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Saint George, The Dragon Slayer: The Legend Behind the Hero

St. George is perhaps one of Christianity's most famous saints, and is best-known as the patron saint of England. Apart from this well-known fact, St. George is also the patron saint of a number of other countries, including Portugal, Georgia, Lithuania, and Greece. The most popular tale regarding this saint is the one in which he slays a dragon. Thus, St. George is most commonly depicted as a knight mounted on a horse and in the [process](#) of spearing a dragon. This image has inspired many artists over the years, and has been portrayed on various coats of arms.

St. George's Early Life

St. George is believed to have lived during the latter part of the 3rd century AD and served as a soldier in the Roman army. Most sources agree that this saint was born in Cappadocia, an area which is located in modern day Turkey. The parents of St. George are said to have been Christians, and he inherited this faith from them. It has been claimed that after the death of St. George's father, his mother returned to her hometown in Palestine, taking the saint with her. St. George then joined the Roman army, and eventually obtained the rank of Tribune.



Portrait of St. George by Hans von Kulmbach, circa 1510. ([Public Domain](#))

St. George's Protest

The persecution of Christians by the Emperor Diocletian at the beginning of the 4th century AD was objected to by St. George, who resigned from his military office as a sign of protest. When the emperor's order against the Christians was torn up by St. George, Diocletian was furious. In an attempt to force St. George to renounce his Christian faith, he was imprisoned and tortured by the emperor's men. The saint, however, refused to reject his faith. Seeing that their efforts were of no use, St. George's jailers had him dragged through the streets of Diospolis (known also as Lydda) in Palestine and beheaded.



Saint George dragged through the streets of Diospolis, by Bernat Martorell, 15th century. ([Public Domain](#))

The story of St. George's life would have been quite similar to that of his many contemporary martyrs, i.e. refusing to give up their Christian faith in the face of a persecuting pagan emperor, and paying for it with their lives, if it had not been for one particular tale.

- [Zmaj and the Dragon Lore of Slavic Mythology](#)
- [Archaeologists in Sweden unearth first Viking brooch piece depicting dragon head](#)
- [Ancient Hellenic mosaic discovered in 'the Hall of Dragons and Dolphins'](#)

It was St. George's combat with a dragon that set him apart from most of his fellow martyrs. The best known [form](#) of this legend is said to be found in the *Legenda Aurea* (translated as 'Golden Legend'), which was written during the 13th century by Jacobus de Voragine, an Italian chronicler and archbishop of Genoa.

Combat with a Dragon

In the [account](#) of the *Legenda Aurea*, St. George is said to have passed by a city called Silene, which is in the province of Libya. Beside this city was a pond, and in this pond lived a "dragon which envenomed all the country". The people of the city decided to feed the beast with two sheep each day so that it would not harm them. When the dragon's appetite was not satiated, the people of the city began sacrificing human beings to it,

"Then was an ordinance made in the town that there should be taken the children and young people of them of the town by lot, and every each one as it fell, were he gentle or poor, should be delivered when the lot fell on him or her."



Saint George and the Dragon by Gustave Moreau, 1889/1890. ([Public Domain](#))

One day, the lot fell on the king's daughter, who was prepared to be offered to the dragon. It was during this time that St. George passed by the city, and saw the princess. When he enquired as to what was going on, St. George was told about the dragon, and he decided to slay the beast. The battle with the dragon, as described by de Voragine, is as follows:

“Thus as they spake together the dragon appeared and came running to them, and S. George was upon his horse, and drew out his sword and garnished him with the [sign](#) of the cross, and rode hardily against the dragon which came towards him, and smote him with his spear and hurt him sore and threw him to the ground. And after said to the maid: Deliver to me your girdle, and bind it about the neck of the dragon and be not afeard. When she had done so the dragon followed her as it had been a meek beast and debonair.”

- [Bestiary, The Book of Beasts: Compendiums of Medieval Monsters and Moral Lessons](#)
- [The Incredible Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia](#)
- [The Mystery of the White Horse of Uffington](#)

St. George brought the dragon to Silene, converted the king and his people to the Christian faith, and then slayed the dragon.



St. George on Horseback, Meister des Döbelner Hochaltars, 1511/13, Hamburger Kunsthalle. ([Public Domain](#))

It has been said that St. George's military prowess made him popular amongst the knights of Medieval Europe, especially following the crusades. During the First Crusade, for example, an apparition of St. George is said to have aided the crusaders during their successful siege of Antioch in 1098.

Another popular myth was that the English king Richard the Lionheart saw a vision of St. George during his siege of Acre, which lasted from 1189 to 1191. The king then rebuilt a church in honor of the saint in Lydda, and adopted his emblem (a red cross on a white background) as England's arms. This myth, however, was disproved during the 1990s.

Top image: St George the dragon slayer (rudall30 / [Adobe Stock](#))

By [Wu Mingren](#)

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