



# The Real St George

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# Introduction

As flags go, it is stunning. A blood red cross on a white background is instantly recognisable, easily produced and clear enough to be spotted a mile away. It is a flag that England has made its own.

These days, you can see St George's flag almost anywhere - in England at any rate. When England is playing in an international football competition, they are everywhere. They flutter from cars, being carried on plastic struts that attach to the car windows. Larger versions are nailed to wooden poles lashed to builders' vans and trucks. Houses have flags flying from windows, garages and garden fences. Shops are festooned with them and pubs are swathed in St George's flags, St George's bunting and St George's posters.

The imagination of modern marketing men has been let loose on the once simple flag of St George. Breweries put their logos into the white quarters of the flag to link their product to the ubiquitous flags. Other flags are decorated with a silhouette of a mounted knight in armour piercing a fierce dragon with a lance. Some combine the coat of arms of England with the flag of St George by displaying three lions on the flag. Advertisements show jocular knights in armour and a surcoat displaying the flag enjoying a wide variety of products seeking to gain sales by being linked to the patron saint of England.

St George and his flag have entered the public life of England in a big way. Fully grown men dress up as St George to go to football matches or to slip down the pub to watch English cricketers take on foreign rivals on giant television screens. His flag is emblazoned on supermarket packs to show that the apples, steaks or lager within was produced in England.

In part this modern obsession with St George has got a lot to do with the marvels of modern manufacturing. Time was when flags were expensive things to buy. Coloured dyes that would remain true in sun, rain and wind were pricey to make and costly to fix on cloth. Now with new synthetic fabrics and artificial dyes, a pound or two will buy you a colourful flag that would previously have set you back half a day's wages. Flags, costumes and outfits are cheap enough to be bought, used and discarded without much cost.

But there is also something about St George himself that captures the English mind. In the public imagination, St George is a bold, fearless and hearty chap. He thinks nothing of grabbing sword or lance to rush into battle against a ferocious dragon to save a pretty damsel. No doubt he would be just as ready to hurl himself into battle to slaughter foreign enemies of England. And nobody can be in much doubt that he would

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celebrate his victory with a vast platter of sausages, steaks and chips washed down with a beer or two, while belting out a singalong chant with his mates.

St George's image is decidedly male and working class. In these days when politicians tell us that "we are all middle class now", submerge England into a bureaucratic European Union and seek to embrace a touchy-feely empathy with the world, St George gallops out on his white horse to remind us of a very different England. When the football World Cup comes around it is Council estates and areas of smaller houses that are festooned with red and white, and it is white vans that carry the largest flags.

Big, bold, brave and determined to enjoy himself while cheerfully slaughtering his enemies, St George is seen in much the same way as the English like to think of themselves.

But what was the real St George like? How has he come to embody the more robust virtues of the English? To find the answers we must set out on the trail of the real St George.



*England fans dressed as St George on their way to a match in the 2007 Rugby World Cup Finals, held in France during October. England beat the USA, Tonga, Samoa, France and Australia on their way to the World Rugby Final, where they came second to a strong South Africa team.*

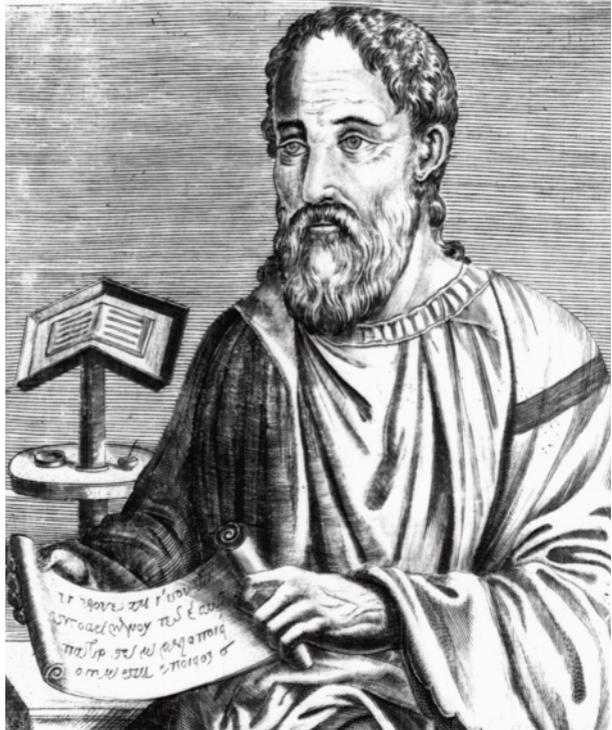
# Chapter 1

## The Martyr

The trail goes back to the distant past. So far back does the trail wind that records are sparse and facts obscure. There is little that can be said with any real certainty - there are different versions of events even in the oldest sources - and it can be difficult to sort out truth from legend. As a rule, however, it is usually best to start with the oldest written sources on the grounds that they are more likely to be accurate, or at least not to include any information that would have sounded obviously wrong to the people reading it.

The oldest reference to St George is almost certainly to be found in a History of the Church written by Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea in about 322. It is worth noting in

*The early Christian leader and bishop, Eusebius of Caesarea was the first man to write about the martyr who suffered death on 23 April 303. Eusebius does not give the man's name, but does make clear that he died on the orders of Diocletian and that he came from Cappadocia, the same province as Eusebius himself. Assuming the man in question was St George, then Eusebius would have known him personally and is therefore a reliable contemporary source for the existence of the saint.*



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the light of later events that Caesarea was the main city in the province of Cappadocia (now Kapadokya in Turkey).

This was an interesting time to be a Christian. The pagan Roman state had been largely indifferent to the new religion, though there had been periods of persecution, but in the early 4th century Christianity was getting the upper hand over paganism. In 306 the Christian Constantine became Emperor in the western half of the Roman Empire and by 324 had become the undisputed ruler of the whole empire. Eusebius promptly wrote a biography of Constantine that was a master class in sycophantic flattery.

He had reasons to want to gain the favour of the new supreme ruler. Constantine was aware that there were dozens of different Christian traditions within the Roman Empire. Bishops did not co-operate with each other and often argued fiercely about doctrine, ceremony and which books were genuine histories of Christ and which were not. As soon as he gained power, Constantine called a meeting of all the Christian bishops to take place at Nicaea (now Iznik in Turkey) to thrash out all the disagreements. The Council of Nicaea produced the Nicæan Creed, a way to calculate when Easter fell each year and issued rulings on various theological points. One of these was on the relationship between the three persons of the Holy Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Bishop Eusebius found himself on the losing side and, since he did not accept the Nicæan rulings, on the wrong side of Emperor Constantine. If he had not been such a good historian he may well have been ousted from his bishopric, or even condemned for heresy. As it was, Eusebius spent the rest of his life trying to make things up to Constantine.

In Book VII of his *History of the Church*, Eusebius gives details of the great persecution of Christianity by the Emperor Diocletian which began in 302 and lasted, off and on, until 311. Among those recorded by Eusebius as being killed was “A man of the greatest distinction”, who was sentenced to death by Emperor Diocletian in Nicomedia on 23 April 303. Eusebius does not mention the name of the man, nor any details of his crime, execution or career. The context, however, implies that this man had tried to stop the destruction of the cathedral in Nicomedia (now Izmit in Turkey), and that it was for this opposition to an imperial order that he was killed.

Trouble had been brewing between the pagan Diocletian and his Christian subjects for some time. A long-running war with Persia was going badly and pagan officers in the army blamed a cabal of Christian officers. Moreover a group of senior pagan priests had become jealous of funds and bequests that were going to Christian churches instead of to pagan temples. They pointed out to Diocletian that bequests to pagan temples usually included a share for the Emperor, while those to Christian churches did not. The final straw came at Antioch in the autumn of 302 when a Christian deacon named Romanus interrupted official pagan rituals and started a fight that stopped the ceremonies being completed. This Romanus was a friend of Eusebius, which may have

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*The pagan Roman Emperor Diocletian ruled from 284 to 305. He rose from lowly origins through the ranks of the army until he was acclaimed to be emperor by the army when the Emperor Carus died on campaign in Persia. Diocletian drastically reformed the imperial government, imposing new taxes and bureaucratic offices in an effort to improve the control of the central government over the far flung empire. His crackdown on Christians was part of a wider effort to control groups outside of the imperial system.*

coloured Eusebius's version of the events that followed.

Diocletian was furious. He ordered Romanus to have his tongue cut out and then to be thrown into prison. Diocletian then travelled to consult the powerful oracle of the god Apollo at nearby Didyma. Apollo, speaking through his priests, told the emperor that he could not offer advice “due to the impious ones” in imperial service. Diocletian at once ordered all civil servants and army officers to take an oath sacred to the pagan gods or to resign. Many Christians left their jobs, but that was not enough.

On 23 February 303, Diocletian ordered that the newly-built cathedral at Nicomedia be destroyed. Nicomedia was close to Didyma so the new church was held to have offended Apollo – and in any case Diocletian had a palace in Nicomedia and had no wish to look out on a Christian church from his bedroom window. Other churches were to be stripped of treasures and the wealth handed over to the imperial treasury. Five days later the imperial palace caught fire. Inevitably, Diocletian blamed a Christian conspiracy and ordered the execution of several leading Christians. It was in one of these rounds of executions that the “man of the greatest distinction” died.

With much of his palace in ruins, Diocletian left the Eastern provinces of the empire for Rome, then went campaigning against barbarian tribes in the Danube Valley.

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With Diocletian gone, the persecutions lost their impetus as many local officials were either Christians themselves or found the religious killings distasteful. In the more relaxed atmosphere Christianity revived. Those who had been executed were treated as honoured martyrs. Their bones were dug up and placed in shrines or reburied under monuments that commemorated their actions and deaths. When Constantine lifted all restrictions on Christianity the number of churches and Christians boomed.

In about the year 345 or thereabouts a church was built in the town of Shakka, Syria. The original church has long since gone, but the door lintel has survived. On it are carved words that translate as “This is the house of the holy and triumphant martyr George, and of the holy ones who suffered martyrdom alongside him.” It is the earliest reference to a martyr named George.

A few years later, another Syrian church was dedicated to the martyr George. Unlike the small chapel at Shakka, the structure at Adhra was a substantial stone structure, having previously been a pagan temple. The cult statue of the pagan god was torn down and dragged outside to be smashed up. In its place was erected a stone altar on which was carved the following inscription in Greek:

“This home of demons has become a house of God. A light has shone in the place where darkness held sway. Where there were sacrifices to idols there are now songs of angels. Where God was angry he is now content. A lover of Christ, John the noble man, son of Diomedes, has paid with his own money to create as a gift to God a building that is suitable for the purpose. He has placed within this structure a relic of the splendidly triumphant and most holy martyr George who appeared to John himself, not in a dream but as a real vision.”

Both these inscriptions were carved when people who had been alive during the persecution of Diocletian would still be alive and able to remember what had happened. Neither of them specifically links the martyr George to the man killed on 23 April 303, but they do make it clear that this George was highly respected and revered in Syria at this time.

Within a century, however, documents were being written that state that the martyr George was being commemorated on 23 April, which was believed to be the anniversary of his death. Moreover, it was recorded that the Emperor Constantine, no less, had given money to build a shrine over the tomb of the martyr George. The shrine was built at Lydda (now Lod in Israel) in the Plain of Sharon.

Taken together these very early sources make it clear that a man named George was killed because of his Christian faith, probably on 23 April 303, during the persecutions of the Emperor Diocletian. This George had obviously made a big impression on his contemporaries for he had at least two churches dedicated to him within living memory of his death and a shrine or chapel was built over his tomb on the instructions of the Emperor Constantine. No other martyr of the date can claim such devotion.

Sometime around the year 400, the date is in dispute, a Christian scribe living in

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what was then Nobatia (now Qasr Ibrim, Egypt) wrote out brief accounts of the lives of a number of martyrs. Among them was the martyr George. According to the unknown scribe of Nobatia, George had been born in Egypt during the reign of the Emperor Aurelian (270-275). George's father was a pagan named Gerontius who worked for the Roman government in an unspecified capacity. Gerontius had originally come from Cappadocia. At this date both Cappadocia and Nobatia were part of the far flung Roman Empire and officials were often moved from one province to another by the government. George's mother was a Christian named Polychronia. She had George secretly baptised, and as he grew up taught him about Jesus Christ.

According to this version of his life, George completed his education, and then got a job in the Imperial government through the influence of his father. He later moved to Lydda in the province of Syria where he was promoted to a senior, but unspecified, position. The local governor was a pagan who suddenly announced that only pagans could remain in Lydda. George spoke out against the instruction, denouncing the god Apollo in furious terms in front of the pagan governor during an official function. George was at once arrested and tortured in public. His feet were forced into metal boots lined with spikes, but he calmly began preaching to the assembled crowd on the benefits of Christianity. George was then tied to a wooden stake and whipped, but again he ignored his pain to talk about Christ. Such steadfast faith in the face of suffering caused several onlookers to convert to Christianity. Even the pagan governor's wife renounced her pagan gods. George was dragged from his stake by soldiers, whereupon he again loudly denounced Apollo. He was then beheaded by order of the pagan governor.

This version of George's life is the earliest that has survived. It would seem to fit reasonably well the known facts of the persecution of Diocletian. It is interesting that George is said to attack Apollo, when it was the priests of Apollo at Didyma who spurred Diocletian into action. Similarly the death of George is located at Lydda, where another manuscript records his tomb. If he was born around 270, he would have been over thirty years old by 303 which is a reasonable age to be a fairly senior civil servant at the time. It is worth noting that the scribe makes a great point of mentioning that George converts to Christianity the wife of the pagan governor. The woman here is a shadowy figure of no apparent relevance to the story, but she is mentioned several times as if she is somehow important. The conversion of a high-born lady would remain a permanent fixture of the various stories about St George.

A slightly later version of George's life was written sometime before 480, perhaps as early as 420, in one of the eastern provinces. It is sometimes dubbed the Syrian Life to distinguish it from the version written in Egypt. In this version George was born in Cappadocia and joined the Roman army as a young man. He proved to be a talented soldier and rose to become a senior officer. He was serving as deputy to the general Anatolius in Syria when the local governor Dadianos ordered that everyone had to sacrifice to pagan god Apollo. George refused and publicly denounced the false god

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*The Greek god Apollo. All the earliest references to St George portray him as being vehemently opposed to the worship of this pagan god. He was condemned to death and martyred on the orders of the Emperor Diocletian for these actions. Apollo was the god of light, truth, music and the arts. He is usually depicted as a handsome young man without a beard and holding musical instruments. This marble statue is a 2nd century Roman copy of a lost Greek original. The bloody persecution of Christians begun by the Emperor Diocletian in 303 was prompted by a message given him by the priests of Apollo that was claimed to have come direct from the god himself. It is likely that the early tales of St George defying Apollo are linked to this historical incident.*

Apollo. In this version, George is once again subjected to tortures which are even more inventive and painful than those described by the Nobatan scribe. The tortures occupy rather more of this document, and have more fantastic details. George was actually killed three times under torture – the first time when his back was broken on a wheel, the second time when Dadianos poured molten lead down his throat and third time when he was whipped until his ribs shone white in the sun. Each time the Archangel Michael appeared and restored George to perfect health. This impressive display converted to Christianity the general Anatolius and a princess named Alexandra, both of whom are promptly beheaded by order of Dadianos. George himself was then beheaded and this time stayed dead.

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The Syrian Life of George is quite obviously a highly fictionalised version that was written to emphasise the sufferings of the martyr and the power of God to overcome them. The lengthy accounts of the tortures undergone by George make for gruesome reading and a modern reader could be forgiven for feeling queasy. Behind these invented details, however, there can still be discerned a basic framework that had a basis in reality. As in the Egyptian Life, George is said to be of Cappadocian origins and to be working for the Roman government in Syria. He falls foul of orders to perform pagan sacrifices to Apollo and is martyred. The Syrian life is the earliest time that George is described as being a soldier. The earlier Egyptian Life had merely said he worked for the Roman government in some way.

If these two accounts are correct that George was born into a noble Cappadocian family, it would explain by Bishop Eusebius had been interested in his martyrdom.

In the year 494 the Pope Gelasius ordered the papal bureaucracy to draw up a list of works that should be accepted as genuine Christian tracts, and which should be discarded as being either heretical or of unproven origins. That original list has since been lost and the list known as the *Decretum Gelasianum* which survives is of a rather later date. In it the Syrian Life is mentioned. It is listed as being of dubious origins, but not condemned outright. Crucially the martyr George is listed among those “whose names are justly revered among men, but whose actions are known only to God.” In other words, George was accepted as having been a genuine martyr, but the details given in the Syrian Life are dismissed.

Over the following centuries the fame of St George the Martyr spread and increased. In those countries that recognised the Pope Rome as the head of the Christian Church, George acquired the title of “Saint”. He did so along with many other early Christian martyrs as the developing Christian theology produced the concept that outstandingly holy individuals should be recognised as saints. In Greek-speaking lands he became known as a “megalomartyr”, which translates as “great martyr” and indicated that he should be revered more highly than ordinary martyrs.

In the west the concept of a saint was changing. At the time that George lived, it was enough to pray to God and to believe that Jesus Christ was His son. By about 600, however, it was coming to be believed that we poor mortals needed a bit of help when talking to the Almighty. That is where saints came in. It was believed that those who had led especially holy lives or who had performed acts — such as martyrdom — that were highly regarded by God occupied a special place in Heaven close to the throne of God. On the other hand, the saints had been humans in life and this gave them rather more empathy with other mortals than was shown by angels, archangels and other sacred beings. It became increasingly common practice to address a prayer or request to a saint, effectively asking them to pass it on to God on behalf of the human making the prayer.

The concept was formalised as a result of the Second Council of Nicaea, held in 787. This was the seventh great meeting of all the bishops of Christendom and had

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been summoned by the Patriarch of Constantinople Paul VI to discuss a variety of issues that were causing debate within Christianity. The Council emphasised that worship was due to God alone, but that prayers could be addressed to saints so long as it was clear the ultimate recipient of the prayer was God and that the saint was merely a messenger. They coined the words “latría” for the worship of God and “dulía” for the veneration of saints. The subtle distinction was lost on most people who took up praying to saints with enthusiasm.

It must be said that although the veneration of St George was widespread throughout Christendom, he was especially popular. Churches and shrines dedicated to St George were erected in all areas of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East but they were always outnumbered by those sacred to other saints.

The versions of St George’s life story that were produced between the time of Pope Gelasius and the 11th century placed increasing emphasis on his courage in the face of torture and death. The details of the tortures endured changed regularly and became increasingly bizarre and painful. He was routinely described as a soldier and whenever a picture of him was drawn or painted it showed him clad in the armour of the period and wielding a spear or sword. Several churchmen wrote books that were either about him or that mentioned him. Although the accounts of St George concentrated on his martyrdom, the fact that he had been a soldier made him a favourite of knights and others going off to war.

It was this fact that was to lead to events in 1098 that were to transform St George forever.

*A bust of the Roman Emperor Constantine, who ruled the entire Roman Empire from 312 to 337. The accession of this, the first Christian Emperor of Rome, transformed the religious life of the empire. Constantine paid for a shrine to be built to cover the tomb of St George at Lydda.*



## Chapter 2

# On Crusade

**B**y the 1080s, the world had changed since George's day. He had lived at the height of the Roman Empire when the Imperial edict had force from northern Britain to the Sahara and from the Atlantic to the Black Sea. The Empire was rich, peaceful and heavily populated. Then had come a change in the climate that devastated crops, causing famines and depopulation. Recurrent economic problems combined with corruption and vested interests to undermine the effectiveness of the Roman government and especially the Roman army. When the barbarians attacked, Rome fell.

At Constantinople, Roman civilisation staggered on in the shape of the Byzantine Empire though it was much reduced in size, wealth and scale. In the west, the Roman Empire was replaced by a selection of kingdoms, duchies and principalities. In 800 the Pope crowned the most powerful of these kings to be Emperor in the west, though the Byzantines disputed the legality of the title and most western kings refused to acknowledge his power.

In the 7th century a new religious and political force exploded on to the scene as the Moslem Arabs surged out of Arabia. The new religion of Islam was spread by the sword across the Middle East and North Africa. Previously Christian lands were taken into the Islamic Caliphate. The conquest was accompanied by the usual massacres, rapes and pillaging, but as occupations go the Islamic occupation of Christian lands was not too onerous. Christians were allowed to continue their religion more or less freely, though they had to pay extra taxes and lacked various legal rights that were enjoyed by Moslem citizens. The temptation to convert to the new religion was strong, and many took the step.

In 996 a new Caliph came to power in the person of Abu Ali Mansur Al Hakim. This Mansur was an especially devout Shiite Moslem who launched a series of persecutions of other religions. Christianity suffered badly, but forms of Islam also came in for hostile treatment. In 1010 soldiers sent by Mansur burned the Church of St George at Lydda that had been built over the saint's tomb by the Emperor Constantine. A priest managed to rescue an arm bone from the ruins and fled north to Constantinople with it. The Emperor had it place in a reliquary and pledged that one day he would see the church rebuilt and the arm bone replaced in the tomb.

Mansur went on to demonish the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and

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to convert various other churches to be mosques. Christians were ordered to wear an iron cross on a leather thong around their necks at all times (Jews had to wear a brass bell), and imposed various Islamic laws on all his subjects. Of particular concern to Christians was the ban on alcohol, since this made it impossible to get wine for use in Holy Communion.

The Byzantine Emperor Basil II objected to this treatment of his fellow Christians, but backed off when Mansur mustered his armies. On 12 February 1021 Mansur set off alone to spend a night fasting and praying in the hills west of Cairo. He vanished and no trace of him was ever found. His son and successor Ali Zahir relaxed some of the anti-Christian laws, but refused to allow any churches to be rebuilt. The tomb of St George was neglected and deteriorated.

In 1071 the Battle of Manzikert saw the Byzantines utterly defeated by a Moslem army. The Emperor Romanos IV was captured and some 30,000 square miles of wealthy agricultural land fell to the Moslems. The huge, wealthy cities of Antioch, Edessa and Hierapolis were also captured. Antioch was so large that its walls were over 18 miles long, and Edessa was not much smaller. Over the following 20 years, the Byzantine Empire was reduced to half the size it had been before Manzikert. By 1095 the Moslem scouts were almost within sight of Constantinople itself. Emperor Alexios I decided to call on his fellow Christians for help. He sent a message to Pope Urban II asking him to issue an appeal for Christian warriors to come to help him recapture the lost lands.

Urban set out on a series of travels spreading the word that Christianity was under dire threat. His messengers travelled through Europe retelling reports of Moslem brutality to Christians. Knights and soldiers were particularly interested to learn that the shrine of their most revered soldier saint, St George, was among those that had been burnt and that it still lay in ruins. The aim of rebuilding the shrine at Lydda became one of the rallying points for the army that Urban was gathering.

In the late summer of 1096 a huge number of people began arriving in Constantinople from Europe. Many were soldiers, knights and nobles but others were unarmed pilgrims who wanted to add their prayers to the weapons of the fighting men in the effort to overcome the Moslems. By April 1097 an estimated 40,000 fighting men and 20,000 others were in place. They were led by a number of noblemen including Duke Robert of Normandy, Count Raymond of Toulouse, Count Adhemar of Le Puy, Prince Bohemond of Taranto and Godfrey of Bouillon. The force became known as the Crusade – historians call it the First Crusade – from the Latin word *crux* meaning cross.

Escorted by a large Byzantine army under the general Tatikios, the Crusaders marched into Anatolia to capture Nicaea. They then pushed on toward Jerusalem. On the march a clear difference of purpose emerged. The crusaders wanted to capture Jerusalem, rebuild the ruined churches and make the area once again safe for Christian pilgrims and residents. Tatikios wanted to return the lost lands to Byzantine control.

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*The charge of the Christian knights led by Duke Robert of Normandy at the Battle of Antioch during the First Crusade. It was the sight of St George attacking the flank of the Moslem army that spurred the Crusaders to attack.*

Both objectives involved defeating the Moslem armies, so the two Christian forces cooperated. At Antioch, the dispute came into the open.

The Crusaders wanted to capture the great city of Antioch to act as a port through which supplies and reinforcements could reach them from Europe. They would then march south to Jerusalem. Tatikios wanted to ignore Antioch and march north to defeat the Seljuq Turks. As the siege of Antioch dragged on, Tatikios lost patience and led his army north. He left the Crusaders with some help, however. The reliquary holding the arm bone of St George was left with the Crusaders in the hope that they could return it to Lydda.

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After eight months of siege, Antioch fell when a Christian soldier within opened the gates to his fellow Christians. The Crusaders robbed the local Moslems, killing any who resisted, but then found themselves in serious trouble. No sooner than they were in the city than a huge Moslem army led by Kerbogha of Mosul arrived. Kerbogha had aimed to defeat the Crusaders and lift the siege, but now he laid siege to the city instead. His army outnumbered the Christians and was well fed, while the Christians were short on food and water. One of the poor pilgrims named Peter Bartholomew then had a vision that led him to uncover a spear that he declared to be the Holy Lance that had pierced Christ's side as He hung on the cross.

On 25 June the Crusaders began three solid days of prayers and religious processions, moving from one church in Antioch to the next in an endless round of devotions. At dawn on 28 June they marched out of the city to do battle with Kerbogha and his host. Bohemond led the way with his personal troops, while Adhemar, Godfry and Raymond led other sections. Robert of Normandy was there, so was an English prince named Edgar. Only 100 knights had horses fit for battle so most of the Christians fought on foot. The army was followed by a host of pilgrims in simple tunics and walking barefoot shouting prayers. Among them was Peter and the Holy Lance. Battle was joined and the killing began. One force of Moslems sought to ride around the flank of the Crusaders to get to the open gates of Antioch, but Bohemond led a force of knights to block the move.

Then the Christians saw a remarkable thing. A lone horseman wearing armour and a white cloak appeared on a hill behind the Moslem army. Another horseman joined the first, this man carrying a white banner very different from the green and black flags of Kerbogha's men. Soon a small knot of armoured horsemen was gathered on the hilltop. A force of cavalry detached itself from the Moslem army and spurred toward the new arrivals. As the Moslem men rode up the slope, the man in white lifted his sword high over his head. The white banner was waved three times, then the horsemen surged down the slope in a disciplined charge. The Moslem horsemen turned tail and fled without striking a blow. The fleeing men rode across the rear of Kerbogha's army shouting, screaming and pointing in fear at the advancing men under the white banner. Within minutes the vast Moslem army broke up and fled. The Crusaders had won a great victory.

Strangely there was no sign of the man in white nor the men who had ridden into battle under the white banner. The riders who had caused the Moslems to break and run had vanished. For the Crusaders there was only one possible explanation. They had been holy warriors sent by God. And their leader could have been nobody but St George, the soldier saint. Soon men were saying that the white banner had been emblazoned with a red cross.

It was a miracle.

The veneration of St George was transformed by the Battle of Antioch. Up until this point the emblem of a red cross on a white field had been widely used as a symbol

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of Christian martyrdom. The cross symbolised faith in Christ, the red stood for the blood of the martyr while the white indicated purity of faith. The Crusaders now identified the symbol with St George. It was to be many years before the red cross on a white field became the exclusive property of St George as many traditionalists continued to use it as a generic symbol of martyrs, but the process proved to be inexorable.

And while St George had long been a soldier saint, he was now very much a fighting saint. He had drawn his sword in battle against the Moslems and caused their destruction. Pictures of him began to show him in belligerent mood. No longer was he shown standing passively in armour, he was now shown riding a prancing horse, waving a sword or lance as if going into battle and sometimes he was depicted actively slaughtering Moslems by the dozen.

The Crusaders stayed at Antioch for some time while reinforcements arrived and the supply system was sorted out. Then they swept on toward Jerusalem. They were helped by the fact that the caliphate that had unified the Moslem rulers had collapsed. The Christians were faced in the Holy Land by a number of small, feuding Moslem states none of which could field a particularly large army.

At Lydda, the Crusaders paused at the ruins of the Church of St George. The arm bone was returned to the broken tomb and rebuilding work began. The Crusaders rebuilt the Church of St George as befitted their new warrior saint. The new structure was larger than the old one had been. It was stoutly built of stone, equipped with battlements and provided with a tower as big and strong as a castle keep. The new Church of St George was an impressive stronghold.

Construction work was still in hand as the Crusaders swept on to their ultimate prize: Jerusalem. The governor of the city, Ifikhar ad-Daula had expelled all Christians from the city, not wanting to see one of his gates opened as at Antioch. A siege began on 7 June 1099. By 8 July the Christians had completed their siege towers, had battered the walls with catapults and were ready to attack. The entire army then prayed and fasted for two days, after which they processed barefoot around the city walls singing hymns.

The attack began at dawn on 14 July, and raged throughout the day and into the night. Stones and flaming bales of hay were hurled into the city to set fire to houses, while boulders pummelled the walls. The defenders shot back with arrows, stones and flaming pitch. Several of the Crusaders towers and catapults were destroyed by rocks hurled from the walls. Just before dawn the Christian commanders met to discuss the situation. Their men had been attacking in relays so that fresh men replaced those tired by fighting. Soon all the men would have served two terms in the front line and could not be asked for more.

As the cold grey light of a new day spread over the fighting, a great cry went up from a group of Crusaders. A knight dressed all in white and carrying a white banner could be seen standing on the Mount of Olives. This was the spot from which Jesus

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*The triumph of Saladin at the Battle of the Horns of Hattin in 1187 transformed the military situation in the Holy Land. The Crusaders lost Jerusalem and dozens of other towns and castles. The defeat prompted the launching of the Third Crusade led by King Richard the Lionheart of England who was to have an inspirational vision of St George that led him on to victory.*

Christ had ascended into Heaven, according to the Bible, and had special significance for the Crusaders. Obviously the knight was St George, come back again to work his miraculous help for the Crusaders. The knight in white waved his banner forwards, pointing toward the siege tower manned by the Flemish contingent. Two knights, Litold and Gilbert, hurled themselves from the tower on to the walls of the city. They cut down the defenders, then hauled up other Christians to join them. Soon the Flemings had a secure foothold, allowing dozens of others to clamber up to join them. Then the Moslems fled, seeking the shelter of the impregnable Tower of David. The Crusaders were into Jerusalem, pillaging and killing at will.

St George had worked yet another military miracle.

Next day, Iftikhar ad-Daula and the men who had joined him in the Tower of David were allowed to march out of the city. The civilians who had survived the night

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of pillage were also allowed to leave, though they had to leave behind everything of any value.

The Kingdom of Jerusalem that the Crusaders had founded stretched from Edessa in the north, through Antioch, Tripoli, Acre and Jerusalem to embrace both shores of the Dead Sea and reach as far south as the Red Sea. For almost hundred years the Kingdom of Jerusalem kept open the pilgrim routes for Christians from Europe heading for Nazareth, Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The Church of St George at Lydda was a favoured stopping point for knights on the road from the coast to Jerusalem.

Then a new Moslem ruler managed to unite all the Islamic states in the Middle East under his personal control. Salah ad-Din, known to Christians as Saladin, believed it to be his sacred duty to drive the Christians out of what had once been Moslem lands. In 1187 at the Battle of Hattin he almost wiped out the army of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, and captured King Guy. Saladin's troops fanned out to ride across the Kingdom of Jerusalem, capturing castles and towns denuded of their troops and left leaderless by the losses at Hattin.

At Lydda, the entire Christian population locked themselves up in the Church of St George. Saladin's men could do nothing against the strong defences of the church, and with Jerusalem beckoning did not have time for a siege. The Christians of Lydda negotiated their way to safety. Jerusalem fell after an heroic siege, followed by the main crusader strongholds and cities. Soon only Tyre, Antioch and a few coastal castles remained in Christian hands.

The disaster of Hattin and the fall of Jerusalem echoed through Christendom. King Richard I of England, better known as Richard the Lionheart, King Philip II of France and many others vowed to set off for the Holy Land to defeat Saladin. Philip arrived first in April and laid siege to the great port city of Acre. He was joined by Duke Leopold of Austria, Duke Frederick of Swabia and others, but they failed to make any impression of the formidable walls. On 8 June 1191, Richard the Lionheart arrived with the English crusaders. He was a famously competent soldier and was deeply unimpressed by the efforts being made by his Christian allies. Richard set his men to build catapults and siege engines to his preferred design.

The work was almost complete when Richard fell ill with a fever. Richard was confined to his bed as he slipped in and out of consciousness. On 10 July Richard suddenly recovered. He sprang from his bed declaring that he had had a vision. Summoning his commanders, Richard told them that St George had appeared to him while he had been helpless with fever and told him to attack Acre at once. While Richard had been ill, the new siege engines had indeed battered a hole in the walls, so next day the Crusaders attacked. They were driven off but the fighting had been so severe that the defenders surrendered next day.

For the next year Richard rampaged through the Holy Land, beating the Moslems time and again but never inflicting a decisive defeat on Saladin. Finally, Richard and Saladin negotiated a peace that left Jerusalem in Moslem hands, but kept it open to

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Christian pilgrims, while the newly appointed King Henry of Jerusalem gained enough lands and castles to make the Christian grip on parts of the Holy Land secure for another century. The Christians would finally be driven out of the Holy Land in 1291. The “Kingdom of Jerusalem” was then restricted to the island of Cyprus, which finally fell to the Turks in 1570.

King Richard’s vision at Acre was the last time that St George intervened in the crusades. But he was far from idle. There was the little matter of a ferocious dragon to deal with.

## Chapter 3

# Enter the Dragon

**E**xactly when the dragon first entered the story of St George is a matter of some dispute. The first written account of St George fighting a dragon does not appear until the 1240s, by which time St George was rapidly gaining in fame as a result of his exploits in the crusades. However, icons of him produced the Byzantine Empire had been showing him fighting a dragon since at least the 800s.

The dragon in Byzantine icons is usually symbolic of paganism or paganism. Angels and saints are often shown trampling on dead or humbled dragons to symbolise the pure faith of the Christian figure triumphing over paganism. St George is more often shown fighting the dragon than trampling on it, presumably because he was known to be a soldier saint.

One theory suggests that the link between St George and the dragon is older even than this. The tomb of St George at Lydda was covered by a chapel built by the Emperor Constantine the Great. This Constantine was the first Christian Roman Emperor and many of his coins, buildings and statues feature Christian iconography. Several of his coins show him trampling on a serpent, and one at least depicts him spearing the serpent to death.

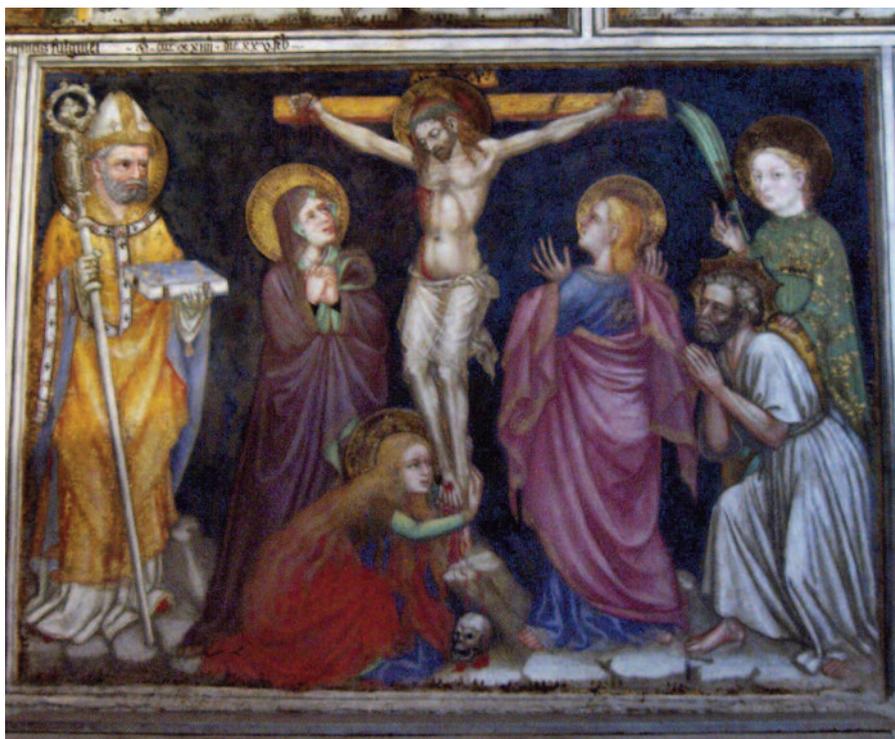
It has been suggested that when Constantine built the church over the tomb of St George he may have included a statue or relief of himself to commemorate the act. This would certainly be standard practice at the time as patrons who spent money on a sacred building usually wanted later visitors to know who to thank. If Constantine had decorated the church with a carving of himself it is possible that he may have shown himself spearing a serpent, as he did on his coins. It is argued that later visitors to the church may have seen the carving of the emperor and mistaken it for one of St George. Thus the martyr may have been linked to a dragon-like creature by accident.

It is an interesting theory, but there is no evidence at all to support it. We have no idea what Constantine's church looked like nor whether it featured an image of the emperor, be he in serpent-slaying pose or not.

However St George got linked to the dragon, it is certain that icons painted in the Byzantine Empire were showing him triumphing over a dragon by the time the Crusaders took up the veneration of the saint in a big way after the siege of Antioch. Several of those crusaders brought back to western Europe souvenirs of their time in the East when they returned home. Among these are known to have been icons of the



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*A painting of the Crucifixion with Jacobus de Voragine looking on from the left dressed in his robes as Archbishop of Genoa. In his hands he holds a copy of his most famous book, the Golden Legend in which he tells an elaborate version of the tale of St George.*

Archbishop of Genoa. In 1260, however, he was Prior of the Dominican Priory at Bologna and had time on his hands. He decided to fill his time by collecting together biographies of all the more important saints of his time. He called his book the *Legenda Sanctorum*, or Readings of the Saints, but it became better known as the *Legenda Aurea*, or Golden Legend. The book was an instant success with hundreds of copies being made by hand within a few years of its compilation. It would later become a bestseller in the early days of printing — at one point outselling the Bible itself.

The Golden Legend drew on a variety of sources for its many tales and anecdotes. So far over a hundred likely originals for the material in the book have been identified and it is generally thought that Voragine based his chapter on St George on the book by Vincent. However, Voragine included a much longer and more elaborate version of St George's battle with the dragon than had Vincent. Where this story came from, nobody has ever been able to prove. Perhaps Voragine simply made it up.

In the version told by Voragine the incident happens while George is an officer

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serving in the Roman army. For reasons that are not explained, George decides to travel to Libya and chances to pass the city of Silenus. As he approaches the city, George passes beside a large lake. Sitting on the shores of the lake is a beautiful young woman dressed in the finest clothes imaginable. She is crying and weeping, while walls of the city are crowded with a vast crush of people who are all staring toward the lake as if expecting something to happen. George stops to ask the woman why she is crying, but instead of explaining she tells him he has to flee or he will be killed with her. George looks around for signs of danger, but can see nothing untoward. He refuses to leave and again demands that the young woman explain what is going on.

The young woman then dries her eyes long enough to blurt out her story. She says that she is the daughter of the King of Silene and is awaiting her death since it is her turn to be offered to a hideous dragon that lives in the lake. The dragon, it transpires, had come to live in the lake some months earlier and although the men of Silene had tried to kill it, they had all failed. The dragon has poisonous breath and used to come to the city walls, causing citizens to die. Then the people hit on the idea of tying a sheep to the lake shore each day for the dragon to eat. That plan worked for a while, but when all the sheep had gone the dragon returned to the city. In desperation the people took to sacrificing a human daily instead of a sheep. The unfortunate person was chosen by lot.

One day the lot fell on the young woman, daughter of the king. The king at first refused to let her be sacrificed to the dragon, but the people grew angry that he had supervised the death of members of their families, but would not lose one of his family. The king asked for a week to mourn his daughter, which the people agreed to. At the end of the week, the king led his daughter to the lakeshore, weeping and bemoaning the fact that he would never see her wedding day. The king then returned to the city to watch the final moments of his daughter's life from the safety of the walls. The princess sat down to await her death, which was when George had come riding by.

As George digests the tale told by the princess, the waters of the lake suddenly heave aside and a mighty dragon emerges on to the shore. St George springs into the saddle of his warhorse, couches his lance and charges. After a terrific battle George succeeds in stabbing the dragon with the lance and inflicting a terrible wound.

With the dragon now helpless, George jumps down from his horse and calls forward the princess. She is understandably reluctant to approach the hideous dragon, but George assures her that it is safe to do so. As she approaches, George asks her to remove her girdle and tie it around the dragon's neck. As soon as the princess has done this, the dragon becomes docile. Together George and the princess walk toward Silene, with the dragon following peacefully behind.

The little procession reaches the main town square of Silene, which is deserted. George shouts out that there is nothing to fear as the dragon is defeated. The King of Silene warily emerges into the square followed by the nobles and the rest of the population. George tells them that God has sent him to Silene to rid them of the

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menace of the dragon. If the king and all the population agree to be baptised and to renounce their pagan gods, George says he will finally kill the dragon.

The King of Silene promptly goes down on his knees to be baptised, along with all his people. George then draws his sword and stabs the dragon in the heart, killing it. The king then summons a team of eight oxen that drag the dragon's body out of the city to be disposed of. Hearing of the death of the dragon people come flocking to Silene from far and wide, allowing George to baptise 20,000 people as Christians in a single day. The king then builds a church and dedicates it to the Virgin Mary and to St George the dragon slayer. A spring of fresh water miraculously burst out from the altar. The water was found to have the power to cure the sick.

George refuses all offers of money. He then makes the king swear to follow four sacred orders: First to cherish the Church of Christ; Second to attend mass regularly; Third to honour priests and Fourth to care for the poor.

George then mounts his war horse and rides off for Lydda and his fatal encounter with the cruel pagan governor.

This version of the St George and the Dragon is very much of its time. The equipment used in the battle by George and the defences of the city of Silene are described in detail and are quite clearly of the mid 13th century rather than of Roman type. Moreover, the placing of the incident in Libya shows that the writer wanted to

*Painted about 1470 by Italian artist, Paolo Uccello, this picture shows most elements of the legend of St George as it existed in the later Middle Ages. St George is shown as a contemporary knight in armour on a white charger using a lance to kill the dragon while the Princess Silene of Egypt (wearing contemporary European clothes) prays to God.*



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put the dragon in a far away place about which little was known. At this date, “Libya” might have meant almost anywhere in North Africa. The area was firmly in the hands of Moslem rulers who were hostile to Christendom. Nobody from Europe went there, other than as slaves captured by Moslem raiders. A writer wanting to place a fantastic tale somewhere remote would choose Libya, much as today we would start such a story “Once upon a time...”

The fact that the King of Silene – a purely imaginary city that never existed – dedicates his new church to the Virgin Mary is again a pointer to this tale originating in the 13th century. For the first thousand or so years of its existence, Christianity did not pay much attention to the mother of Christ. From around 1070 the clerics Anselm of Canterbury and Bernard of Clairvaux began to develop a new concept of Mary as an emotional intercessor between humans and her son, Christ. The idea was relatively slow to catch on, but gradually priests found that the softer, more feminine role ascribed to Mary was proving very popular with their flock. By the 1220s the Biblical figure who for generations had been simply “Mary” had become “The Blessed Virgin Mary” and was a major figure in both worship and in theology. Any nobleman wishing to prove himself to be both devout and up to date with the latest trends would make a dedication to the Virgin Mary.

Finally the interests of Voragine as a Dominican friar are reflected in the parting advice given by George to the king. The first three admonitions relate to the king’s duties to the organised church, while his charitable works get relegated to fourth place.

In Voragine’s version of his martyrdom, George undergoes the same tortures as specified in the Libyan Life, though Voragine adds a few painful refinements of his own. The pagan tyrant is named s Dacian, not Dadianos, in the Golden Legend and



*The coat of arms of the city of Moscow show St George clad in blue mounted on a white horse spearing a dragon all set on a red field. The colours of red, blue and white were later adopted as those of Russia and now make up the Russian tricolour flag. The arms were adopted by Dimitry Donskoy, Grand Prince of Moscow, in 1380 after his victory over the Mongols at the Battle of Kulikovo. The victory allowed Moscow to throw off Mongol control and established it as the leading city state in the lands of the Russians. St George had appeared on Muscovite coins and churches since about 990, but it was Dimitry who made him the official patron saint of the city and its ruling dynasty.*

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Voragine added a final twist to the story. Perhaps because he could not bear to have Dacian get away with the murder of a dragon-slaying saint, Voragine describes how Dacian walks home after the brutal tortures and execution only to be struck by lightning and consumed by fire raining from heaven.

There is one clue that Voragine may have been working from some older source that he adapts to his own purpose. The story makes great play of the fact that the princess is young, beautiful and rich. Indeed, it seems that it is her physical beauty that first attracts the attention of the passing George. Meanwhile, her father the king spends some time bemoaning the fact that he will never see his daughter married, nor have any grandchildren. Everything seems to be leading up to a happy ending in which George marries the princess, settles down and has children who inherit the kingdom. This never happens, and George simply rides away. As a celibate cleric, Voragine would have had no interest in a love story and may have shared the anti-woman views of many of his contemporary clergymen.

One story that has been suggested as an original source for the version of George's encounter with the dragon in the Golden Legend is the ancient Greek myth of Perseus. In the story, Perseus is the son of the great god Zeus by Danae, daughter of King Acrisius of Argos. Perseus grew up in the household of King Polydectes who wished to marry Danae, though Perseus was opposed to the match. Polydectes therefore sent young Perseus off on a series of apparently impossible errands to keep him out of the way, but Perseus managed to achieve all the tasks set for him with the help of his divine relatives.

On returning from one such errand, Perseus is travelling through Ethiopia when he happens to spot a beautiful princess chained to a rock overlooking the sea. Perseus asks the princess why she is chained up, but she tells him to go away before the sea monster arrives and devours them both. It transpires that the girl is Princess Andromeda whose mother, Queen Cassiopeia, had boasted that she was as beautiful as the Nereids, the divine nymphs of Poseidon, God of the Sea.

Poseidon had taken umbrage at this and sent a sea monster to ravage the lands of Cassiopeia. The monster, Cetus, arrives at Ethiopia and emerges from the sea once each day to devour livestock. An oracle tells Cassiopeia that the monster will continue its activities until Andromeda is offered to it by being chained to a rock by the sea. Hearing the story, Perseus decides to save the beautiful princess.

Perseus battles with the monster Cetus using weapons given him by the gods and kills it. He then releases Andromeda from the rock and returns her to her native city. Perseus then marries Andromeda. After a series of further adventures, Perseus and Andromeda become King and Queen of Mycenae where they have a long and happy reign, establishing a dynasty that ruled the city state for generations.

Although Perseus was a pagan semi-deity, his story was fairly widely known in medieval Europe. Almost certainly Voragine would have known it. The central section in which Perseus rescues a princess from a monster that emerges from the waters is so

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similar to that of George and the Dragon in the Golden Legend that it seems very likely that Voragine simply adapted the older story, changing it to suit his purposes.

The popularity of the Golden Legend was enormous, and the tale of St George and the Dragon was one of the best known episodes within it. The veneration of St George was already popular among knights and soldiers, but now his derring do on behalf of winsome young maidens made him popular with ladies as well. Before long, George was popular across the social spectrum. The anniversary of his martyrdom, 23 April, was declared to be a feast day in the 1220s and a double feast in 1415. He was venerated right across Christendom, with churches, chapels and organisations all being dedicated to him.

To this day, St George remains honoured in widely separated areas. He is the patron saint of cities as diverse as Moscow, Genoa and Beirut. He is highly revered in Georgia, which has a variant on the St George's cross on their flag. In India there are more than a dozen shrines to St George in Kerala that date back to the earliest days of Christianity in India. In Ethiopia an entire church of St George has been hacked out of the living rock to form an exotic cave-church of unique design.



*Facing page: The tomb of St George in the restored Church of St George at Ludd, Israel, the ancient Lydda. The church and effigy carved on the tomb date only to the 19th century, but the Tomb is known to have been here since at least the 330s.*

## About the Author

Rupert Matthews is Conservative Member of the European Parliament for the East Midlands. Before becoming an MEP Rupert worked as an historian. He has written a number of history books, has appeared on television and has acted as historical consultant to television shows and movies.



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*Left: Rupert Matthews at a St George's Day event in Derbyshire Dales, with a local who has dressed the part.*

# The Real St George

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# The Real St George

by Rupert Matthews

Dragon-slayer, English hero, martyr, warrior, soldier and saint – St George has been all these things. But who was the real St George? St George is one of the most instantly recognisable saints who has ever existed. His bold red cross on a white background waves from football terraces wherever England play, flutters from cars and flies proudly from English flagpoles everywhere. And yet surprisingly few people are aware of where he has come from, how he developed and what has made him what he is today.

This fascinating book draws on the most recent academic research into folklore and legends to put together an accurate account of St George's original life story, and how he has developed in folklore and legend to become what he is today.

