inventory taken in 1552, it contained the head of St George as one of its relics (Riches 17). George was named as the order's patron along with the two other patron saints, Edward the Confessor, Edmund the Martyr, and the Blessed Virgin Mary (Good 66; Riches 106).<sup>3</sup>



had performed that function and indeed, the fact that Edward elevated George as patron saint bore very little value to the laity of the time. Although *promoted* as Patron Saint, by establishing him as patron of the order of the garter, he was still very much a *royal*, rather than *national* saint. Even so, Jean Froissart, who chronicles some of the Hundred Years War, refers to the English calling upon St George for aid, for example at the Battle of Poitiers in 1356 (156–7). By 1360, the three English Saints appear in stained glass, for example in Heydour, Lincolnshire (King 75–86). All three saints are wearing armour appearing as Christian Knights – this presentation suggests their joint role as the protectors of England from its earthly enemies (Riches 22).

<sup>3</sup> Although it is not known why the name of the Garter came about, the story of Edward III picking up the garter of the Countess of Salisbury and saying "cursed be he who thinks evil of it" – *honi soit qui mal y pense* – is believed to have first been published by Polydor Vergil in the sixteenth century

After Richard II, St George's claim as patron was strengthened. Legends arose around Agincourt in 1415: Shakespeare's monologue in *Henry V* begins: 'Once more unto the breach dear friends, once more/ or close the wall up with our English dead' and ends 'The game's afoot:/ follow your spirit; and upon this charge/ Cry "God for Harry, England and St George"' (Henry V, Act III, Sc.1). Later, Thomas Rhymer's eighteenth century *Foedera* describes how St George appeared on the battlefields of Agincourt, just as he did in Acre. After Agincourt, St George's Feast day was elevated to a higher status.

Time dictates the necessity of skipping over some other English monarchs who invoked St George, although it is worth mentioning Edward IV, who resurrected the Order of the Garter recognising the importance of its political symbolism: he elected foreign princes he wanted as allies (Good 89–90). In addition, like Edward VI, who seized the crown from Henry VI, when Henry VII (*Harri Tudor*) usurped the throne from Good King Richard III of York, he was enthusiastic about his employment of St George to show he too could be a good English king – Henry himself was Welsh and 27<sup>th</sup> in line to the throne. (It would be like Xan Windsor, who is also 27<sup>th</sup> in line to the British throne becoming Queen in the present day – everyone says who? and that's precisely my point).<sup>4</sup> Henry had a lot to prove: his claim was tenuous as it was through the female line and by illegitimate descent. However, Henry recognised the feast offered 'good grace and honour' for England.

Later, in 1549 (during the reign of Edward VI) Thomas Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* listed St George's Day in red letter in its calendar, although by 1552 it had been downgraded to a black letter day and the bishop of London banned St George's Day (Good 124) and by 1562, during the time of the Puritan Iconoclasm the veneration of *any* saint was illegal under Article XXII of the Thirty-Nine articles ((Marcus 106).<sup>5</sup> Popularity for the feast waned and waxed, depending on the whims of the monarch and the general mood of the people. St George is represented by the Redcrosse Knight, the hero of Book 1 in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in 1590. At the end of Book 1, the Redcrosse knight slays the dragon who has laid waste to Eden. He has been recruited by Una, the personification of the 'True Church' who takes the role of the sacrificial princess. The Redcrosse knight is named as St George in Canto X:

For thou amongst those Saints, whom thou doest see,  
Shalt be a Saint, and thine owne nations frend

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<sup>4</sup> Xan Windsor is daughter of Prince Richard, Duke of Gloucester.

<sup>5</sup> The First Council of Nicaea in 325 decreed the saints' days, feasts and other holy days, which came to be printed on church calendars in red. The term came into wider usage with the appearance in 1549 of the first Book of Common Prayer in which the calendar showed special holy days in red ink, hence 'Red Letter Day'.

And Patrone: thou Saint George shalt called bee,  
Saint George of mery England, the signe of victoree (1, X, 61, ll. 6-9).

The Feast was downgraded by the Catholic Church as an 'optional local festival' in 1969 (Morgan 124). However, the General synod of the Church of England restored 23 April as a major religious holiday in the Anglican calendar in 1997. These days there is a movement to make St George's Day a national holiday, although its proximity to Easter and the May



Bank Holidays causes some problems. Beyond that, however, I think it is fair to say the flag of St George is generally shown reverence when England are playing at football, and then almost every product jumped on the bandwagon so, as well as the products shown here we could buy branded cola, chocolate and even salad...

## Martyrdom Legend

Earlier, I described the legend of St George as a literary palimpsest, a legend upon which other legends had been added and embellished. The earlier legend, apparently based on an historical event, took place at the start of the fourth century: this is known as the martyrdom legend. The martyrdom is believed to have taken place on 23 April 303 AD – the start of the fourth century; a church in Shakka, Syria, dedicated to St George and the saints who suffered martyrdom with him potentially dates from the *mid* fourth-century, but no later than the *end* of the century. The date in the inscription reads "in the year 9 of the year 410, which Marcus admits is difficult to interpret: it could be 346 or 515AD (Marcus 30). Either way, it attests to the importance and transmission of the cult at its inception (Budge 1930 16). Herbert Thurston attributes the rise of St George, whom he describes as an 'obscure saint', to the prominence that led to national patronage to a 'coincidence' of the feast day with certain 'immemorial observances of the peoples whom the devotion [of St George] was first propagated' (Budge 1888 vii; Thurston 27; Marcus 27).



Riches argues the martyrdom story of St George may have generated around Nicomedia, which Diocletian, who was Roman Emperor until he abdicated in 305 AD, established as the eastern capital of the Roman Empire in 286 AD. There is no primary source for these

events of St George's life: despite being described as a valiant soldier, no details of his military exploits survive. Instead, George suffers torture and eventual death while protesting his faith, and the events are described in the terms of a passion – the sufferings of a martyr – rather than anything about an historical character. A Greek version of the story, dating from the fifth century, known as the Vienna palimpsest, claims to have as its source a text written by Pasocrates, a servant to St George who was with his master to the end. This is a common rhetorical device that lends authentication to a text by providing what would be perceived as an eyewitness account (Delehay 70ff). However, as this manuscript relies on an *ur*-text, it is plausible that many historical details have been lost in favour of more popular aspects of the tale.

The martyrdom legend can be summarised that George was born around 270 AD in



St George before Diocletian

Melitene, a city of Cappadocia (now in Central Turkey). He was of high birth and rank, and according to one source, he was baptised by his mother, named Polychronica. In another version of the legend, his father is a wealthy Christian Palestinian Sheikh, who had been a friend of the Emperor Diocletian and had enjoyed power and position under the Roman governance. After his parents' death, George travelled to Nicomedia to appeal to Diocletian. Becoming an officer in the Roman army, George reached the distinguished rank of Tribunus, and was

stationed as a member of the imperial guard.

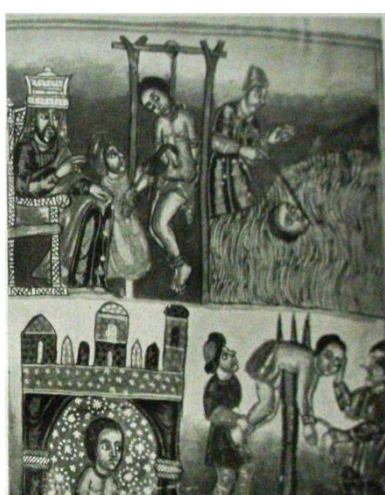
In a later legend, St George is said to have visited England as a Tribunus. He travelled along what is now called St George's Channel – the name being first recorded in 1578 by Martin Frobisher on account of the popular legend. He landed at Porta Sisuntiorum in Lancashire, and then travelled to York, to the Court of Constantius Chlorus, who was power sharing co-emperor with Diocletian. Here, he formed a friendship with Constantius's wife, Empress Helena: it was she who discovered the location of the True Cross around 326. If we consider weaving together the two versions of the legend, then it was on this journey that he encountered the dragon. George travelled to Glastonbury to visit the burial place of his kinsman, Joseph of Arimathea, whose home was close to Lydda. He also visited the second Roman legion at Caerleon, which is where he heard about Diocletian's edict that began the 'Great Persecution' against Christians (Elder 22).

During the reign of the Emperor Diocletian (ruled 284–305AD) Christianity had been widely accepted, but in 303 he issued an edict against Christian soldiers. This decree may have



been because of their unwillingness to follow orders; or because of a minor uprising against him; or the 'Great Persecution' could have been at the instigation of Galerius, who started to curtail Christian activities after he had conquered the Persians (Budge 1888 xxix). The Great Persecution included the closing of the churches, the surrender of the scriptures, depriving citizens of noble rank their civil rights, and the imprisonment of the clergy. The praetorian guard were ordered to destroy the cathedral of Nicomedia, which was carried out on 23 February 303AD; by 304 all citizens were required to sacrifice to the gods. This edict led to the martyrdom of St Alban, amongst others.

Giles Morgan argues that the martyrdom legend of St George is based on the actions of a particular historical figure and therefore, we might consider Eusebius of Caesarea's description in 332AD recalling a 'well-known [person]... the first of many' who was tortured after tearing down the edict, and then was slowly roasted to death (Budge 1930 xxx; Eusebius 261). However, the early legends do not correspond with the information provided by Eusebius: he names the man as 'Nestor', however Marcus argues that a discrepancy in the name is not an issue and that George was 'the baptismal name adopted upon canonisation' (Marcus 19). In addition, George is called to sacrifice to the pagan deity, Apollo, and he refuses, although in other versions, he sees the contempt with which the heathen ruler treats Christians, and, having distributed his wealth, professed his faith. Distraught at the prospect of losing his most valued soldier, Diocletian attempts to persuade him with wealth and land; however, George refuses and the ruler has to resort to the more persuasive methods of torture.



Tortures of St George, British Library, MS Oriental 713

It is not necessary to discuss all the violent descriptions. Let it suffice to suggest that the more violent the tortures a saint endures, the more it establishes their sanctity. During the course of his torture, George performs twelve miracles which lead to the conversion of many onlookers. He also suffers death three times. Before the first, he prays he may endure until he can defeat the heathen ruler. In the first death, George is hung on a cross, flayed, disembowelled and covered in pitch and salt; he is then broken into ten pieces on a wheel. He dies, and his dismembered body is placed on a mountainside from which St Michael collects the pieces and restores George to life. The resurrection results in the

conversion of many pagans to Christianity. George then suffers more torment – in some versions this continues for seven years. The miracles include healing a boy from being deaf

and mute. The heathen ruler then changes his approach and promises to treat George 'like my own beloved son' if he would worship his gods. George asks why he didn't suggest this before and agrees. He is taken into the palace where he is able to pray in private. However, the ruler's wife, named in some versions as Alexandra, hears George's prayers and after a short discussion, she is convinced that 'Christ is the god of the Universe', but asks George to conceal her conversion from her husband.

George is taken to the temple of Apollo, and the entire town is called to bear witness to his worship of the idols. However, George calls forth the widow's son whom he earlier released from being deaf and mute: the boy speaks to the demon within the idol, demonstrating a divine miracle. George then drives the demons back to the Abyss and destroys the idols. Queen Alexandra chooses this moment to profess her own Christianity, for which she suffers excruciating torture, including being hanged from a tree by her hair, flailed, and then having her body crushed by a huge stone. She is then led outside of the city for execution where she 'consummated her martyrdom' (Budge 1930 106). In a manner, similar to Pontius Pilate denying any responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ, the heathen ruler then declares Queen Alexandra's blood is on George's hands and absolves himself of any responsibility.



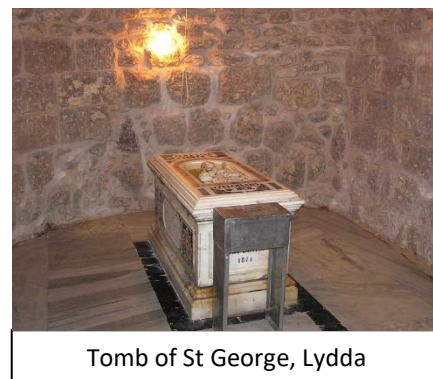
Fresco from Decani Monastery, Kosovo



Beheading of St George

However, it is this event which leads to George's final martyrdom: he, too, is taken outside the city. He is given an opportunity to pray, and he entreats God to send fire to consume the Pagan Governors, which immediately happens. George is then beheaded: water and milk issue from his neck. The moment of martyrdom is marked by a great earthquake, thunder and lightning, and water that wash away those who carried out the execution. In some versions, the heathen ruler is said to have died shortly afterwards.

After St George's martyrdom, his servant Pasicrates placed the severed head next to the body and the two parts joined back together. The body was taken to Lydda where it was placed in a tomb which has been the focus of pilgrimage since the sixth century: it was found by Richard the Lionheart during the crusades (Morgan 66). Lydda was the centre of the cult of St George, although there is little evidence that Richard attempted to promote the cult himself; most of the legends that surround Richard developed in Tudor times (Good 36).



Tomb of St George, Lydda

What has been presented here is a form of the martyrdom story collected from a few sources; however, there is one detail that is included in the Vienna palimpsest, that may demonstrate a relationship between the martyrdom legend and the story of George and the Dragon with which we are familiar. In this version, which mostly runs parallel with the description presented here, George refers to the heathen ruler, governor Dadianus, as the



St George spears  
Diocletian, from The Art  
Museum of Georgia, Tbilisi  
(11th century)

'evil dragon'. Later, when George endures the tortures that will lead to his first death, the text refers to Dadianus as 'the dragon of the Abyss'. The narrative thus describes a metaphorical battle between a Christian Knight and the governor in the form of the adversarial dragon representing the quintessence of evil. As the legend develops, this becomes a *literal* battle between saint and dragon. Furthermore, the governor's wife, whom George frees from the worship of heathen gods and from the draconian mastery of her husband, is later represented by the princess whom George saves from the dragon, and the salvation of the townsfolk. Finally, the water and milk that flow from George's decapitated body are represented by the spring that flows from the Altar within St George's church.

Dissecting the legend reveals some intrinsic problems in continuity: if the edict for the Great Persecution of Christians was issued by Diocletian in 303AD, and George's Passion lasted for seven years, then the date of the martyrdom would have been 310AD, which was five years after Diocletian died. There was no queen or empress Alexandra at the time (Stace 19). At his most generous, Wallis Budge argues the accepted date was incorrect and the events could have taken place some 50 years earlier during a previous persecution, which would allow an appropriate passage of time for the legends to become established by the time of Diocletian (Budge 1930 47). He suggests Eusebius of Caesarea's description of a young man

tearing down Diocletian's edict against Christians, and the perpetrator's subsequent torture and execution, suggested the *manner* of St George's martyrdom rather than being a direct report (Budge 1888 xxix–xxx). The author of the Coptic version of the martyrdom legend, or the original Greek text upon which it was based, knew principal details concerning Diocletian's persecution, but the 'names of the persons who took part in it have been either wilfully or ignorantly corrupted by him and that the historical sequence has been destroyed' (Budge 1888 xxvii). Thus, there may well have been a martyr called George, but his name has been attached to a separate character who suffered under Diocletian.

As a description of a Christian martyr, the legend of St George would have acted as an example to other Christians. These stories were, as Budge argues, often 'grafted portions of legends of gods and heroes and supernatural beings and much of the original form of the legend... was destroyed in the process' (Budge 1930 56). The struggle of St George and Alexandra against Dadianus, 'the Dragon of the Abyss', is a means of Christianising the mythological story of Perseus and Andromeda: Perseus overcame the sea monster. Alternatively, the martyrdom and resurrection is a retelling of the conflict between light and dark, perhaps represented by Marduk and Tiamat in Mesopotamian mythology, adapted to conform to the historical details (Budge 1888 xxxiii). Budge draws parallels with the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh and the martyrdom of St George. According to this mythology, Gilgamesh was two third god and one part mortal; therefore, the promoters of the early cult may have identified him with the Mesopotamian hero: Budge argues that if 'St George was three parts God and one part man' then the four killings would be understandable (Budge 1930 43; Morgan 21). The name George may well be a corruption of an ancient god of hero, and some details of *his* life have been inherited by the now-Christian saint (Budge 1930 42). Thus, George draws parallels with other pre-Christian sources, and it is to these I now turn.





## Al Khidr



St George shares his feast day with one of the oldest gods of the Middle East, known as *Al Khidr* (also *El Khudr* and *Jiryis Baqiya*).<sup>6</sup>

St George is a translation of *Mar Gîyôrgîs*, and *Jiryis Baqiya* translates as 'George, the resurrected one' (Walker and Uysal 287). There is a Monastery called *Dier Mar Jirjis* in a town between Bethlehem and Hebron named *al-Khader* after George (Brown 306). Commentators of the Koran describe Al Khidr as one of the prophets, or as a guide for those who seek God. In the stories of Al Khidr, he is represented as a great soldier whom God

sent to convert a Pagan king of *El Mauçil* (Mosil in Iraq); during his preaching, he is put to death on three occasions, but is restored to life (Hole 109–10; Baring-Gould 97). Thus, through reputation and deeds, there are similarities with the life of St George. Likewise, the names correspond: if George is translated as 'earth worker', then Al Khidr is translated as 'The Green One', suggesting his links with the vegetation rites. However, Khidr is also linked with the Greek sea deity, Glaucos, and the root of the story is Greek, rather than Muslim (Bussell 281). Ovid's *Metamorphoses* describes how Glaucos was a fisherman who discovered a herb that brought the fish he had caught back to life. Eating the herb himself, Glaucos became immortal, but consequently he grew fins and a fish's tail (Ovid 322–27). This method of immortality corresponds with the Mesopotamian myth of Ut-napishtim in the epic of Gilgamesh, which is amongst the earliest works of literature, dating from some four thousand years ago. Ut-napishtim was a survivor of the Great Deluge (his story parallels that of Noah in the Book of Genesis), and with whom Gilgamesh discusses the secret of immortality. Ut-napishtim describes a plant that grows at the bottom of the ocean which would renew Gilgamesh's youth. Although Gilgamesh succeeds in retrieving the plant, it is stolen by a serpent as he bathes. The serpent is reborn and sheds its skin (Dalley 118). As mentioned earlier, the legend of St George has also parallels with the Mesopotamian hero Marduk who defeated the dragon Tiamat and restores the world from chaos.



Ut-napishtim

<sup>6</sup> Sam Riches and I discussed how to say "Al Khidr" and suggested the pronunciation should be "Al-Hudder".



Al-Khidr as Andreas the cook, with Alexander the Great. They marvel at the sight of a salted fish that comes back to life when touched by the Water of Life.

The story of rejuvenation is also echoed in the Greek Romance of Alexander written around the second century BC. Here, Alexander's cook, named Andreas, washes dried fish in water from a spring: immediately the fish comes to life. The cook and Alexander's daughter Kale also drink the water. Envyng their immortality, Alexander laments that 'it was not fated for me to drink from the spring of immortality which gives life to what is dead'. Kale is banished from their company, while the cook is thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck: 'thereupon he became a spirit himself and went away to live in a corner of the sea' (Pseudo-Callisthenes 121-2). The Water of Life motif is, of course, represented by the healing spring in the church at the end of the dragon

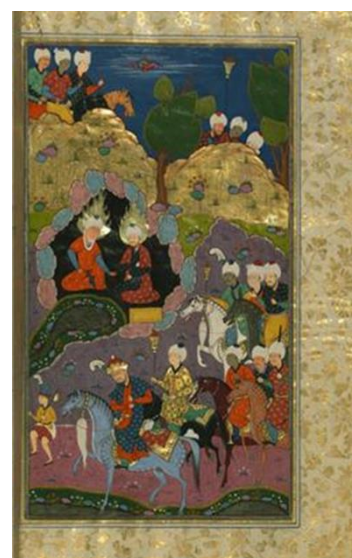
legend, while the water of Eternal Life is baptism. Furthermore, as well as the parallel with rejuvenation through nature, we also see the recurring motif of the Pagan ruler who orders the execution and the subsequent resurrection, or supernatural prolongation of life of the hero. The Khidr mythology deals with these traditions by explaining that Khidr's soul transferred to each of these characters (and others) through metempsychosis, the transmigration of the soul.

## Elijah

There is also a tradition of linking al Khidr with Elijah, the prophet of the Kingdom of Israel in the Book of Kings. Budge observes that Arabs regarded St George as the reincarnation of Moses or Elijah (Budge 1930 44; cf. Ginzberg 599). The first parallels are vague: according to the Second Book of Kings, Elijah ascended into Heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). Thus, he is considered immortal, while Glaucos is described as a 'deathless being' (Bussell 282). However, Khidr's name in Islam is *Ilyas*, which is the Turkish form of Elijah (Walker and Uysal 288). So, the deathless being becomes an eternal prophet.

Tradition recognises Al Khidr as an eternal wanderer or prophet, linked to Elijah: because of Elijah's transcendence into heaven, he

is regarded as a soul which has not passed through death. Consequently, Malachi's prediction of Elijah's return 'before that great and dreadful day of the Lord' (Malachi 4:6)



Khidr's real name is Ilyas



Antichrist beheads Enoch and  
Elijah in the Last Days

leads to the Christian tradition that, in the Last Days, Elijah and Enoch (who also did not suffer death, but was taken into heaven, described in Genesis 5:24) will battle and be slain by Antichrist and will be resurrected after three days. An Islamic tradition holds that Christ will overcome Antichrist at a convent dedicated to St George just outside the Jaffa Gate of Lydda in the Last Days (Hanauer 48).

The identification of Khidr with Elijah presented a problem as the mythology developed: Elijah is mentioned by name in the *Koran* (Book VI, 85 and XXXVII 123–30). Thus, it became necessary to create a character to become the close companion of Khidr/Elijah: this character became

Elisha (Bussell 282). Thus, the character of Elijah evolves from the grotesque sea demon and instead becomes associated with travellers across land.

Hanauer describes how there is a place of Al Khidr worship on the northern slope of Mount Carmel in northern Israel (48). Currently, this is a place where pilgrims travel in search of physical and mental healing, and is associated with Al Khidr and the Fountain of Youth. However, in the Old Testament, Elijah is associated with the mountain, first by rebuilding a ruined altar to God (1 Kings 18: 32), and then by defeating the prophets of Baal by calling down fire from Heaven (v.38). In a parallel to this story, St George calls down fire to kill the governors and the pagans before his execution.

The motifs of deaths and resurrections, shown by St George and Elijah (who will come again) are repeated through mythologies of gods and heroes. As early as the tenth century, Muslims recognised elements of St George legend in the mythology surrounding the Mesopotamian vegetation god Tammuz (Anderson 29). Other Life-death-rebirth deities include: the Egyptian Osiris; the Greek Dionysius; the Aztec Quetzalcoatl; the Welsh and Irish legends of Bran; the Norse Baldr; and Odin, who became the Anglo-Saxon Woden; the Saxon Fertility Goddess Eostre; the Celtic Cernunnos; and even King Arthur, the Once and Future King. We can also match the traditions and rituals associated with these mythologies with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which bear striking similarities with the cult of Mithras (including the celebration of the Virgin birth of the saviour at the winter solstice, 25 December). Bussell considers the death and resurrection motif with regard to Vishnu 'who incarnated himself for the good of mankind' (282); however, Frazer argues that these stories form part of a much larger ritual process intended to personify the conflict between Winter and Spring and to restore fertility to the land (181).



## English Folk Legends

The ritual representation of the conflict between the seasons and the supplication for the season's fertility is personified through many aspects of English Folklore. In the fourteenth century poem, *Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Green Knight is decapitated in a New Year game. The language used equates to someone pollarding an old tree; however, he regenerates through the spring to complete his challenge to Gawain a year and a day later. The decapitation of the Green Knight may well be a parallel with the beheading of St George. For the Green Knight the decapitation is about vegetation and renewal; for St George, his beheading is his martyrdom, but he can expect to rise again in Heaven. The Green Knight might well be a later incarnation of Khidr, a personification of the vegetation god;



The Beheading of the Green Knight. London, British Library, Cotton Nero A.x

however, he enters the court of King Arthur, who we have seen is also an example of the dying and rising god. In effect, in this version of the legend, King Arthur and the Green Knight represent the tradition of brothers in conflict for supremacy. The tradition (in Judaism, Christianity and Islam) begins with the conflict between Cain and Abel, but is also seen in the Mummer's play where the Turkish Knight (pagan) kills St George (Christian); however, as St George came from Cappadocia, he is *also* the "Turkish Knight". St George is then resurrected by the doctor, who either takes the form of the divine, or the regeneration of the seasons (Weston 53). Similarly, Withington observes that the sword dance performed by the Morris men in the mummer's play is symbolic of the battle between Winter and Summer, which ends with the decapitation of the fool (I 5).

The resuscitation during torture can be seen as a form of renewal, and this parallels Jesus's death and resurrection. Both of these are also seen in the rituals of the Anglo-Saxon fertility goddess Eostre, suggesting all are distantly associated with nature symbolism representing death and renewal.<sup>7</sup> Frazer describes how rituals were performed on St George's Day to ensure fertility, either for the crops or for the women. These pageants included the sacrifice of a character called 'Green George' to the winter. The sacrifice is necessary so the divine spirit in him might be transferred to the successor (Frazer 157; Weston XXVII). This may once have been a literal human sacrifice. The killing of the dragon is a movement away

<sup>7</sup> "Easter", used from 890AD by King Alfred, derives from the Northumbrian spelling of Eostre; this is believed to refer to the goddess whose festival was celebrated at the vernal equinox. Her name [Old Teutonic *austrôn*, cognate with Western Sanskrit *Usra* meaning dawn, suggesting that she was the Dawn Goddess]. Most modern European languages have the word relating to *Pascha*, *Pascua*, deriving from "Passover".



from the human sacrifices, not only those of pagan times, but seen also in the story of Abraham and Isaac and of Iphigenia. In these stories, as Chambers argues, 'the hero puts an end to the periodical death of a victim by slaying the monster who has enforced and profited by it' (138). He argues that the dragon, and other monsters dwelling in or near water, suggests a bloodless sacrifice by drowning, although it could be argued that, as the texts are reworked by Christian hagiographers, the water becomes symbolic of baptism.

### **Holly and Oak King**

The Holly branch carried by the Green Knight represents the branch carried by Saturn, the roman Agricultural god. The feast of Saturnalia is held for the winter solstice and extended to incorporate 17-23 December. Thus, the 'defeat' of the Green Knight by Gawain, denotes the defeat of the Winter by the Summer so the seasons can progress towards Spring. As Christopher Fee observes, 'it can be no accident that *Sir Gawain* is set at midwinter, nor can the familiar form of the Green Man, presenting himself for sacrificial decapitation at just the appropriate time, be merely coincidental' (Fee 199). This cycle of the seasons is also shown in the conflict between the Holly King (Saturn) and the Oak King (Jupiter). According to tradition, the Holly King rules nature through the dark half of the year, from the Midsummer solstice until Midwinter, thus, the two kings are light and dark aspects of the complete identity (Broadhurst 37). The defeated king rests at *Caer Arianrhod* until the next battle. The Oak King is the Lord of the Greenwood, who mates at Beltane, identifying him as a symbol of light and fertility. Beltane has now been secularised to the May Day celebrations.

Given St George's association with the 'green one', it is a logical progression to see him as a pre-Christian form of a fertility icon in the 'Green man' or the foliate head that one sees in Churches. The Venerable Bede cites a letter from Pope Gregory who had initially told the Christian mission to Canterbury in 597AD to destroy the pagan altars, but then he ordered that they should be saved and purified to establish them as temples of the True God. Later, when churches were built to protect the altars from the elements, the pagan symbols were incorporated into the Church. Thus, people would come to the location where they had always worshipped, except this was now a Christian site.

Writing about the Green Man more generally (with whom the Green Knight is often identified), Lady Raglan ties together various characters from English folklore including Robin Hood and the King of the May (Raglan 50), although Marcangelo objects to the association of the two, observing there were *two* plays and 'the play of Robin Hood was an entirely different performance from that of King of May' (Marcangelo 180). However, that is not to say the two plays did not have a common root, just as the later seventeenth century

play 'George a Greene, the Pinder of Wakefield' draws together the strands of 'Green George' and Robin Hood with the former representing loyalty to the crown and the latter representing political rebellion. In the same way, discussing symbolism in English pageantry, Withington observes 'the relationship between wildmen, green men, Robin Hood, the Moors and the devil is difficult to clear up. A great many cross-influences must exist; and it seems obvious that all these figures are connected' (Withington I 74). However, the parallels *are* apparent and if Robin Hood is the King of the May, then Marian becomes the May Queen who is crowned then led out for sacrifice to Maia, the Roman Goddess of the Spring. The sacrifice occurs at the Maypole (itself a fertility symbol), as a parallel to the sacrifice in the St George legend (Ordish 329; Reader Digest Association 38).

St George is considered the Patron Saint of farmers and part of this association is the feast day of 23 April. This was before the Julian calendar changed to the Gregorian calendar in 1752 and the days moved forward by 11 days (from 2 September to 14 September), consequently "old" St George's Day was (seasonally) the time of 4 May, which would have been the middle of the spring celebrations (Stewart 66; Broadhurst 29).<sup>8</sup>

Robin Hood and St George are also linked: St George's thematic ancestry is with Al Khidr, the 'Green One' and Robin Hood is a representation of the Oak King or the May King who has evolved into the spirit of the Greenwood and become human. The names Robin and Marion were traditionally associated with a shepherd lover and his lady in Medieval French ballads, particularly the thirteenth-century *Le Jeu du berger et de la bergère* (The Play of the Shepherd and the Shepherdess, which is often renamed 'The Play of Robin and Marian') by Adam de la Halle (Harris 103). Here, the cosmic order addressed by the conflict between winter and spring is symbolised by the redistribution of wealth in the Robin Hood legends which serve to create a sense of balance between the rich and the poor.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, when we address the question: "who do you think we were?" in relation to St George, our Patron Saint, we are left with many questions on what it means to be English. St George is the epitome of Englishness and chosen to protect us because of his chivalric courtesy. Unlike other contenders for the role of national patronage, however, George was not martyred in England, nor did he play an active part in the conversion of the nation. In fact, aside from an episode in an inconsequential legend, St George never came to England

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<sup>8</sup> This explains a problem that I had as a child when wondering how the Three Wise Men had their Epiphany some 12 days after the birth of Christ; in fact, by these calculations, it takes us to 5 January – "Old" Christmas Eve.

at all. The epic battle with the dragon was, of course, allegorical, representing the Christian knight defending the Church against the forces of evil. Tracing this legend further back, we see the dragon is an epithet for a tyrannical heathen ruler. Likewise, the story of the Christian martyr who suffered and was resurrected, parallels the imagery of the Messiah, whose message inspired the acts (whether real or apocryphal) of other Christian martyrs. However, many of the motifs are a patchwork of recurring themes from mythologies from various cultures, including Greek, Islamic, Jewish and Sumerian. When Christianity was young, their heroes, examples of how the faithful should live their lives, took the deeds of Pagan heroes, and overcame monsters with the power of the Cross. Given St George's associated with Khidr, 'the green one' then it is simple to see him in terms of a pre-Christian icon of fertility, and the combat with the dragon becomes one part of the story of the battle between winter and spring.

Throughout mythology and legend, the snake has represented the forces of evil, perhaps in Biblical terms through the garden of Eden, or, in the legend of St Patrick, who may have driven the snakes out of Ireland, but this could also have been a metaphor for driving out the pagan ways as well. Thus, we see a similar allegory in the combat between George and the Dragon: if the serpents driven out by St Patrick represented the devil in Genesis, then the dragon fought by St George represented the dragon from Revelation.

Yet, what is most interesting about these legends is that they have developed to be incorporated into English culture so they became more relevant to each successive audience. The principal themes of the story of St George also echo through the tales of other popular folk heroes including Robin Hood and King Arthur. Although, if there was an historical figure of St George, it was unlikely he ever came to England, but this is not a disadvantage: he was not linked with a specific location in England, and so he became a symbol for all of England.

NORTHAMPTON

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