A history of St. George

Did Saint George exist and does it matter? If he did exist, it would appear he was a brave hero. If he didn't, we can create a hero in whatever form we choose.

The evidence that he did exist is gaining ground. But some mischievous writers have connected St. George with a heretical Archbishop called George of Cappadocia.

The Archbishop held beliefs that were the opposite of official church doctrine (e.g. he believed Jesus was a mere mortal, not the son of God). He also sold 'questionable' pork to the Roman Army and was murdered by a raging mob in 362 AD.

Linking the patron saint of England with George of Cappadocia is an attempt to undermine St. George. Think about it. Would a con artist that was murdered by local people later be made a Saint and gain worldwide popularity? Connecting the two Georges is clearly nonsense.

This fake news, most notably spread by Edward Gibbon in his book 'The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire' (published in 1776), is part of the prejudice against St. George of England.

However, much of his history was written several hundred years after his death. Chief among the late sources is the Golden Legend, which remains the most familiar version in English owing to William Caxton's 15th century translation.

A version of St. George and the Dragon written by Richard Johnson in 1596 makes slightly easier reading, and is available as a children's story on our website at www.stgeorgesholiday.com.

George's early life

Most historians (at least, those who believe he existed) agree George was born between 275-281AD and died on 23 April, 303AD. George was from Greek-speaking Cappadocia, now part of modern day Turkey, and because of his tall stature and fair hair was probably of Darian origin.

George's father (Gerointius) served as an officer of the Roman army. His mother was from Lydda (now Lod, Israel). His mother (Polychronia) secretly baptised him without his father knowing. She returned to her native city as a widow along with her young son, where she provided him with an education.

George enlisted into the Cavalry of the Roman Army at the age of 17, and very quickly established a reputation for courage, chivalry and charity (the 3 C's). By his late twenties he achieved the rank of Tribunus Militum in charge of a regiment of 1,000 men. George was now stationed in Nicomedia as a member of the guard for Emperor Diocletian.

It should be noted this was a time of high inflation and civil unrest across the Roman Empire and the increasing influence of Christianity was causing the authorities some concern. Diocletian set himself the task of reviving the traditions of Paganism.

George's later life and death

Diocletian's second-in-command was Galerius, an avid supporter of the Pagan religion. In 303AD, as a result of a rumour the Christians were plotting the death of Galerius, an order was issued for all Christian Churches to be destroyed. Anyone admitting to being a Christian, would lose their rights as a citizen, if not their life.

George tried to limit Diocletian's cruelty against the Christians. He went to the city of Nicomedia and tore down the notice of the Emperor's order. As news spread of his rebellion George realised that it would not be long before he was arrested.

When he appeared before Diocletian, George bravely denounced him for his unnecessary cruelty and made a courageous speech. But the Emperor sentenced George to prison with instructions he should be tortured until he denies his faith in Christ.

There is some debate on the identity of the evil tyrant. Some say it was Diocletian, some say it was the Persian King Dacian (or Dadianos in Greek). You choose. Diocletian is said to have ordered St. George to be beheaded, whereas Dadianos kills George four times over a seven-year period (three times he is resurrected by the Archangel Michael and God, the final time he ascends to heaven and becomes a martyr.)

After various tortures, George died on 23 April, 303AD. His body was returned to Lydda for burial, where Christians soon came to honour him as a martyr.

(It should be noted that because St. George stayed true to his faith, despite terrible torture, he is highly regarded among Muslims in the Middle East and is the only Christian Saint to be mentioned in the Koran, Holy Book of Islam. He also has the distinction of having a Mosque named after him, Al Khadr, in Palestine).

George as a Saint

While it's true that little is known about St. George that doesn't mean he never lived. Indeed, Pope Gelasius in 494AD went through an exercise of removing some of the miracles performed by saints but concluded that George was a Saint whose name is "justly reverenced among men, but whose actions are known only to God". So Gelasius agrees little is known about him, but he also agrees that he did exist.

 By 1222 the popularity of St. George encouraged the Bishops of the Oxford Synod in England to declare 23rd April a public holiday, and by 1415 it was as popular as Christmas.

The story of St. George and the Dragon was a legend brought back by the Crusaders. In the Western version, a dragon made its nest at a spring that provided water for the city of 'Silene' in Libya (or the city of Lydda, depending on which version you read).

Consequently the citizens had to dislodge the Dragon from its nest in order to collect water. So each day they offered the Dragon a human sacrifice. The victim was chosen by drawing lots and one day the Princess chose the short straw. The King begged for her life but without success. She was offered to the Dragon, but St. George rode to the rescue, slayed the Dragon and saved the Princess.

A classic tale of good triumphing over evil.

George as an English icon

It is claimed that St. George was adopted as the Patron Saint of England after the English won the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. Shakespeare captured the moment in this famous speech from the play Henry V (Act III, Scene I):

> "I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
> Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:
> Follow your spirit, and upon this charge
> Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'"

St. George is truly a great symbol of modern England. He is possibly England's most successful immigrant. Born in a foreign land, welcomed by the English, and has worked hard for over 800 years in his adopted country. He has integrated so well that he has come to symbolise the very essence of 'Englishness' and is now an English icon.

St. George's Holiday - Unofficial Bank Holiday

W: www.stgeorgesholiday.com
E: hello@stgeorgesholiday.com