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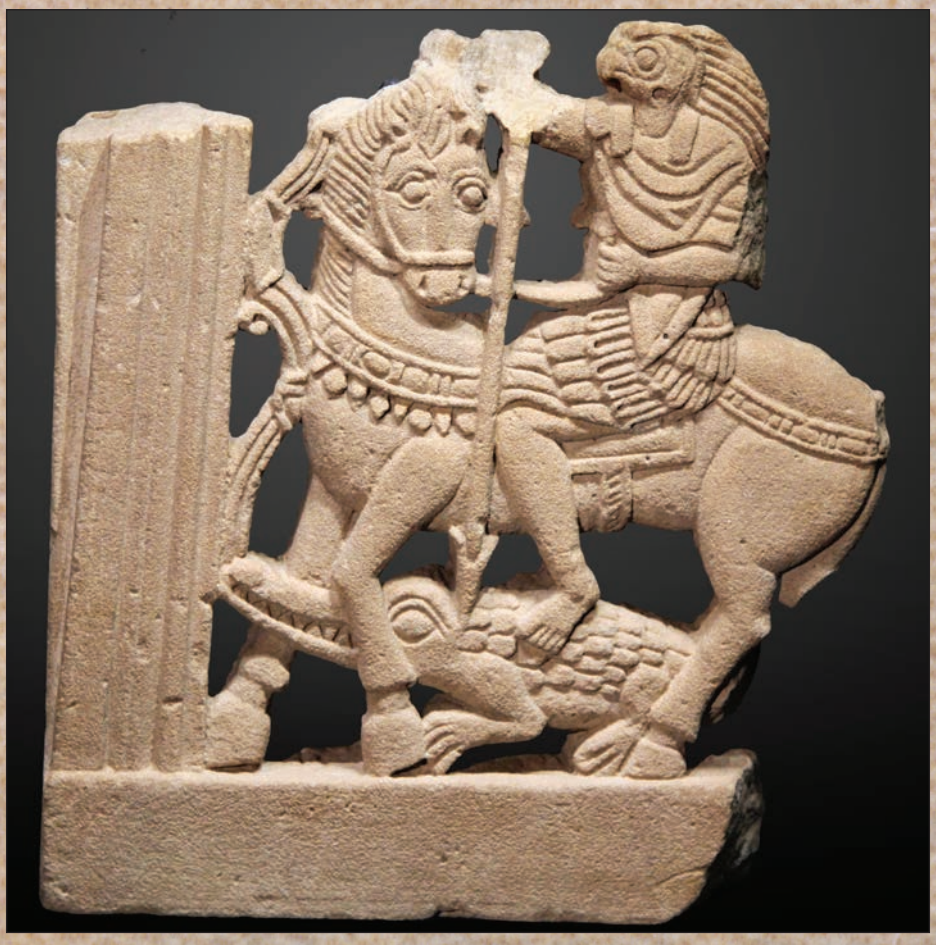

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SAINT GEORGE, THE DRAGON SLAYER: SACRALIZED VIOLENCE AND THE ALLEGORICAL UNION OF SACRED AND SECULAR POWER

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the transformation of the legend of Saint George from an early Christian martyr into a militant dragon slayer and divine agent of order. It argues that this shift reflects broader cultural and theological changes in medieval Europe, where narratives increasingly framed conflict resolution through sacralized violence rather than symbolic mediation. By analyzing the legend as a structure of meaning, the study shows how Saint George came to embody a model of holy intervention that legitimizes the elimination of enemies as a form of cosmic purification. The dragon, as a symbolic adversary, externalizes chaos, heresy, and disorder, while the saint's action restores divine order. At the same time, the legend enacts an allegorical union of sacred and secular power, staging a mythic foundation for religiously sanctioned authority. The legend thus operates not as a literal prescription, but as a powerful narrative that mirrors and shapes collective imaginaries of legitimacy, sovereignty, and spiritual warfare.

Keywords: Saint George, dragon slayer, medieval hagiography, symbolic conflict resolution, religious violence, gift exchange, medieval iconography, sacrifice, structural anthropology

SAN GIORGIO, L'UCCISORE DI DRAGHI: VIOLENZA SACRALIZZATA E UNIONE ALLEGORICA DI POTERE SACRO E SECOLARE

SINTESI

Questo articolo esamina la trasformazione della leggenda di San Giorgio da martire cristiano delle origini a militante uccisore di draghi e agente divino dell'ordine. Si sostiene che tale mutamento rifletta più ampi cambiamenti culturali e teologici nell'Europa medievale, in cui le narrazioni tendevano sempre più a rappresentare la risoluzione dei conflitti attraverso una violenza sacralizzata piuttosto che tramite una mediazione

simbolica. Analizzando la leggenda come una struttura di significato, lo studio mostra come San Giorgio sia giunto a incarnare un modello di intervento santo che legittima l'eliminazione dei nemici come forma di purificazione cosmica. Il drago, in quanto avversario simbolico, esternalizza il caos, l'eresia e il disordine, mentre l'azione del santo ristabilisce l'ordine divino. Allo stesso tempo, la leggenda mette in scena un'unione allegorica del potere sacro e di quello secolare, istituendo una fondazione mitica per l'autorità religiosamente sancita. La leggenda opera così non come prescrizione letterale, ma come potente narrazione che riflette e plasma gli immaginari collettivi di legittimità, sovranità e lotta spirituale.

Parole chiave: San Giorgio, uccisore di draghi, agiografia medievale, risoluzione simbolica dei conflitti, violenza religiosa, scambio di doni, iconografia medievale, sacrificio, antropologia strutturale

INTRODUCTION[1]

The legend of Saint George, one of the most enduring figures in the Christian imaginary, underwent a pivotal transformation in the eleventh century. Originally venerated as a martyr who resisted Roman authorities and suffered death for his faith, Saint George was gradually reimagined as a militant and missionary figure. During this period, new textual versions and visual depictions introduced the dragon episode: George appears as a mounted knight slaying a monstrous adversary, rescuing a princess, and demanding the conversion of a kingdom to Christianity. The legend thus does more than evolve, beginning to encode new models of conflict, divine intervention, and symbolic resolution. This transformation reflects broader shifts in medieval conceptualizations of sanctity and authority, including the growing emphasis on militant virtue, public affirmation of faith, and the saint's role as an agent of divine justice. Saint George is no longer a passive martyr but an active mediator of sacred violence. The dragon—often interpreted as a figure of paganism, heresy, or generalized evil—becomes an objectified adversary through which divine power can be visibly asserted. Rather than embodying Christian suffering, the saint comes to embody divine action: heroic conquest replaces martyrdom as the dominant mode of sanctification.

1 This article results from research conducted for the project N6-0268 *Political Functions of Folktales* and program P6-0435 *The Practices of Conflict Resolution between Customary and Statutory Law in the Area of Today's Slovenia and Neighboring Countries, Research of Sociocultural Dynamics Through Computer Folkloristics*, (with University of Berkeley, BI-US/24-26-034), and *Large Language Models for Digital Humanities* (LLM4DH, GC-0002), supported by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARIS), as well as *Centre of Excellence in Artificial Intelligence for Digital Humanities* (AI4DH, HORIZONCSA, Grant No. 101186647). The author thanks Jeremy Johns, Daniel Burt, The Khalili Research Centre of Oxford University, Barakat Trust, University of Edinburgh, Ekaterine Gedevanishvili, Jason Borges, Eva Schubert, and the Museum With No Frontiers, the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, as well as Žiga Oman.

I argue that this narrative shift mirrors and supports eleventh- and twelfth-century developments in the Christian world, particularly the Church's use of religious narratives to legitimate violence and consolidate political authority. These reconfigured hagiographic traditions contributed to shaping the legal and ideological structures of Christian Europe by presenting divine justice as a model for worldly intervention. Saint George becomes a paradigmatic figure of mediated authority; not a neutral third party, but an active agent who resolves a supernatural threat and inaugurates a new socio-religious order.

SAINT GEORGE BEFORE THE ELEVENTH CENTURY: MARTYRDOM AND PASSIVE HOLINESS

The early versions of the legend of Saint George from late antiquity and early medieval hagiographies emphasize Saint George's role as a Christian martyr who endures persecution under Diocletian and serves as a passive model of divine endurance and faith. These narratives center on miraculous survivals and resurrections, mirroring the figure of Christ. One of the earliest attestations of the legend's existence appears in a proclamation by Pope Gelasius in 494 (Matzke, 1902, 464–535). *Church History*, written in the fourth century by Eusebius of Caesarea (Book VIII, Chapter V), is believed to refer to Saint George, although not by name.[2] The text describes a nobleman of distinction who, immediately after the publication of the imperial edict against the churches in Nicomedia[3]—when both Diocletian and Galerius were present—was moved by zeal for God and spurred by fervent faith to seize the edict and tear it to pieces, declaring it blasphemous and impious. For this audacious act, he suffered the expected consequences, but his spirit remained cheerful and untroubled until death. Early versions of the legend appear in the early seventh century, notably in the hagiography written by Theodore of Sykeon. Icons of Saint George also existed by this time, or even as early as the sixth century (Walter, 1995, 319). However, these do not yet depict the archetypal image of Saint George as he came to be known in later centuries—mounted on horseback and slaying a dragon.

2 "Another being taken up half dead, was cast aside as if already dead, and again a certain one lying upon the ground was dragged a long distance by his feet and counted among those who had sacrificed. One cried out and with a loud voice testified his rejection of the sacrifice; another shouted that he was a Christian, being resplendent in the confession of the saving Name. Another protested that he had not sacrificed and never would. But they were struck in the mouth and silenced by a large band of soldiers who were drawn up for this purpose; and they were smitten on the face and cheeks and driven away by force; so important did the enemies of piety regard it, by any means, to seem to have accomplished their purpose" (Eusebius, 1952, 326).

3 The Roman emperor Diocletian, who reigned from 284 to 305, carried out the largest persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, also known as the Diocletian or Great Persecution. In 303, the Roman emperors issued a series of edicts rescinding the legal rights of Christians and demanding they comply with traditional religious practices. Persecution was greatest in the eastern provinces. The persecution of Christians ended in 313 with the Edict of Milan. The emperor Constantine I or Constantine the Great (Roman emperor from 306 to 337 CE) was the first to convert to Christianity. After 381, Christianity also became the only official and permitted religion of the Roman Empire.

In the early twentieth century, hagiographical scholars such as Hippolyte Delehaye, Karl Krumbacher, and Johannes B. Aufhauser aimed to reconstruct historically accurate lives of the saints. Their method involved eliminating later accretions to recover the original, authentic core of the narrative. Yet as Walter observes, "the earliest life had long been recognized to be fabulous, and a main preoccupation of those who later produced new versions was to make them historically more plausible" (Walter, 1995, 319). A hagiographic account of a saint's life is a narrative composed with a particular didactic intent. The primary aim of writing hagiographies was to convey a religious truth or moral lesson. Hippolyte Delehaye (1859–1941), himself a prominent hagiographer, reflected on the literary methods employed in such works.

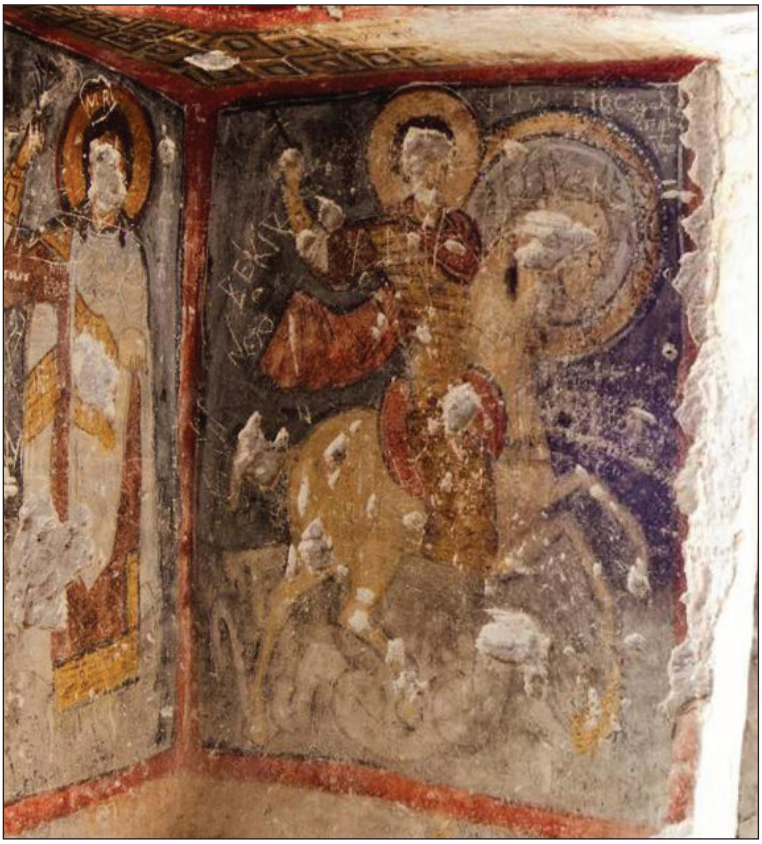

Fig. 1: Saint George slaying the dragon. Fresco from the Church of Saint Barbara in Soğanlı, Cappadocia, dated to either 1006 or 1021. This is considered the earliest known depiction of Saint George in combat with the dragon (source: https://www.foliamagazine.it/en/saint-george-dragon/).

He noted that some hagiographic texts constitute a distinct literary genre—imaginative fiction designed to teach a certain truth: "they are parables or stories designed to bring out some religious truth or moral principle" (Delehaye, 1962, 50). In the Middle Ages, he observed, history encompassed everything that was told or read in books. The hagiographer shared the historical sensibilities of his time but wrote with a clearly defined purpose that shaped the character of his work—not merely to inform or entertain, but above all to edify the reader, "to do them good." "And so a new form of literature is born," Delehaye concluded, "part biography, part panegyric, part moral lesson" (Delehaye, 1962, 53–54).

John E. Matzke identified numerous early versions of texts containing the legend of Saint George and classified them into distinct groups: apocryphal, canonical, later eastern apocryphal, and later western versions. The earliest version he found dates from the seventh to eighth centuries in Crete and Greece, and from the ninth century in Latin. He also traced early variants of the legend in Coptic, Syriac, and Arabic cultural contexts (Matzke, 1902, 466–481). According to the canonical version, George was born to Christian parents in Cappadocia. He came from a wealthy family; his father died when he was an infant, and his mother was a native of Palestine. The young man quickly rose in honor and esteem. Emperor Diocletian, who held dominion over the governors of the entire East, initiated a widespread persecution of Christians. After losing his mother at the age of twenty, George appeared at the emperor's court. Witnessing the atrocities committed against Christians, he distributed his wealth to the poor. On the third day of the Council, he rose and openly confessed his faith in the Christian God. He was tortured so severely that any other person would have died, but he recovered repeatedly. Witnessing these miracles, many people—including Empress Alexandra—converted to Christianity. In some versions of the legend, George is described as a Roman soldier. This trait was retained in the later versions that circulated after the eleventh century, in which George is portrayed as a military saint. For the Crusaders, the figure of George as a soldier was especially convenient, as it made him a fitting patron saint. The version most widely used in the Latin West from the eleventh century onward contains a long historical prologue that introduces the names of Diocletianus[4] and Maximianus (Matzke, 1902, 513). During Diocletian's reign, the Roman Empire was beset by invasions and internal unrest, prompting him to appoint Herculius Maximianus as co-ruler. Together, they committed their efforts to eradicating Christian heresy—Diocletian in the East and Maximian in the West. In this context, Datianus is portrayed as the principal antagonist of the martyr.

Early on, Saint George became one of the most venerated saints of the Western Church. In 491, Clotilda, wife of the Frankish King Clovis, dedicated the nunnery she had built at Chelles near Paris to his memory, while Clovis himself founded a monastery in his honor at Cambrai around the same time. In the sixth century,

4 Datianus or Dadianus, also Dacianus, king of the Persians Datianus ("ruler over the four quarters of the earth, with whom were four wicked kings, calls a council of his subordinates") (Matzke, 1902, 467–468).

Venantius Fortunatus praised the church of Saint George in Mainz, and Gregory of Tours built a church dedicated to him near Astoux in the diocese of Dax. In the seventh century, Chlothar III, king of the Franks, constructed a chapel in his honor at Noyon in Picardy, while Childeric II, king of Austrasia, founded a monastery of Saint George in Alsace, in a valley later known as the Valley of Saint George. The veneration of the saint also reached England at an early date. A monastery at Thetford was founded in his honor during the reign of King Canute (Cnut, king of England, 1016–35), and a church dedicated to his memory existed in Southwark during the Anglo-Saxon period. The collegiate church at Oxford was dedicated to him around 1074 (Matzke, 1903, 99–171). Early archaeological evidence of the cult of Saint George includes the church at Shaqrā, Syria, dedicated to him by Bishop Tiberinus in the sixth century. By that time, the cult had already spread to Syria, Arabia, Egypt, and Byzantium, as well as to southern Gaul. In the eighth century, Pope Zacharias (741–52) transferred the supposed head of Saint George from the Church of Saint John in the Lateran to the Church of Saint George in Velabro, and the saint began to be venerated in Rome (Whatley et al., 2004). Although there is ample evidence that Saint George was already venerated in the West before the Crusades, his cult enjoyed extraordinary popularity in Western Europe in the centuries immediately following them (Matzke, 1903, 150).

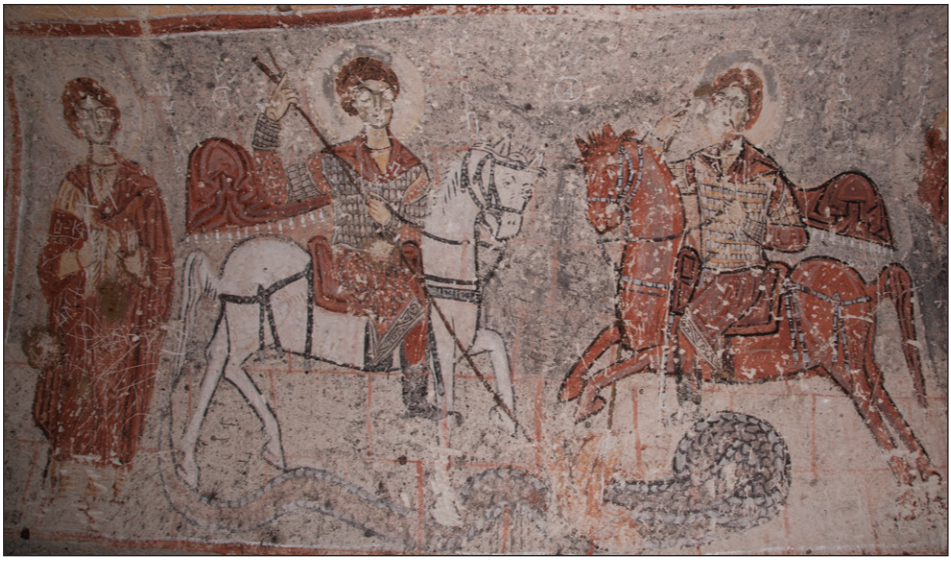

Fig. 2: Saint George and Saint Theodore, slaying serpents. Fresco from the Church of the Serpent (Yılanlı Kilise) in Cappadocia, dated to around 1070. The depiction reflects the emerging iconography of mounted military saints confronting monstrous adversaries (source: https://www.cappadociahistory.com/ © Jason Borges).

ICONOGRAPHIC AND HAGIOGRAPHIC TRANSFORMATION OF SAINT GEORGE TO A DRAGON SLAYER

George had been venerated as a saint since the fifth or even fourth century, but the dragon episode did not find its way into the legend of Saint George until the eleventh century in the East. The dragon motif indeed appears to be a later addition to the hagiographic tradition and visual iconography of Saint George, emerging only in the eleventh century in Cappadocia (the Church of Saint Barbara (Fig. 1) and the Church of the Serpent (Fig. 2)) and Georgia (hagiography), and afterwards iconographically disseminating into other parts of the Byzantine Empire (such as Siria, Palestine, Anatolia) (Fig. 3), Georgia (metal relief from Lighauri (Fig. 4), fresco from Adishi (Fig. 25)), Russia (fresco from Staraya Ladoga (Fig. 26)) and Norman Sicily (e.g. Palermo, Cappella Palatina (Figs. 5–8)[5]) in the twelfth century. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the motif had fully taken root in the West, particularly in book illustrations (e.g., in *Passio Sancti Georgii*, Verona, thirteenth century (Fig. 9), in *Legenda Aurea* (Figs. 10–11), and *The Book of Hours* (Fr. *livre d'heures*) (Fig. 12) in the fourteenth century), where it also includes the motif of the sacrificed and rescued princess.

Earlier representations of George, however, do not represent George as a dragon slayer. Yet, the figure of Saint George as a militant saint can be traced back even earlier: a notable ninth- or tenth-century icon from the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai shows George slaying a figure commonly interpreted as a Roman soldier or, in some readings, the Emperor Diocletian himself (Fig. 13). Additional examples from tenth- and eleventh-century Georgia—repoussé metal icons, such as those from Parakheti (Fig. 14), Nakuraleshi (Fig. 15), and Lebechina (Fig. 16),[6] as well as the fresco from the Church of Archangels of Ip'rari (Fig. 17) and the fresco from Adishi (Fig. 18) (where the iconography is not completely discernible)—further reinforce this martial image. In these cases, George is shown as a mounted warrior in elaborate lamellar armor, slaying a prostrate enemy beneath his horse. While the enemy is not explicitly identified, the iconography—especially in the Parakheti image, where the victim wears courtly robes—suggests imperial connotations and may allude to Diocletian or a generic persecuting ruler. These representations must be understood as a direct reference to George's martyrdom and confrontation with Roman imperial power. They portray the saint not as a miraculous dragon slayer but as a militant confessor confronting the earthly persecutor of true faith. Particularly striking is the Georgian fresco from Nakipari (ca. 1130) (Fig. 19), which shows George being tortured on a wheel—an iconography firmly rooted in martyrological tradition.

5 For a detailed study of iconography in Cappella Palatina, cf. Johns (2015).

6 For additional examples and discussion on the eleventh-century metal relief icons depicting Saint George slaying Diocletian, cf. Gedevanishvili (2025, 94–97).

The dragon motif thus signifies a meaningful shift in narrative and function. While early Christian and Byzantine representations emphasized the saint's suffering, piety, and confrontation with a known historical persecutor, the later inclusion of the dragon abstracts the enemy into a general embodiment of evil. George is no longer the passive sufferer of Roman violence but becomes an active agent of supernatural victory. With a beginning in the eleventh century, and universally until the thirteenth century, the narrative has been dramatically restructured: the dragon becomes symbolic evil, the princess a sacrificial victim, and Saint George the miraculous liberator of the princess and the empire.

The iconographic evolution of George as a warrior saint—rather than merely a confessing martyr—must be situated within the geopolitical tensions of the period. The frontier zones of the Byzantine Empire, especially Christian peripheries such as Egypt, Cappadocia, and Georgia, were regions marked by both religious and military contestation. These were contact zones where representations of militant saints responded not only to internal theological debates (e.g., iconoclasm) but also to shifting political boundaries and religious conflicts. It is telling that Saint George's early visual antagonists are Roman (Diocletian or generic Roman soldiers).[7] Only later does the dragon emerge as a symbolic adversary, eventually allowing for more abstract or allegorical representations of evil. While some later textual traditions begin to associate the dragon with Islam—particularly during and after the Crusades—there is little iconographic evidence that this identification was made explicit.[8]

It is also important to stress that this transformation follows a typological and symbolic lineage. The mounted dragon-slayer motif predates Christian iconography, as seen in votive tablets of the Thracian Horseman attacking a beast (e.g., second-century marble votive tablet from Stara Zagora, Bulgaria (Fig. 20)), depictions of Horus slaying a crocodile (e.g., fourth-century Egyptian

7 Cf. also Ivan Gerát's study of the transition of the figure of Saint George from an early anti-imperial symbol—such as the saint defeating Diocletian—into a highly politicized emblem of imperial authority, particularly under Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, who appropriated the saint's chivalric and crusading associations in both private devotion and public propaganda, though without relying on miraculous elements or traditional Catholic iconography (Gerát, 2019). Jonathan Good has also pointed out the changing political functions of Saint George by showing how, in medieval and early modern England, the figure of Saint George evolved from a royal saint into a broader national and military symbol, surviving even the Protestant Reformation while taking on new, sometimes secularized, meanings (Good, 2009).

8 For a representative example of later medieval romance literature conflating the saintly battle against evil with Christian conflict against Islam, see the Middle English *Sowdone of Babylone* (ca. 1380). Although Saint George does not appear as a character, the narrative adopts the militant ethos of Crusader hagiography, casting Saracens as adversaries of Christendom. Allegorical extensions of the dragon motif—while not literal in this case—were often mapped onto Islamic figures in Western narratives, especially through the orientalist trope of the "Sultan of Babylon." The hagiographic tradition of "the persecution of the early Church martyrs at the hands of Roman imperial authorities is conflated with the medieval conflict of Christianity and Islam enacted in the crusades" (Conklin Akbari, 2009, 203).

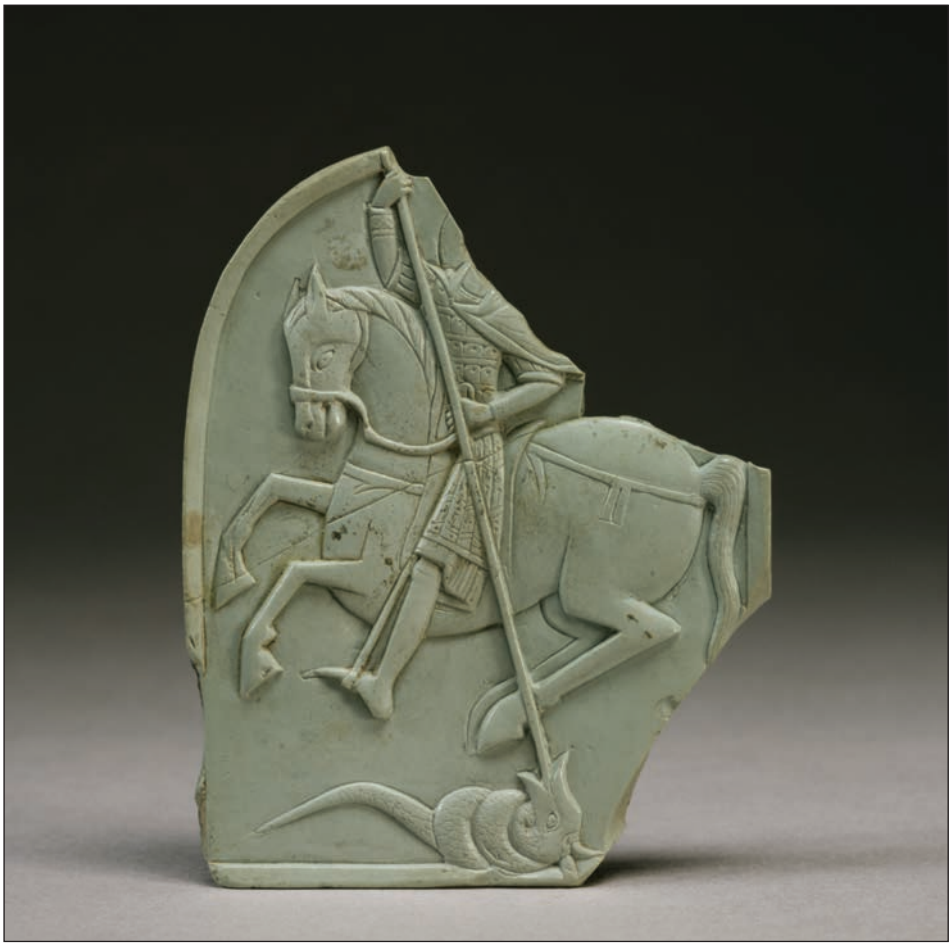

Fig. 3: Byzantine bas-relief of Saint George slaying the dragon, carved in steatite. Twelfth century (source: Wikimedia Commons).

plaques (Fig. 21)), a horseman in combat with a serpentine dragon (e.g., the tenth- or eleventh-century "Raqqa ware" figure with a serpent coiled around the left foreleg of the horse and biting the rim of the shield, Siria (Fig. 22)) or a (Roman) horseman slaying a barbarian (e.g., a Roman military tombstone from the fourth or fifth century from Great Britain (Fig. 23)). These iconographic precedents were reinterpreted and absorbed into Christian saintly narratives, particularly in regions with longstanding visual traditions of mounted divine or heroic figures. The familiar motif of a horseman vanquishing a monstrous serpent—rooted in pre-Christian symbolic systems—was thus appropriated and

transformed.[9] By the tenth or eleventh century, the human adversaries formerly associated with military saints were increasingly supplanted by the dragon, which emerged as their principal symbolic antagonist in Christian iconography. This shift is evident both in Byzantine frescoes from Cappadocia and in Georgian stone reliefs such as the one at the Church of the Dormition in Martvili (Fig. 24), where mounted saints confront a serpentine creature. These images reinforce the saints' role not merely as military heroes but as cosmic agents of purification and divine order.

In the eleventh century, the legend was restructured: the princess was introduced as a sacrificial victim, the dragon as symbolic evil, and Saint George as the miraculous liberator. The earliest certain image of Saint George slaying a dragon is found in the Church of Saint Barbara in Soğanli, dating from 1006 or 1021, and in the Church of the Serpent (Yılanlı Kilise), where Saint George is depicted together with Saint Theodore, from around 1070, both in Cappadocia.[10] In these two cases, however, there is no princess. The motif of the rescue of the princess originates from Georgian hagiography, while the oldest Greek text, according to Walter, dates to the twelfth or thirteenth century (Bibliotheca Angelica 46). Walter also ascertained that the earliest depictions of Saint George on the horseback and the princess leading the dragon by her girdle toward the terrified people watching from the ramparts of the city can be found in several places in Georgia: Pavnisi (1158–84), as well as earlier in Bočorma (ca. 1100) and Adishi (late eleventh century (Fig. 25)),[11] as well in Ikvi (twelfth century) (Walter, 1995, 322). The motif of a princess leading the dragon by a belt iconographically appears fresco from Staraya Ladoga, Russia (1167) (Fig. 26).

9 Oya Pancaroğlu has drawn attention to the polyvalent iconography of the dragon-slaying horseman in both Christian and Muslim traditions, particularly in tenth-century Anatolia, where equestrian figures—potentially Saint George, Saint Theodore, or others—embodied multiple and often overlapping identities (Pancaroğlu, 2004). Sara Kuehn (2011) has likewise explored the theological and political roles of dragons in Christian and Islamic visual culture. These intersecting traditions allowed the dragon motif to mediate cosmological and ideological concerns across confessional lines. Heather Badamo (2023) further demonstrates how the image of Saint George functioned as a political and theological tool in the medieval East, adapting to diverse confessional and imperial settings—from Coptic Egypt to the Frankish Levant and the Crusader East—where the saint was enlisted as both protector of the faith and agent of ideological conversion. In her study of the medieval Adriatic city of Bar, Marina Odak has shown how the figure of Saint George not only functioned as a religious symbol but also became central to the visual construction of communal and ecclesiastical authority. His consistent representation on coins, seals, and church architecture underscores the strategic use of his image in expressing both autonomy and alignment with broader political powers, such as the Venetian Republic (Odak, 2024).

10 Some scholars identify the earliest representations of Saint George slaying the dragon as dating from the sixth century: Xožorna stele, Brdažori smaller stel and large stele of Brdažori, Georgia (Gedevanishvili, 2025, 89–91). However, these stonework depictions are highly stylized and difficult to distinguish from earlier classical motifs—a horseman frequently shown defeating a serpent or beast and the serpent as a surviving element of ancient mythologies. It remains unclear whether all such images were originally intended to depict George or whether they were retrospectively assimilated into his cult.

11 Ekaterine Gedevanishvili (2025, 148–160) further discussed the motif of the rescue of the princess in Georgia and presented more examples of frescoes with this motif.

The first attested narrative in which Saint George kills the dragon and rescues the princess, as well as saves the empire, is an eleventh-century Georgian manuscript preserved in the Greek Patriarchal Library in Jerusalem (Walter, 1995, 321). The story goes that a fearsome dragon was sent by God to a nearby lake because a godless emperor, the idolater Selinus, ruled in the city of Lasia. The emperor made many attempts to subdue the dragon, but in vain. The inhabitants of the city gathered to reproach the emperor for his ineffectiveness and to insist that he do something. The emperor suggested sacrificing children. When it was the emperor's turn, he sacrificed his only daughter, dressed as if for a wedding. The Lord wanted to perform a miracle in the name of Saint George. When George returned to his estate from Diocletian's army in Cappadocia, he stopped at the lake to water his horse. George met the princess and asked her which god was worshipped in her town. She answered him: Hercules, Apollo, Scamander, and Artemis. George asked God to perform a miracle and help him defeat the dragon. God agreed. The dragon appeared; George made the sign of the cross and asked the Lord to transform the wild beast into one that would be docile. The dragon fell at his feet. The saint tied it to the girl's belt, handed it to her, and told her to go to the nearby town. The people were frightened, but George calmed them down and demanded that they convert to Christianity. All of them professed their faith in Christ. George then drew his sword and killed the dragon. The people gathered and prostrated themselves at the feet of the saint and gave thanks to the Lord. Saint George sent for Bishop Alexander, who baptized the emperor, his court, and all the people, 45,000 in all. The emperor had a shrine built in honor of the saint, and Saint George went into the shrine and performed a miracle. Next to the altar, he made a life-giving spring flow, which is said to still perform miracles today (Walter, 1995, 321). This story does not mention the sufferings of George or his resurrections, nor his beheading.

The transition in Saint George's representation—from persecuted martyr resisting the Roman emperor to heroic mounted dragon slayer—reflects deeper theological and geopolitical transformations. It maps a shift from martyrdom theology to militarized sanctity, from concrete imperial enemies to abstracted cosmic evil, and from individualized suffering to triumphant intervention. This evolution mirrors the needs and anxieties of Christian communities on imperial borders, and it anticipates the use of Saint George as a crusading figure. Still, Aufhauser (1911, 27) pointed out that the murals depicting Saint George slaying the dragon in Cappadocia were painted many years before the First Crusade—those in the Church of Saint Barbara in Soğanli were painted at least seventy-five years earlier.

There were many ancient heroes and early Christian saints who protected mankind from vile beasts; even female saints were known to slay dragons (Walter, 1995, 320). In the sixth century, Venantius Fortunatus wrote a hagiography about his predecessor, Bishop Marcellus (who probably died in 436), who had several miracles attributed to him. The holy bishop drove away a serpent dragon that had been terrorizing the population of Paris. Using his supernatural powers,

he first subdued the monster and then made it disappear in full view of the public (Le Goff, 1980, 160). C. Grant Loomis interprets the dragon creature in Christian hagiography as a symbolic representation of a pagan cult. The victorious battle usually signifies the eradication of the practices of an earlier

Fig. 4: Copper repoussé icon plaque depicting Saint George slaying the dragon, from Likhauri, Georgia. Twelfth century. This repoussé relief, crafted from hammered copper, likely served as part of a liturgical or devotional icon, possibly affixed to a wooden panel or used in a church setting. Such metal plaques were often produced in Georgian ecclesiastical workshops and feature stylized military saints as defenders of the faith, merging local artisan traditions with Byzantine iconographic models (source: Wikimedia Commons).

religion (Loomis, 1948, 65). Jacques Le Goff noted that "[t]he early medieval commentators on the Book of Revelation were led quite naturally to identify the dragon with the devil […] [or] the devil with the serpent of Genesis as well as with the dragon of the Book of Revelation" (Le Goff, 1980, 166). By contrast, the act of subjugation, as performed by Saint Hilary, who does not exterminate the serpents on an island, but only subdues them and allows humans to settle, makes Saint Hilary a "civilizing hero" and implies that once the dragon is tamed, a contract is made with it (Le Goff, 1980, 173).

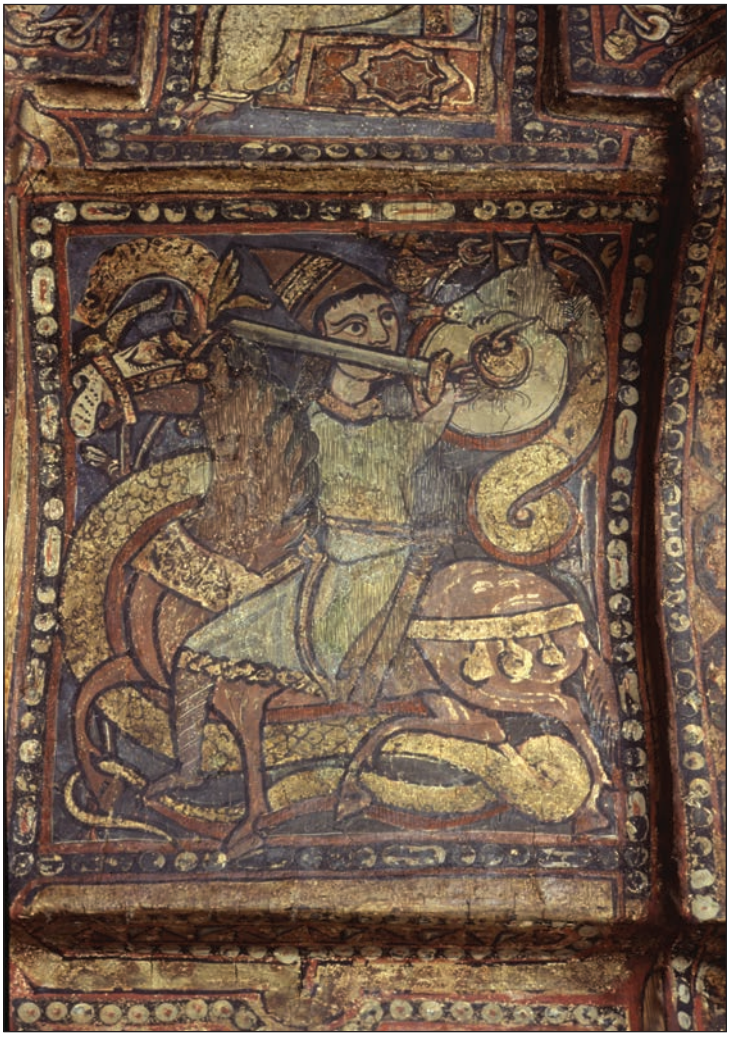

Fig. 5

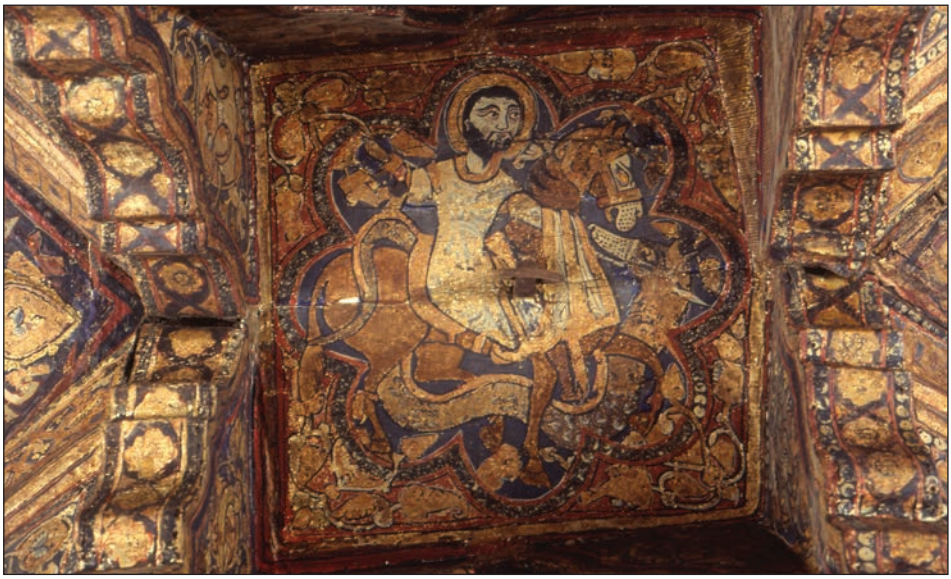

Fig. 6

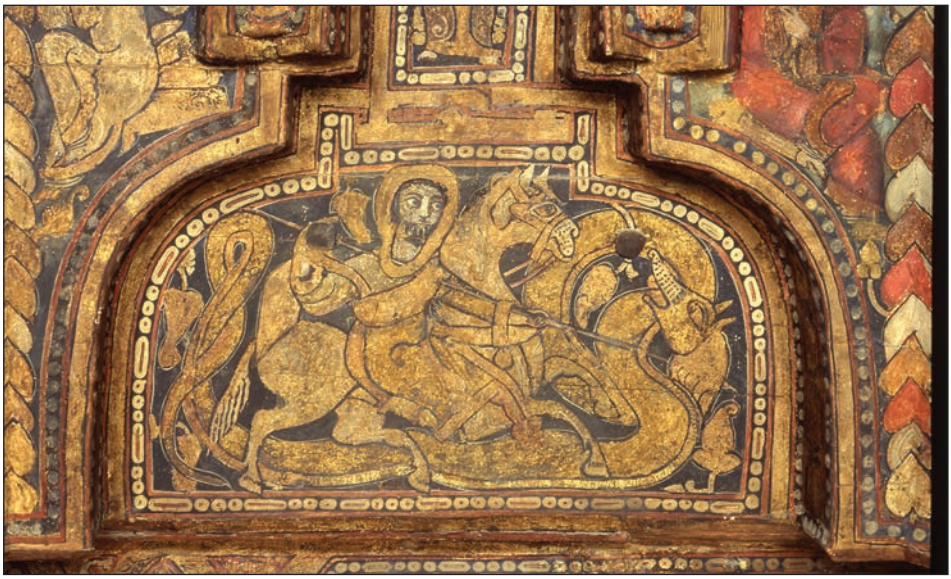

Fig. 7

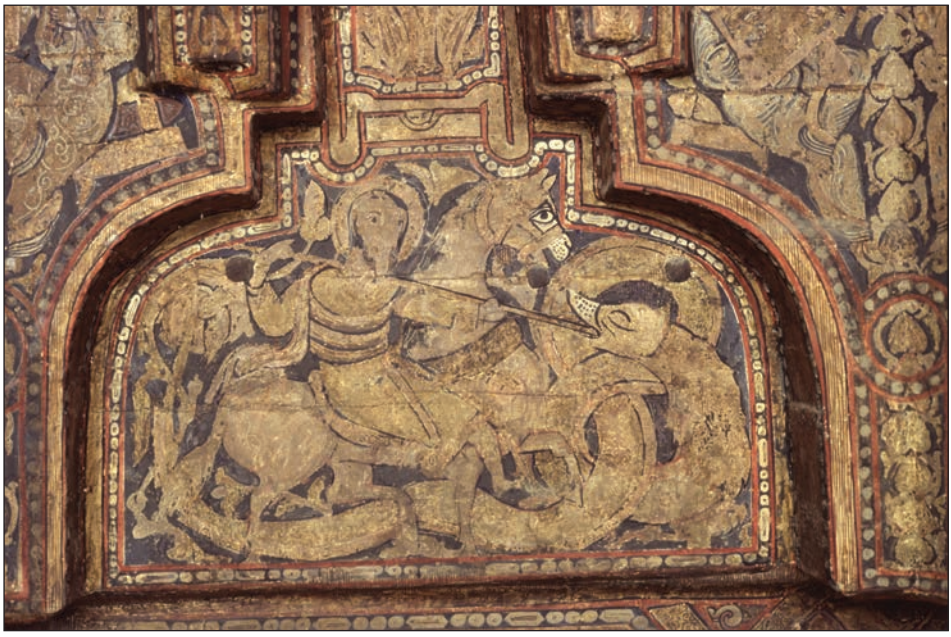

Fig. 5–8: Mounted dragon-slayer scenes from the muqarnas ceiling of the Cappella Palatina, Palermo, ca. 1143, "inspired by a Byzantine prototype" (Johns, 2015, 71). Panels depict richly dressed horsemen in combat with dragons in various stylized poses. Figures 6 to 8 feature halos and iconographic traits traditionally associated with Saint George, suggesting a Christian reinterpretation of the cosmological battle motif. These visual narratives, integrated into a royal Norman chapel, articulate a transcultural and theological symbolism of sacralized violence and support the allegorical union of sacred and secular authority. Images taken in 1989 under the direction of Robert Hillenbrand: Khalili Research Centre (University of Oxford), image no. ISL.15344, ISL.15431, ISL.15060, and ISL.16084. (© Barakat Trust and University of Edinburgh).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: CRUSADES AND MILITARIZATION OF SAINTHOOD

The transformation of the legend of Saint George through the introduction of the dragon episode did not originate with the Crusades. However, it was during the Crusading period that the motif became widely popularized and standardized in Western Europe. Earlier visual evidence of the dragon motif appears already in the eleventh century in Cappadocia, predating the First Crusade. Furthermore, the figure of Saint George as a militant saint can be traced back even earlier: a notable ninth- or tenth-century example from the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai, as well as tenth-century repoussé metal icons

from Georgia, depict George slaying a Roman soldier or, in some readings, Emperor Diocletian himself. Nevertheless, the Crusades—particularly marked by Pope Urban II's call to arms in 1095, the Siege of Jerusalem in 1099, and the growing militarization of sainthood—provided the historical context in which Saint George was elevated as the patron saint of Crusaders and the dragon-slaying narrative became firmly associated with Christian holy war.

According to Jay Rubenstein who explored the apocalyptic and eschatological imagination that animated early crusade narratives, the crusade meant "a new phase in God's plan" (Rubenstein, 2011, xi). "More fundamentally, the crusade helped to fashion a broader sense of Christian identity in an otherwise divided European homeland" (Rubenstein, 2011, xii). The dragon-slaying narrative of Saint George must also be understood within the broader symbolic economy of crusading ideology, where the figure of the saint functions as a legitimizing model of divinely sanctioned violence. Rather than viewing the Crusades simply as military campaigns aimed at territorial conquest or religious zealotry, recent scholarship interprets them as deeply rooted in symbolic representations of cosmic order and divine justice. The dragon in this context becomes a condensed signifier of heresy, infidelity, and ontological disorder. Saint George's act of slaying the dragon mirrors the rhetoric and logic of the crusader as a sacred agent: violence is transformed into purification, conquest into restoration. As such, the legend participates in a wider transformation of spiritual warfare into performative and institutionalized violence under ecclesiastical authority, shaping not only religious imagination but also political legitimacy in the high Middle Ages.

The transformation of the legend of Saint George corresponds to the transformation of Christianity from a pacifist to a militant religion, in which saints such as George legitimize holy war through their iconography and narratives. Le Goff associated the Crusades with Christianity's conversion to warfare, which is something of a paradox since the Christianity of the New Testament, like Jesus himself, was pacifist and anti-war. The pacifism of Christians was also one of the main reasons for their persecution by Roman emperors, as they refused to serve as soldiers (Le Goff, 2007, 93–95). In contrast, Jonatan Riley-Smith and Susanna A. Throop have claimed that the "Christian theology of violence evolved from its first century onward," even if, "[p]acifism had played some part in the early church" (Riley-Smith & Throop, 2023, 18). In recent decades, the crusades have been reinterpreted as a complex nexus of religious ideology, social mobilization, and legitimized violence. Andrew Jotischky has argued that the conceptualization of violence underwent a significant theological shift during the crusading period. While earlier Christian doctrine regarded all violence as inherently sinful and therefore requiring penance, the advent of crusading ideology redefined this stance. "Where once all acts of violence had been judged inherently sinful and thus required penance," he writes, "now certain prescribed acts of violence were not only permissible, but could actually form penances

in themselves" (Jotischky, 2017, 28). This reframing of violence as a penitential act offered a powerful justification for religiously sanctioned military campaigns and helped to align spiritual merit with physical aggression. Within such a framework, the militant saint—like Saint George—no longer symbolized martyrdom through suffering, but divine justice through destruction. His actions became exemplary not of endurance but of redemptive violence, reflecting a broader transformation in Christian attitudes toward coercion, authority, and salvation.

Riley-Smith and Throop have emphasized the theological foundations of crusading, underscoring its deep entanglement with ideas of penitential warfare and holy violence. They have related crusading to the concept of the holy war and to "the concept of Christian punishment, the imposition of retributive justice on wrongdoers" (Riley-Smith & Throop, 2023, 21). Throop has shown that crusading rhetoric often framed military action as a sacred duty rooted in divine justice and accordingly "the First Crusade was perceived as an action more akin to vengeance (punishment) than to war" (Throop, 2011, 15). As Philippe Buc has shown, the Western Christian tradition developed a theological and symbolic framework that legitimized violence not only as a defense of the faith but as a sacred duty (Buc, 2015). Violence on the battlefield that was previously perceived as a sinful act had become acceptable with the crusade (Rubenstein, 2011, xii). Crusading ideology framed violence not as an aberration but as an act of penitence and divine justice (Riley-Smith, 2003, 19). Within this framework, the militant saint—such as Saint George—becomes a narrative device for enacting divine justice through sacralized violence. These campaigns mobilized affective imagery and hagiographic motifs—particularly of militant saints like Saint George—to legitimize conquest and the eradication of religious enemies. The militarization of Saint George's iconography, particularly in the Georgian and Byzantine traditions, is not merely symbolic but visually and materially embedded in representations of military power (cf. Tsurtsumia, 2011).[12]

Christopher Tyerman has emphasized that the Byzantine perspective on the crusades differed fundamentally from the Western Christian view. From the vantage point of the Eastern Roman Empire, the crusades appeared as one episode in a long history of regional power struggles, disruptions, and alliances—less singularly significant than in the West. Byzantium's diplomatic, military, and commercial exchanges with Western Europe predated the First Crusade and were marked by coexistence and mutual dependence as much as by rivalry (Tyerman, 2019, 48). Thus, the appearance of militant saints such as Saint George within both Eastern and Western traditions reflects overlapping but distinct cultural imaginations of holy war and divine intervention.

12 Recent scholarship on the Crusades has embraced a markedly interdisciplinary approach, moving beyond traditional historical or theological studies to include cultural, artistic, and anthropological dimensions (Jotischky, 2017, 6–7).

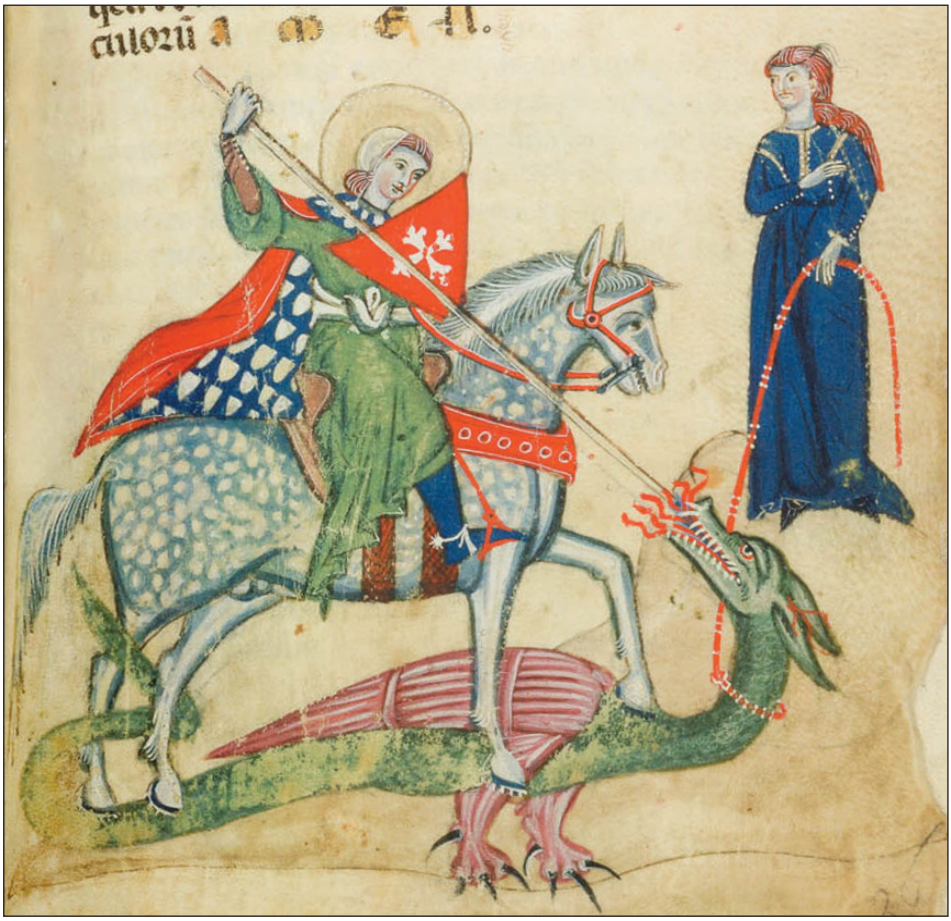

Fig. 9: Miniature from a Passio Sancti Georgii manuscript, Verona, second half of the thirteenth century. This Western manuscript illumination depicts Saint George as a mounted knight in chivalric armor, slaying the dragon with a lance. A crowned princess stands to the right, holding the dragon by a girdle—a motif that allegorically signifies her mediation and the union between secular and ecclesiastical power. The image exemplifies the Gothic narrative style and reflects the evolving iconography of the legend within Western Christendom (source: Wikimedia Commons).

John Matzke described how the Crusades gave new impetus to the veneration of Saint George. When the Crusaders set out to face the dangers of war, it was only natural that they should place themselves under the protection of those saints whose aid was recognized as particularly effective by the martyrs, who had themselves been soldiers. Though not the only one, Saint George was the most famous of

these. There were others, such as Theodore of Amasea, Demetrius of Thessaloniki, and Maurice, who also became patron saints of this expedition from the beginning. Matzke described how the members of the crusading army were constantly reminded of Saint George, the saint of saints, throughout their journey to Jerusalem—with the church in Constantinople, on the Bosporus, then known as the Coat of Arms of Saint George, in Nicomedia, where the tenth persecution of Christians under Diocletian was centered, etc., all the way to Lydda-Diospolis, where he is said to have spent his youth. On their journey, the Crusaders were constantly reminded of the saint, who also supported the Crusades by his opportune appearance in times of need during the expedition, so that in 1098 and 1099 Saint George is said to have led the army to victory outside the walls of Jerusalem. "During the attack on the city, he appears to them dressed in a white armor, with a red cross, and under his leadership they climb the walls successfully, and drive out the Saracens on the fifteenth of July, 1099" (Matzke, 1903, 154). These traditions became more widespread during the twelfth century in various expeditions, especially the so-called Second Crusade, undertaken in 1144 under the leadership of Louis VII of France and Conrad III of Germany. During the Third Crusade (1189–1192), the saint's reputation was greater than ever, and by this time the English knights who accompanied Richard I learned to accept Saint George as their special protector (Matzke, 1903, 155).

Alban Butler's *Lives of the Saints* (1756) includes the legend of Saint George, which was best known in the later Middle Ages, that is, in the form in which it was presented in the thirteenth-century *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine (ca. 1260) (Butler, 1990, 148–150). George was a Christian knight born in Cappadocia, who one day, while riding in the province of Libya, happened to come across a town called Sylene, near which was a swamp. In it lived a dragon that envenomed the whole country. Locals had attempted to attack and kill the dragon, but his breath was so terrible that everyone fled. To prevent him from coming closer, they fed him two sheep every day, but when the sheep ran out, a human sacrifice had to be made. Now it was the king's turn to sacrifice his daughter. She went to her doom dressed as a bride. Saint George attacked the dragon and vanquished it with his lance. He fastened the maiden's girdle around the dragon's neck, and she led the monster captive into the city. "It followed her as if it had been a meek beast and debonair" (Butler, 1990, 149). George reassured the frightened people that if they would only believe in Jesus Christ and be baptized, he would slay the dragon. The king and all his subjects joyfully agreed and 15,000 men, excluding women and children, were baptized. The king offered George great treasures, but he refused them. Instead, he demanded attendance at church services and that the emperor show compassion for the poor. The legend is then explicitly placed in the context of the persecution of Christians by Diocletian and Maximilian. To set a good example, George boldly went into a public square and shouted, "All the gods of the paynims and gentiles are devils. My God made the heavens and is very God." (Butler, 1990, 149). Datianus arrested him, and torture followed. The "Savior" intervened by restoring Saint George to health. In de Voragine's version, George explained that he comes from

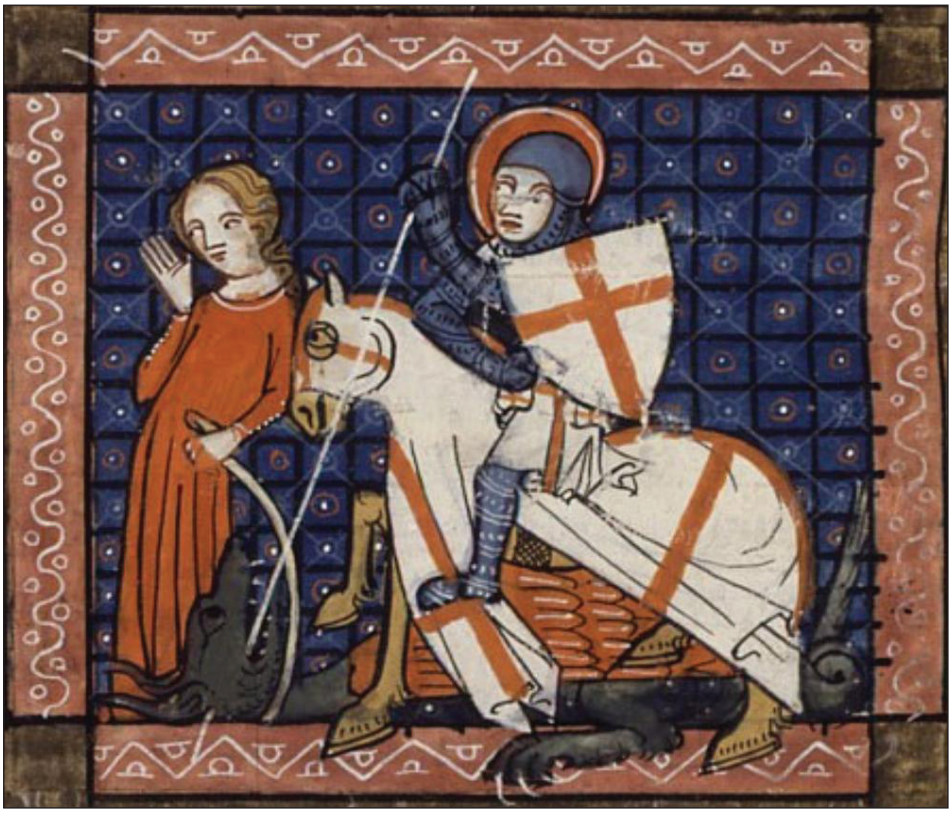

Fig. 10

a noble family from Cappadocia and that he took part in the wars in Palestine with the help of his god. In both de Voragine's (1941, 235–237) and Butler's versions, Saint George is ultimately executed by beheading.

In the fourteenth century, visions of the Saracens and their violence began to appear in connection with the legend of Saint George (Aufhauser, 1911, 27). The cult of the saint was still widespread in early modern Europe around 1500. The legend of Saint George even survived in Protestant areas after the Reformation, and Saint George, who was chosen as England's patron saint predominantly by King Edward III in the fourteenth century, has remained the patron saint of England (Burke, 1978, 149). Saint George was also venerated by the Turks, who declared him a spahi, a Turkish knight (Burke, 1978, 148).

The evolution of the legend of Saint George shows how it was adapted according to the current needs of society in different times and contexts. In texts written before the eleventh century, Saint George represented a devout Christian who dared to publicly declare himself a Christian in the context of the political oppression

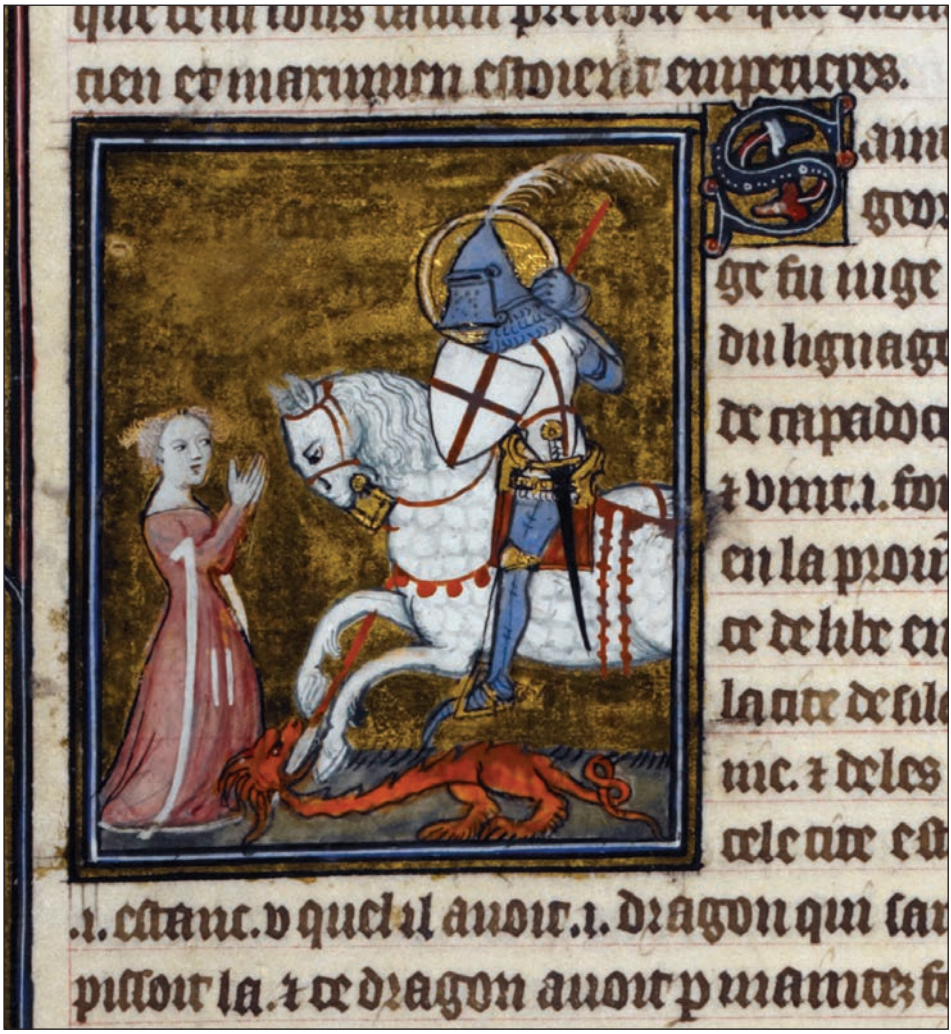

Fig. 10 and 11: Miniatures from two fourteenth-century manuscripts of Legenda aurea (The Golden Legend): (10) St. George and the Dragon, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Français 241, fol. 101v, ca. 1348; (11) St. George and the Dragon, British Library, Royal MS 19 B XVII, fol. 109, ca. 1382. Both miniatures depict Saint George as a knight in contemporary armor bearing the cross of Saint George, slaying the dragon in the presence of the princess, who is shown leading the beast by a girdle. These scenes visually assert not only the saint's role as a divine warrior but also symbolize the allegorical union of ecclesiastical and secular power through the presence of the princess as a royal figure accepting Christian salvation and order (source: Wikimedia Commons).

of that religion in the Roman Empire, which cost him his life. The miracles that Saint George performed were gradually described in detail, especially his recovery from terrible torture. These miracles served to convince non-Christians to accept Christianity. In connection with the Crusades, George's profession as a soldier was emphasized, facilitating his adoption as the patron saint and even the leader of the Crusaders as a Christian military saint. The Georgian text from the eleventh century, in which the dragon and the maid are mentioned for the first time, emphasizes the erroneous belief of the emperor and the citizens, for which the Christian God punished them by sending the devastating dragon. It is again God who intervenes and resolves the situation by way of a miracle that leads the inhabitants to accept Christianity. The later version of the legend contained in Butler's hagiography does not state where the dragon came from. This opens this signifier up to interpretation, as the dragon could stand for different things. This version of the legend also restored the old episodes of torture. George's speech in Butler's version, as in de Voragine's version, explicitly condemns all other gods and declares the Christian God to be the only "Creator of the heavens and the earth" (de Voragine, 1941, 235).

In the episode of Saint George's battle with the dragon, the dragon is vanquished by the saint. Victory is associated with the conversion of the population to Christianity. There is no pact with the dragon as in the case of Saint Hilary. The dragon is beheaded, ultimately defeated, and slain. The danger is averted.Edward Said, in his influential study *Orientalism,* analyzed how Western cultural production—particularly in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and French contexts—constructed the East as its inferior and exotic Other. Orientalism, as a discourse, functioned to reinforce Western dominance by portraying the Orient as static, irrational, and fundamentally different—an imagined Other against which Europe defined itself and justified its cultural and political hegemony. As Said put it, "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Said, 1979, 3). In line with such a framework, the dragon in Christian legend could be interpreted—from a Western perspective—as an allegorical figure for the East, perhaps even for Islam, against which the Christian knight asserts moral and military superiority. Building on Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism, Gil Anidjar has shown that Christian Europe historically constructed both the Jew and the Arab as its constitutive enemies—the former as an internal theological threat, the latter as an external political adversary. According to Anidjar, this dual construction enabled the emergence of a European identity defined against both figures, thus revealing the deep entanglement of religion, politics, and the concept of enmity in Western self-understanding (Anidjar, 2003). However, more recent scholarship challenges the reductive assumptions of Orientalist theory by emphasizing the diversity and complexity of medieval European perceptions of the East. John V. Tolar showed that "European images of Islam and of the prophet Muhammad are anything but monolithic and are far from being invariably hostile" (Tolan, 2019, 15). Rather than a simple dichotomy between West and East, medieval representations often reflected a dynamic range of interpretations, shaped by theological, political, and intercultural encounters.

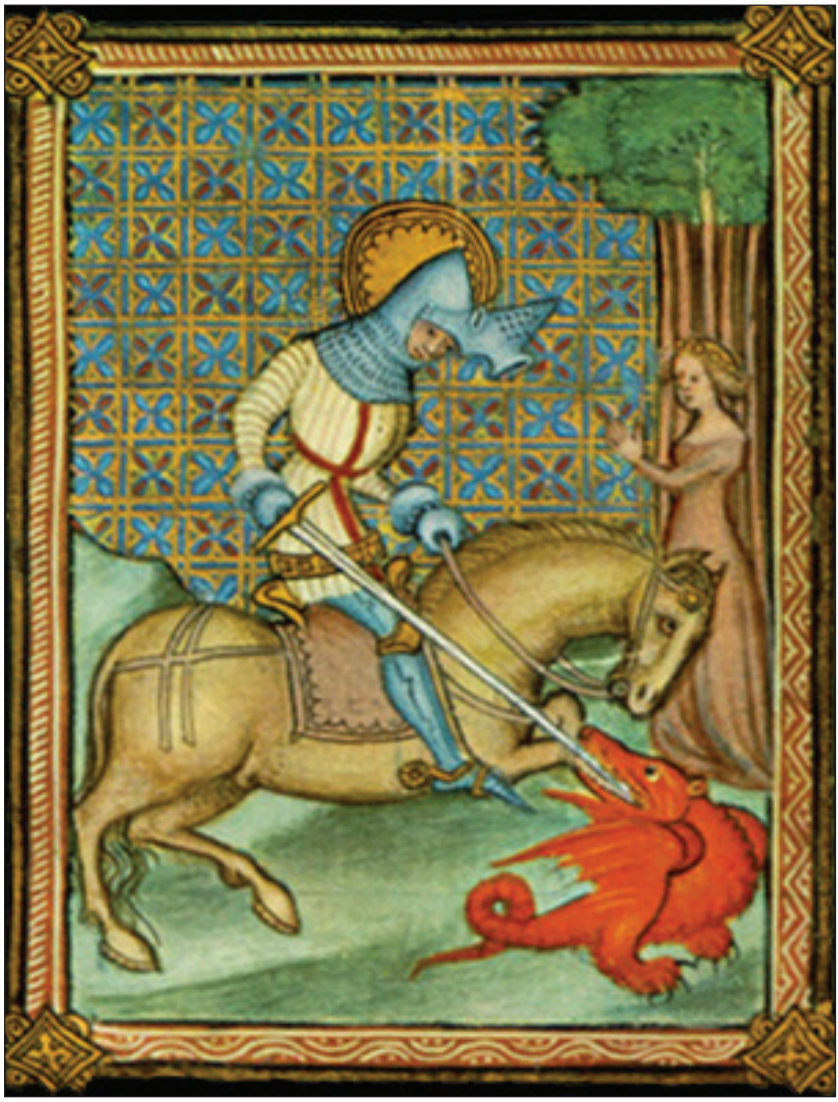

Fig. 12: Miniature of Saint George and the Dragon, from a book of hours, late fourteenth century. This illumination, rendered in the Gothic manuscript style, shows Saint George clad in full plate armor, piercing the dragon with a lance. A crowned princess watches from a distance, positioned beside a tree, further integrating the motif of royal lineage and spiritual salvation. Her presence once again signals the fusion of ecclesiastical and secular realms through the allegory of divine protection over the kingdom. The image reflects both the increasing chivalric iconography of the saint and the evolving narrative emphasis on the princess as a legitimizing figure (source: Wikimedia Commons).

GEORGE'S DISOBEDIENCE AND SACRIFICE

Sacrifice appears in various forms in the evolving legend of Saint George. In earlier versions—as well as in later compilations such as the *Legenda Aurea*—Saint George is portrayed primarily as a martyr who openly declares his Christian faith and remains steadfast during trial, even though it leads to torture. Despite being miraculously revitalized after his suffering, he ultimately pays for his faith with his life. In this version, George functions as a suffering witness, whose endurance and miraculous healing serve as proof of divine power and thus demonstrate the truth of Christianity. In the militarized medieval revision of the early Greek version (Pearse, 2020), by contrast, George is cast as a courageous military commander and a benefactor of the poor, who not only professes his Christian faith but actively resists imperial authority by refusing to offer sacrifice. This act again places him in the position of a victim—he is tortured, yet miraculously resists death, thereby confirming the presence of divine intervention and reinforcing the Christian faith among witnesses. In medieval variants featuring the princess and the dragon, the figure of the princess functions as a sacrificial victim offered to the gods. In the versions by Jacobus de Voragine and Alban Butler, George's slaying of the dragon leads to mass conversions, including that of the emperor's wife (the queen). Yet despite this triumph, George is still tortured and miraculously resists death until he is finally beheaded, securing his sanctity and final status as a Christian saint.

In the Latin version of the Greek passion of Saint George, the Roman emperor Datianus commands George to sacrifice: "advance and give sacrifice to Apollo who preserves the whole earth and governs the whole world […], or at least to Neptune, whom we say established the earth," to which George replies, "I do not worship those of whom you speak, the old serpent."[13] The narrative foregrounds a moment that carries broader ideological significance in the context of the late

13 Cf. the English translation (Pearse, 2020) of the Latin translation (BHL 3363) of the Greek passion of Saint George (BHG 670). Only a few leaves have been preserved of the latter. The fifth-century Greek version was likely much shorter, and above all, a martyrology text, focusing on George's suffering and perseverance in faith. Later Latin versions, especially from the ninth century onwards, were often expanded and reworked, with additions, miracles, long dialogues, and rhetorically exaggerated statements. The phrase *draconem inveteratum* (*hos, quae dicis, non adore, draconem inveteratum*) (Pearse, 2020, 4) does not come from the original text, but is probably a medieval addition, since the dragon does not yet appear in the fifth-century Passion. The episode with the dragon was not included in the legend until the eleventh century. This phrase is strongly allegorical and already includes the concept of the dragon as evil personified, which is not typical of early Christian Passions. It is also likely that the earlier George was more modest, presented as a pious martyr who humbly endures suffering and thereby testifies to the power of faith. Rhetorical belligerence and audacity towards the emperor (including insults and exaltation) characterize the later literary phase, where a heroic and even militarized transformation of the saint occurs.

Roman Empire. The demand for sacrifice was not primarily about theological conviction, but about political allegiance. Under Roman imperial policy, sacrificial rites functioned as rituals of loyalty. The correspondence between the Roman senator and administrator Pliny the Younger around 112 CE, during his tenure as governor of Bithynia and Pontus (in present-day northern Türkiye), and the Emperor Trajan, offers the earliest non-Christian testimony of how Roman imperial authorities viewed and dealt with Christians.[14] It shows that the Roman state was not primarily interested in private belief, but in public conformity: the act of sacrifice was a ritual test of political loyalty, not theological conviction. This context is vital for understanding the legend of Saint George, where the imperial command to sacrifice to Apollo, in this case, represents a demand for allegiance to the Roman cosmological and political order, which George's refusal directly defies. In this framework, sacrifice was a symbolic public act meant to affirm the participant's submission to Roman order, particularly to the divine authority of the emperor and the pantheon. George's refusal to offer a sacrifice must therefore be read not only as an act of personal faith but as a politically charged rejection of the ideological core of Roman imperial unity. His disobedience undermines the public religious performance that sustained imperial legitimacy. The legend thus frames the martyrdom not simply as a spiritual triumph, but as a confrontation with a system.

The figure of Saint George evolves from a sacrificial subject who attests to divine truth through personal suffering, into a militant agent who enforces divine justice through heroic intervention. This shift marks a broader cultural transition from martyrdom as testimony to action as legitimation, transforming the mode of resolving divine-human tension from symbolic self-sacrifice to active mediation. In this later configuration, Saint George steps in between the human community and the cosmic or political disorder that threatens it. He does not mediate between equivalent divine powers—he explicitly rejects the pagan gods as "the work of men."[15] Rather, he becomes an instrument of the one true Christian God, intervening in history to manifest divine authority and protect the faithful. In this sense, George's slaying of the dragon becomes not just a heroic deed, but a theological act: an assertion of Christian monotheism against polytheistic or chaotic alternatives.

14 In his *Epistulae* 10.96, Pliny the Younger seeks guidance from Emperor Trajan on how to deal with Christians, a group he admits he has not previously prosecuted. He explains that his procedure has been to interrogate suspected Christians, give them multiple chances to recant, and execute them if they persist in their faith. The Emperor Trajan (10.97, book X) responded: "These people must not be hunted out; if they are brought before you and the charge against them is proved, they must be punished, but in the case of anyone who denies that he is a Christian, and makes it clear that he is not by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned as a result of his repentance however suspect his past conduct may be" (Pliny, 1976, 291, 293). About the nature of the conflicts endured in the persecution, cf. also Eusebius (1952, 325–326).

15 "Those in whom you believe are not gods, but idols, deaf and blind, the works of the hands of men" (Pearse, 2020, 4).

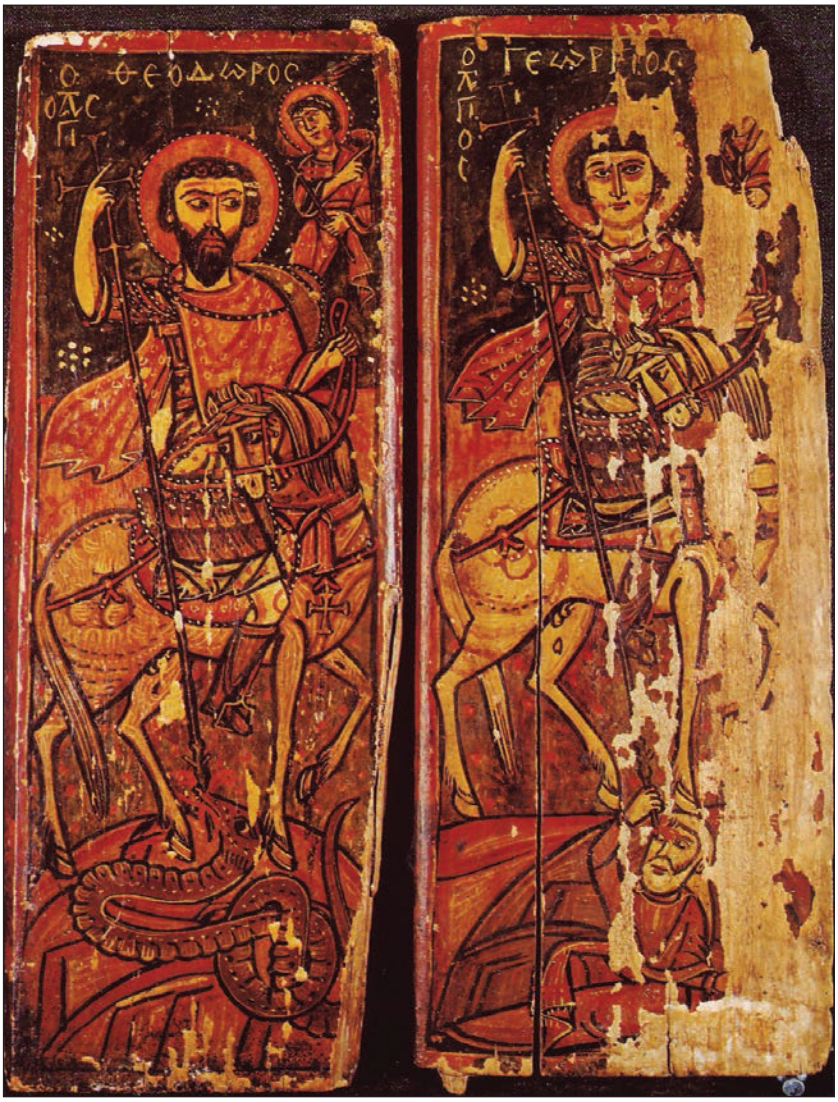

Fig. 13: Icon of Saints Theodore and George, Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai, ninth–tenth century. This early Byzantine icon, painted on wooden panels, depicts two mounted warrior saints—Theodore on the left, slaying a serpent-like dragon, and George on the right, spearing a human figure rather than a beast. The latter is commonly interpreted as a Roman soldier or, in some readings, as the Emperor Diocletian himself, thus signaling a more direct confrontation between Christian sanctity and imperial persecution. The visual pairing of the two saints emphasizes the military valor of the martyrs and the transition of saintly iconography from classical combat motifs to personalized spiritual warfare (source: Wikimedia Commons).

This shift in the narrative logic—from a test of faith and passive martyrdom to active intervention and miraculous military triumph—can also be understood through the lens of symbolic anthropology. The introduction of the dragon-slaying episode marks a significant shift in the hagiographic and visual tradition of Saint George, from a martyr who bears witness through suffering to an active agent who restores cosmic and social order through intervention. In earlier textual versions, George is commanded to perform a pagan sacrifice to Apollo, a typical loyalty test in the late Roman Empire, designed not to persecute indiscriminately, but to secure public acts of allegiance to the imperial religious order. As seen Pliny the Younger's *Epistulae* 10.97, Roman authorities were willing to release Christians who performed minimal ritual gestures—libations, incense offerings, verbal declarations—that demonstrated submission to the Roman gods and emperor. George's refusal to sacrifice was thus not only a religious stance but a political defiance, placing him at odds with the imperial ideology and casting him as a martyr figure.

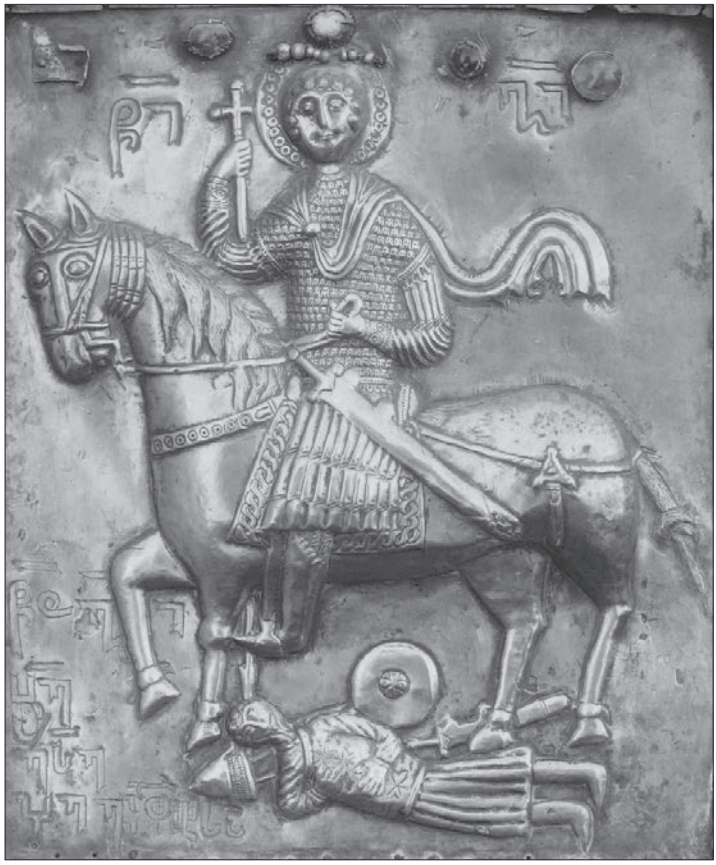

Fig. 14

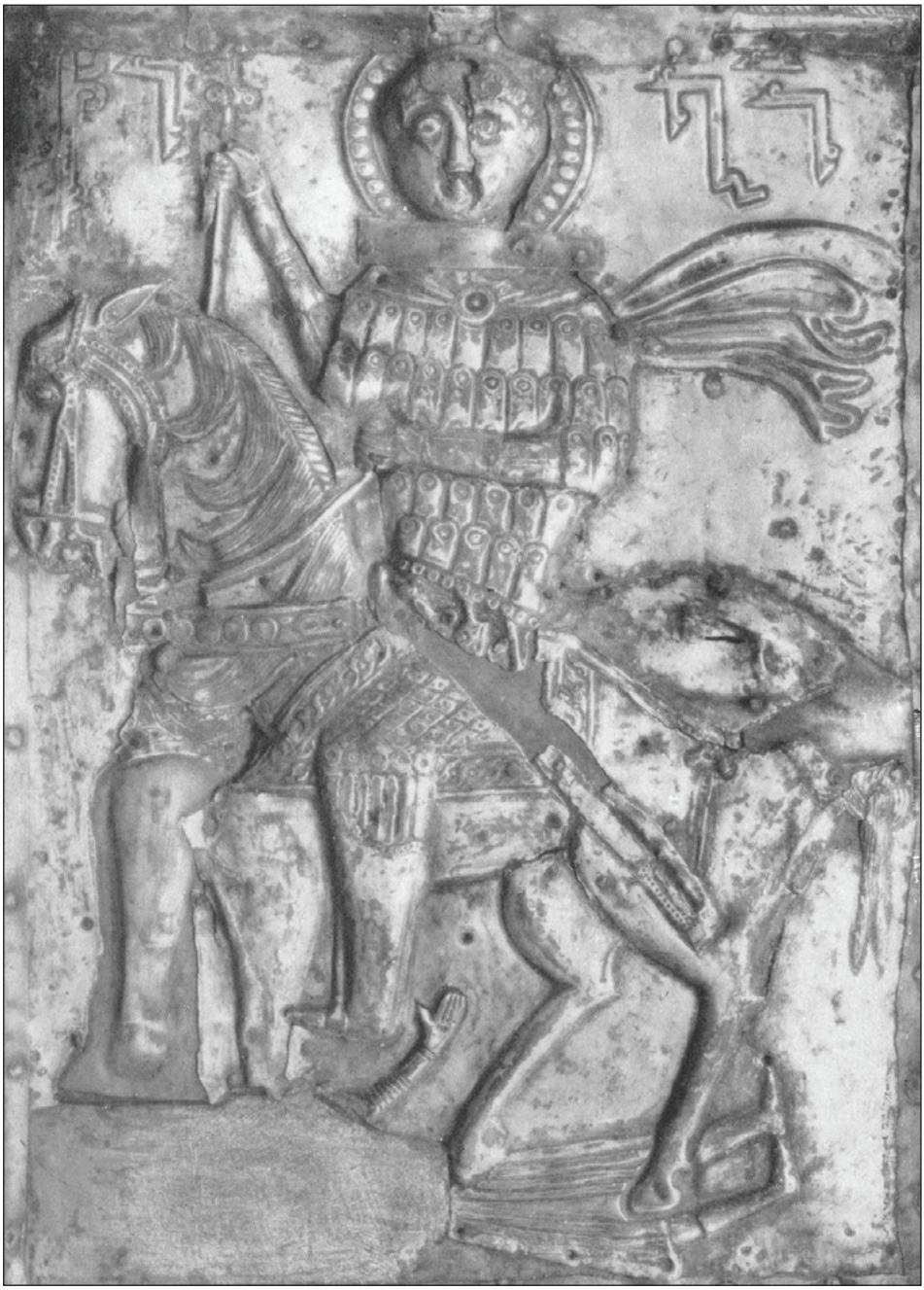

Fig. 15

Fig. 14–16: Three repoussé metal icons of Saint George from medieval Georgia (tenth–eleventh century). These three metal relief icons, executed in the repoussé technique and mounted on wooden panels, stem from different regions of Georgia and represent the widespread cult of Saint George in the Caucasus during the tenth and eleventh centuries. In all three, Saint George appears as a mounted warrior, either slaying a dragon or trampling a human adversary—the latter likely symbolizing a pagan or imperial enemy, possibly Diocletian. These works blend Byzantine military iconography with local Georgian stylistic features and testify to Saint George's function as both military protector and ideological symbol of Christian dominance over worldly or pagan powers. Fig. 14: from Parakheti (late tenth century and George fully armed, holding a cross, and trampling a fallen figure in a classical "Roman" posture). Fig. 15: from Nakuraleshi, emphasizes the saint's lamellar armor, complete with rivets, and likewise presents him as a triumphant military figure. Fig. 16: from Labechina (eleventh century), depicts the saint spearing an enemy underfoot while turning his head to the viewer—a more narrative and dynamic gesture (source: Wikimedia Commons).

THE DRAGON AS A POLLUTING FORCE AND GEORGE AS A VICTORIOUS MILITANT MEDIATOR

Yet in the evolving tradition, particularly from the eleventh century onward, Saint George becomes increasingly portrayed as a militant figure, one who does not merely refuse sacrifice but slays the enemy, now recast symbolically as a dragon. This shift represents more than narrative embellishment. As suggested by Mary Douglas (2001, 7–29), the concepts of purity and pollution are central to how societies construct and maintain order. Holiness, Douglas argued, is not a universal category but a cultural mechanism that defines and protects boundaries between clean and unclean, sacred and profane, order and chaos (Douglas, 2001, 11). The dragon, in this cosmological system, functions as a polluting force—a being that transgresses the proper order of things. The saint becomes not merely a spiritual witness but a divinely authorized purifier, one who violently expels disorder to restore sacred balance. In this sense, Saint George enacts a social drama of purification: his militant gesture is both political and cosmological, legitimizing divine order through the visible defeat of chaos.

Ritual has a reinforcing role for social cohesion and cosmological meaning, highlighting the ritual power of purity systems and symbolic boundaries in the maintenance of social order (Douglas, 2003). Saints, accordingly, particularly those invoked in conflictual contexts, function as agents of boundary-making: between clean and unclean, sacred and profane, order and chaos. Saint George's refusal to sacrifice to the Roman gods—a symbolic act that would have signaled submission to imperial order—must thus be seen as a radical reaffirmation of a new cosmological hierarchy, in which Christian truth displaces imperial religion. His refusal reorders the symbolic cosmos. In this framework, the militant saint acts not only as a boundary-keeper but as a structural mediator between opposing forces—between earthly society and divine will, between Christian community and external threat, between purity and pollution. Thus, George's transformation from martyr to dragon slayer is not simply the product of medieval militarization or Crusader propaganda—it reflects deeper symbolic needs to visualize divine order through action, to assert Christian identity through conflict, and to reframe the notion of sacrifice as a cosmic intervention rather than passive suffering.

As Mircea Eliade argued, the opposition between cosmos and chaos is not merely symbolic but existential: threats to order—whether demonic, military, or otherwise—are experienced as existential dangers that risk plunging society back into a state of formlessness.

> *In Europe, during the Middle Ages, the walls of cities were ritually consecrated as a defense against the devil, sickness, and death. Then, too, symbolic thinking finds no difficulty in assimilating the human enemy*

> *to the devil and death. In the last analysis the result of attacks, whether demonic or military, is always the same—ruin, disintegration, death.* […] [W]*e speak of the chaos, the disorder, the darkness that will overwhelm our world. All these terms express the abolition of an order, a cosmos, an organic structure, and re-immersion in the state of fluidity, of formlessness.* (Eliade, 1987, 49)

As Douglas has shown, the boundaries between purity and pollution serve to structure both cosmologies and societies (Douglas, 2001). While her anthropological framework was developed with reference to traditional ritual systems, its resonance extends into modern urban contexts. David Barnes's study of nineteenth-century Paris demonstrates how efforts to combat filth were not merely technical or hygienic, but deeply moral and political. Public sanitation emerged as a strategy for enforcing spatial, bodily, and class-based order—a "hygiene of separation and aeration" that aimed to eliminate dangerous mingling, contain excretions, and secure urban identity (Barnes, 2006). Although removed in time and context, such logics of purification and control echo the symbolic struggles found in medieval legends, where monsters threaten the spatial and moral order and must be expelled or slain to restore balance.

Eliade also emphasized the mediating role of religious figures who traverse symbolic worlds—earth and heaven, human and divine, chaos and order (Eliade, 1992). While George is not a shamanic figure in the strict sense, the evolution of his legend positions him as a mediator between divine justice and earthly disorder. In later variants, this mediatory role becomes militarized: George no longer mediates through suffering and martyrdom alone, but also through action—slaying the dragon, defending the innocent, and reestablishing divine order through symbolic violence. These anthropological frameworks illuminate the structural transformation of sacrifice in the hagiographic and visual tradition of Saint George. Initially, the saint's own body is the site of sacrifice, offered in testimony of faith. Later, the locus of violence shifts outward: the dragon represents the disorder to be expelled. This transposition marks not only a narrative evolution but also a theological one, where redemption is no longer achieved solely through submission but through victorious intervention.

This shift—from self-sacrifice to active intervention—can also be understood through the structural anthropology of sacrifice as elaborated by Claude Lévi-Strauss. In his analysis of sacrificial logic, Lévi-Strauss emphasizes substitution as its core principle: sacrifice operates as a mediating act between the human and the divine by substituting one element for another. The connection between these elements is not material but conceptual or symbolic. What is sacrificed mediates a reconciliation between the two realms—earthly and divine—through a moment of shared meaning. However, this mediation

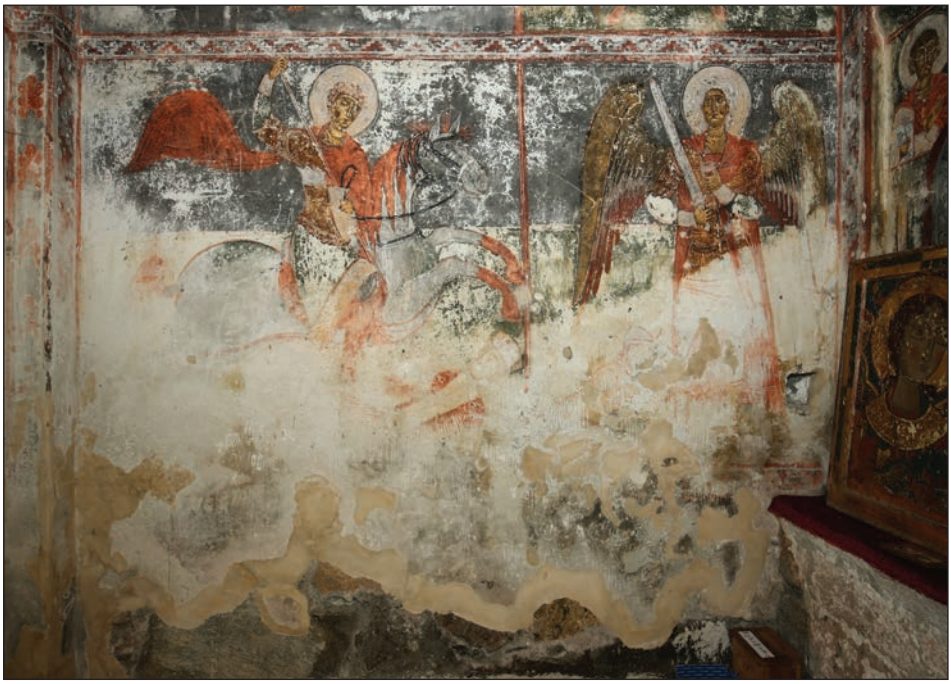

Fig. 17: Fresco of Saint George slaying Diocletian, with the vision of Joshua. Church of the Archangels, Ip'rari, Georgia, 1096. This depiction from the Church of the Archangels in Iprari presents Saint George in the act of slaying a figure interpreted as Diocletian, the Roman emperor traditionally associated with the persecution of Christians. On the right, the Archangel Michael holds a drawn sword, evoking the apocalyptic or eschatological dimension of divine warfare. Above the main scene, fragments of an upper register likely represent the vision of Joshua, who in the Old Testament saw a celestial commander with a sword—a typological foreshadowing of Christian martial saints (cf. Gedevanishvili, 2023) (photo: Zurab Tsertsvadze. © Ekaterine Gedevanishvili).

is paradoxical: it first sacralizes the victim, then resolves tension through its destruction. Human action thus brings about a solution of the established continuity (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, 223–226). Applied to the legend of Saint George, we see a transformation of this structure. Initially, George himself is the victim, sanctified and destroyed as a witness to divine truth. But later, the dragon becomes the sacrificial substitute—a displaced victim whose destruction reaffirms the cosmic order. In this reading, the violence of the saint is not just heroic, but structurally redemptive: it restores balance through a ritualized act of substitution.

SACRIFICE AND VIOLENCE

Importantly, this shift toward militant mediation does not erase the original sacrificial function of the saint's own body. Even in later narratives such as the *Legenda aurea* or the Latin versions of the Greek *Passio*, George ultimately submits to martyrdom—often through beheading—thus reaffirming his role as a witness to divine truth through suffering. The structure of sacrifice remains, but it is extended: the saint first defeats disorder externally (the dragon), only to confirm his sanctity by once again becoming the offering. This dual structure—external victory followed by self-sacrifice—marks the enduring theological and anthropological depth of his legend.

The deeper logic of sacrifice, as theorized by René Girard, reveals its intrinsic relation to violence, understood not merely as an aberration but as a foundational force in the constitution of human societies. Sacrificial violence functions as a social mechanism that channels destructive potential into ritualized forms, thereby producing cohesion. According to Girard, the essential structure of sacrificial logic lies in substitution: Violence always seeks and finds a surrogate victim. The target of the fury is replaced by another one, which is "chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand" (Girard, 2022, 2). The sacrificial victim, ideally, is both innocent and intimately linked to the community—an internal member who nonetheless bears the burden of collective guilt. When animals are used, the chosen victim is typically that which holds the highest value in society. The herd represents a virtual duplicate of human society. The ritual victim is necessarily an innocent creature, "who pays a debt for the 'guilty' party" (Girard, 2022, 4). And it is God who supposedly demands victims (Girard, 2022, 7). So does the emperor from the eleventh-century Georgian legend believe. His sacrificed daughter functions as what Lévi-Strauss terms the "intermediary object" (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, 223): a mediating figure that absorbs and displaces collective guilt. From the meta perspective, which is presented to us, their "guilt" lies in their misbelief.

This sacrificial logic resonates with the mythic structures discussed by Mircea Eliade, particularly in the founding myth of Rome. The fratricide of Remus by Romulus marks not only the birth of the city but also the emergence of a collective religious anxiety—a memory of bloodshed that binds the community through guilt and responsibility (Eliade, 1984, 107–109). The sacrificial victim initiated the founding of the city of Rome, wherein the people took responsibility for the original murder. Girard recognizes the need for any community to be founded and organized based on violence. The community was able to delay this violence so that it became constructive and achieved a means of reconciliation (Girard, 1986, 94). Girard reads such episodes as paradigmatic: societies are founded upon acts of exclusionary violence that must then be ritualized to maintain cohesion. "The vicious circle of reciprocal violence, wholly destructive in nature, is replaced by the vicious circle of ritual violence, creative and

protective in nature" (Girard, 2022, 163). Through such repetition, the original violence becomes hidden, aestheticized, and sacralized. Thus, sacrificial ritual functions both to delay violence and to render it socially productive, turning bloodshed into the basis of order and transcendence.

Fig. 18: Fresco of Saint George. Church of the Archangel, Adishi, Georgia, late eleventh century. This mural depicts Saint George as a mounted warrior saint clad in lamellar armor. Although the fresco is badly damaged, a human figure can still be discerned beneath the horse, with a clearly visible outstretched arm and head, indicating that the saint tramples a human enemy—possibly the emperor Diocletian—instead of the dragon known from later versions of the legend (source: Picryl, public domain).

Georgian hagiography from the eleventh century exemplifies the mythological logic of sacrificial substitution as theorized by Lévi-Strauss. In the legend, the emperor is held accountable for believing in false gods, and divine punishment comes in the form of a dragon that demands human victims. The emperor responds by seeking reconciliation through sacrifice; not by offering himself, but by displacing the penalty onto the community and, ultimately, onto his only daughter. The narrative thus dramatizes a reversal of Lévi-Strauss's sacrificial sequence, which typically moves from the most to the least appropriate surrogate (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, 224); here, the best possible substitute—princess—is saved for last, intensifying the symbolic tension. As the sole heir, the daughter represents dynastic continuity and reproductive futurity. Her sacrifice would signal the end of imperial lineage, governance, and societal regeneration—the end of the empire and a symbolic genocide. This sacrifice is therefore existential, and George is the last chance of the empire surviving.

The legend makes the limits of this sacrificial logic evident. Despite the escalation of offerings, reconciliation does not occur. The dragon remains unsatisfied, and the social order teeters on collapse. Into this failed sacrificial system steps Saint George—not as a substitute victim, but as a mediator in the structural sense described by Lévi-Strauss (1963, 224). Like mythic figures such as Raven or Coyote, George intervenes to resolve binary oppositions: paganism and Christianity, chaos and order, death and regeneration. His intervention displaces ritual appeasement with militant intervention. Where the emperor seeks peace through sacrificial compensation, George abolishes the need for sacrifice by eliminating its object—the dragon itself. Through this act, the Christian narrative reconfigures sacrificial logic: the locus of violence shifts from within the community to an external adversary. The dragon, once the recipient of offerings, becomes the target of annihilation.

This transformation marks a profound epistemic shift. The emperor, blinded by false gods, believes he can appease the divine with substitutionary victims. But the dragon is not a manifestation of the pagan gods—it is an agent provocateur, sent by the Christian God to expose the emperor's theological error. The sacrificial model fails because its premises are false: the wrong god, the wrong ritual, the wrong cosmology. The legend reveals the collapse of the pagan sacrificial paradigm and the emergence of a new theological and structural order. Saint George's intervention is not aimed at restoring balance but at enacting divine justice through eradication. Unlike Saint Hilary, who negotiated with serpents and permitted coexistence, George annihilates the adversary. This shift from mediation through sacrifice to resolution through elimination crystallizes a Christian vision of redemptive violence—one in which the mediator no longer facilitates reconciliation but redefines the very terms of conflict.

Fig. 19: Fresco depicting the torture of Saint George on the wheel, Church of Saint George, Nakipari, Georgia, ca. 1130. Unlike the widespread iconography of George as a victorious dragon slayer, this rare representation emphasizes his martyrdom under Roman persecution, highlighting his suffering rather than his triumph (source: National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia; Picryl, public domain).

THE SACRIFICIAL BRIDE: ALLIANCE BETWEEN CELESTIAL KINGSHIP AND TERRESTRIAL RULE

The emperor's daughter from the eleventh-century Georgian hagiography, adorned in bridal garments and presented as a sacrificial offering, serves as a fulcrum of symbolic transformation within the legend of Saint George. Her offering is not merely an act of appeasement, but a gesture situated at the intersection of cosmology, sovereignty, and mythic structure. Drawing on Marcel Mauss's theory of the gift as a social mechanism that binds communities through obligation and reciprocity (Mauss, 1990), we can understand this act not as exchange between equals, but as a vertical transfer between human authority and divine power. The princess, as the most valued member of the society, becomes an "intermediary object" of yet another kind—a substitute that enables communication between otherwise irreconcilable realms (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, 223). Her status is intensified by her already outlined singularity: she is not just a royal daughter, but the only child, the heir, and

the symbol of future regeneration. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis of kinship systems, we can understand the princess as a figure of the "woman-as-gift," whose exchange marks a shift in social structures (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, 65). In this case, the emperor's daughter is the supreme gift. However, this gift is not exchanged between human groups but across ontological realms. The sacrificial bride is not meant to create an alliance, but to end a regime. In contrast to traditional systems of kinship, where the exchange of women sealed alliances between human groups (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, 67), this exchange occurs across ontological realms: the princess is offered as a bride not to another lineage, but to the divine. This echoes Darko Darovec's application of Lévi-Strauss's theory to medieval diplomacy, where female figures often served as symbolic gifts to negotiate peace and legitimacy between feuding powers (Darovec, 2017). In this legend, however, the logic of the gift does not result in reconciliation but in rupture—her gifting is not a truce but a transfer of sovereignty. Yet this rupture does not negate the symbolic value of the princess; rather, it reconfigures it. Annette Weiner's concept of inalienable possessions helps us see how certain gifts, especially those involving women or sacred regalia, are never truly alienated. Even when surrendered, they retain symbolic ties to their origin, ensuring continuity of social identity and cosmic legitimacy (Weiner, 1992). The princess, as such, remains a vessel of dynastic meaning: her value is not extinguished by the gift but magnified within a new theological economy. What appears as a loss on one level thus reinforces legitimacy on another.

Maurice Godelier's complementary theory clarifies that certain gifts, particularly those offered in foundational moments, serve not to equalize but to restructure power asymmetrically (Godelier, 2002). The princess, although prepared for marriage, is never wed, precisely because the true union is not interpersonal but cosmological: the passage from pagan rule to Christian sovereignty. Her suspended marriage thus signifies a deeper transition, wherein divine order supplants imperial authority. The very suspension of that expected marriage intensifies the ideological weight of the gesture: the real union being enacted is between the old pagan order and the emerging Christian cosmos. Through her symbolic surrender, sovereignty is transferred—not to another human lineage but to divine rule. The princess, poised on this threshold, embodies a moment of liminality: a fragile and ambivalent transitional state between the old pagan order and the emerging Christian cosmology, between death and salvation, between the human and the divine. This liminal position is structurally essential for the narrative's transformation of disorder into a new sacred order.

The offering of the princess is not just a narrative device but a classificatory act: it separates false from true worship, chaos from order. This moment of rupture—when disorder is confronted by symbolic violence—is foundational for reestablishing cosmic order. The near-sacrifice of the princess thus enacts this rupture: it is through her liminal presence that a new cosmic hierarchy is inaugurated. The princess, as well as the saint, as elements of liminality, challenge the established structure and anticipate new order. Building on Mary Douglas's insights into the polluting and dangerous nature of that which eludes classification, Victor Turner expanded the

Fig. 20: Marble votive relief of a Thracian horseman. Stara Zagora, Bulgaria, second or third century CE. The relief depicts the so-called Thracian Horseman—an apotropaic and heroic figure widely venerated across the Thracian region, often associated with hunting, healing, and the underworld. He is shown in dynamic mounted motion, striking down a lion or wolf (in this case likely a prey animal). Typical iconographic elements include the raised weapon (spear or sword) and galloping horse. This cult image exemplifies the persistence of a pre-Christian mounted hero type, which would later be synchronized with the figure of Saint George as dragon slayer (source: Wikimedia Commons).

concept of liminality beyond mere disorder. While Douglas emphasizes anomaly and threat, Turner views liminality not only as dangerous but also as potentially productive, sacred, and transformative. Liminal states are not merely deviations from structure; they are zones of possibility, where new meanings, relationships, and social configurations can emerge. It is within this in-between space that Turner locates the phenomenon of *communitas*—a temporary suspension of hierarchical roles that allows for the reimagining of social order. Figures who inhabit such liminal spaces—victims, jesters, saints, or marginal communities—may appear weak or transgressive from a structural point of view, yet they can wield symbolic power capable of challenging or even renewing the dominant order (Turner, 1977, 95–111).

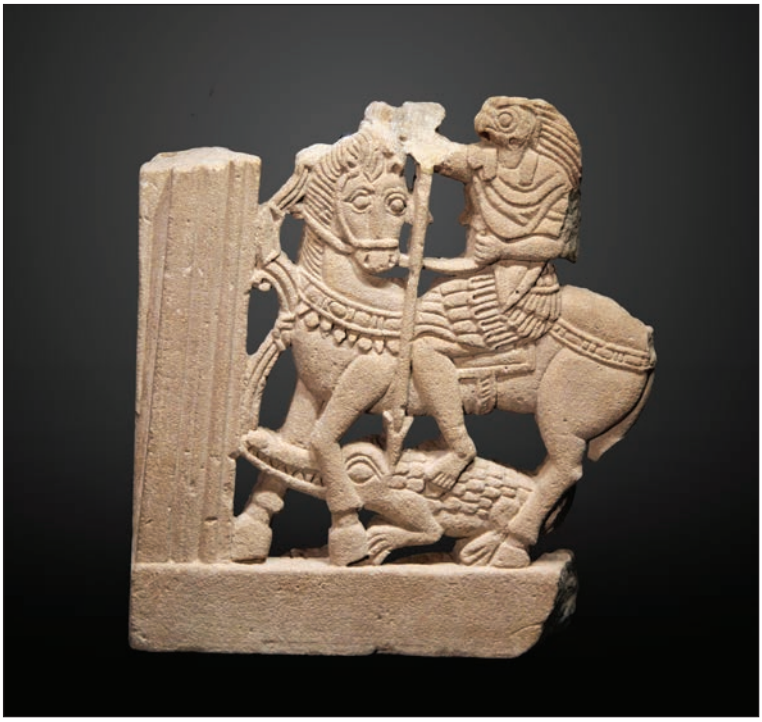

Fig. 21: Horus as a horseman defeating evil forces. Egypt, fourth century AD. This limestone relief shows the god Horus mounted on horseback, spearing a crocodile beneath him—an embodiment of chaos or malevolent forces, often associated with the god Seth. Horus wears a Roman military-style cuirass and a falcon-headed helmet, blending Pharaonic divinity with late antique imperial iconography. This early example of a mounted savior figure is a likely prototype for later Christian depictions of Saint George and other military saints (source: Wikimedia Commons).

The legend of Saint George can be understood as a narrative structure that seeks to resolve fundamental tensions, i.e., between chaos and order, paganism and Christianity, and political authority and saintly mission. As Lévi-Strauss observed, "mythical thought always works from the awareness of oppositions towards their progressive mediation" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, 440), because "the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, 443). In this light, the legend functions as a symbolic resolution of otherwise irreconcilable realities: pagan sacrifice versus Christian martyrdom, civic duty versus divine allegiance, death versus miraculous regeneration.

Finally, the social implications of this mythic structure resonate with George Duby's tripartite conception of medieval society—those who pray, those who fight, and those who labor (Duby, 1982). Saint George, in this scheme, exemplifies the unity of sacerdotal and martial functions. He acts not only as a divine agent but as a model knight, offering a blueprint for Christianized chivalric identity in the high medieval period, particularly in the Crusading context. The princess, meanwhile, becomes the emblem of the order he inaugurates: a living seal of the alliance between celestial kingship and terrestrial rule.

MEDIATION IN PRE-STATE AND MEDIEVAL SYSTEMS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The eleventh-century transformation of Saint George into a dragon-slaying hero takes place against the backdrop of shifting models of conflict resolution in medieval Europe. In earlier societies, particularly those without centralized legal systems, disputes were often resolved through customary mechanisms involving symbolic gestures, substitution, and the intervention of a third party. In such systems, the mediator was essential—not as an enforcer, but as a figure who facilitated the reintegration of the parties into a shared social order.

Anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins and Pierre Clastres have emphasized how these pre-state societies actively avoided the monopolization of force by institutionalizing rituals that dispersed power and redirected aggression. For instance, Sahlins, drawing from Mauss, described "ritualized peace-making" in segmentary societies, where violent tension was resolved through substitutional acts, such as gift exchange, ritual acts, and marriages, based on ritualized substitution (offerings) or balanced reciprocity as the classic vehicle of peace and alliance contracts (Sahlins, 2017, 154, 202–204). Clastres argued that many so-called "primitive societies" were consciously organized against the state—that is, they resisted the emergence of centralized political structures, privileging mechanisms that diffused authority and blocked the rise of coercive power (Clastres, 1989, 197–200). Within this context, the mediator is a liminal figure, often represented in cosmologies

by birds—such as ravens or eagles—who mediate between the earthly and the spiritual, without acting through physical force. In iconography, such mediator figures are frequently associated with animal forms, masks, or totemic symbols, often positioned between antagonistic realms. For instance, in Indo-European traditions, birds like the raven are messengers between life and death (Ivanits, 1989, 93; Eliade, 1992, 176), humans and gods—as well as shamans act as spiritual intermediaries or messengers between the human world and the spirit worlds, evoking animal images as spirit guides, omens, and message-bearers (Eliade, 1992, 248). In Slavic and Norse folklore, such intermediaries are also found in mythic figures who do not intervene violently, but instead deliver messages, omens, or warnings—preserving balance rather than imposing judgment. Odin's ravens Huginn and Muninn are emblematic of such non-coercive intercession: they observe, report, and warn, but do not act violently (Turville-Petre, 1975, 57–59). These mythic intermediaries thus operate within cosmological systems that value symbolic communication over executive force.

The figure of Saint George, as he appears in the eleventh-century dragon-slaying episode, represents a radical break from this model. He functions not as a neutral third party but as a divine enforcer who resolves conflict through violence sanctioned by a higher order. Saint George does not mediate between human parties in a balanced manner, nor does he act through symbolic substitution. Instead, he embodies a new model of divine intervention: a direct, sanctioned use of force in the name of religious truth. The dragon, understood as a symbol of heresy, paganism, or pre-Christian religiosity, becomes the externalized object of destruction. Mediation is no longer a negotiated reintegration but a theologically legitimized act of annihilation, leading to enforced religious unity.

This transition can be interpreted through Claudio Povolo's analysis of early modern Italian judicial culture, particularly his distinction between what he calls liturgies of violence and liturgies of peace (Povolo, 2014). According to Povolo, violence is not necessarily a disruption of order but can be ritualized and legitimized when it serves a communal or religious function. Saint George's intervention exemplifies liturgical violence that is not chaotic but structured—a performative act aimed at purifying the community, culminating in mass conversion and miraculous redemption. His sword is not simply a weapon, but an extension of divine justice.

This shift also echoes broader institutional transformations occurring in twelfth-century Europe, particularly the codification of law and the emergence of statutory systems (cf. Le Goff, 1988). The compilation of the *Corpus Iuris Canonici* (cf. Berman, 1983, 146) and the Spanish *Siete Partidas* (cf. Grossi, 2010, 24, 33) represent landmark efforts to formalize customary and ecclesiastical practices into unified legal frameworks. These legal texts aimed to regulate not only secular disputes but also moral and theological deviations. In this sense, the legend of Saint George

Fig. 22: Horseman in combat with a serpentine dragon. Syria or Iran, tenth–eleventh century. This glazed ceramic figurine—likely from Raqqa, Syria—is an example of so-called "Raqqa ware". It depicts a mounted warrior with a raised sword, engaged in combat with a coiling dragon that wraps itself around the horse's leg and bites the rim of the rider's shield. The composition draws on visual schemes derived from Byzantine iconography, especially images of mounted saints such as Saint George or Saint Theodore, though here adapted within an Islamic artistic context. While the religious identity of the figure is no longer explicit, the motif retains the narrative core of the dragon-slaying horseman (source: © Museum With No Frontiers (MWNF) | Discover Islamic Art).

operates as a mythological parallel to this process: he enacts a model of dispute resolution that is no longer ad hoc or symbolic but codified, hierarchical, and absolute. Just as canon law sought to establish orthodoxy through legal clarity, Saint George embodies a juridified form of saintly authority, dispensing divine justice through violent intervention.

This logic stands in stark contrast to earlier Christian legends of conflict resolution, such as that of Saint Hilary, who subdued serpents without killing them, and allowed humans and beasts to share territory—a symbolic gesture of negotiated coexistence (Le Goff, 1980). Saint George, by contrast, kills the dragon outright. The threat is not neutralized but eliminated. Peace is not restored through compromise but through the erasure of the antagonist.

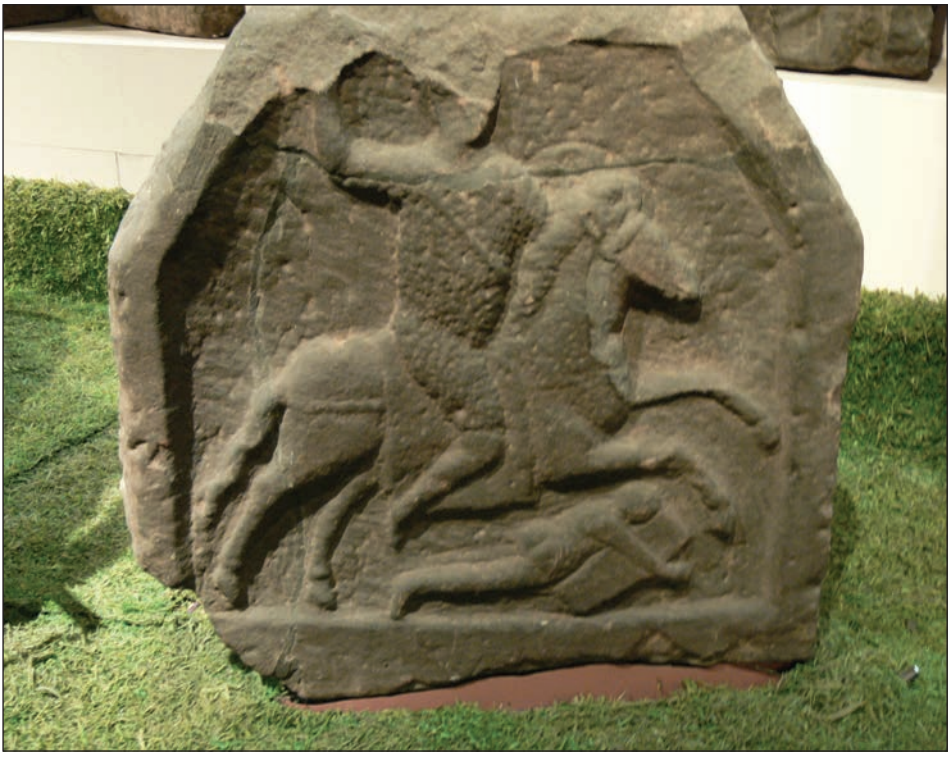

Fig. 23: Tombstone of a Roman cavalryman from Chester, England, fourth or fifth century. The relief depicts a mounted warrior triumphing over a fallen enemy, a composition characteristic of Roman imperial military iconography. Such imagery of equestrian dominance would later influence Christian representations of victorious saints, including Saint George (Grosvenor Museum, Chester) (source: Wikimedia Commons).

Fig. 24: One of the earliest stone reliefs depicting mounted warrior saints spearing a dragon can be found in the Church of the Dormition in Martvili, Georgia, dated to the tenth or early eleventh century. Likely depicting Saints George and Theodore, the scene combines martial heroism with divine sanction, as angels appear to crown the victors. This composition reflects an iconographic shift from historical adversaries to mythological ones, suggesting an evolving symbolic landscape in which the dragon embodies spiritual evil or chaos (photo: Zurab Tsertsvadze. © Ekaterine Gedevanishvili).

Secular narratives of the same period, such as the chivalric tale of Tristan, offer a revealing counterpoint. Tristan also slays a dragon and saves a princess, but his function is primarily dynastic and political—he serves as a human mediator between warring kingdoms. His heroism resolves interpersonal and geopolitical tensions, often through negotiation, alliance, or symbolic gift exchange. In contrast, Saint George operates outside the human realm of diplomacy; he is the executor of divine will. His presence erases the possibility of symmetrical negotiation and replaces it with vertical, unchallengeable authority.

The legend of Saint George marks a decisive transformation in the cultural logic of mediation. The traditional third party, once symbolic, ritualistic, and liminal, is replaced by a figure of sacralized violence, aligned with the centralizing structures of Church and Empire. The dragon-slaying becomes not only a narrative of heroism but a paradigm of religious conquest, wherein peace is achieved not through agreement, but through obedience and purification.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of the legend of Saint George from martyr to militant mediator encapsulates a wider cultural and institutional shift in medieval Europe—one that marks the transition from pacifist Christian ethics to a model of sacralized violence and centralized authority. As this article has shown, the eleventh-century dragon-slaying narrative is not a mere embellishment of an earlier saint's life, but a profound reworking of the symbolic structure of conflict resolution. The sacrificial logic, previously central to both mythic and customary systems of peacemaking, is displaced by a new paradigm: divine intervention through violence, the eradication of enemies rather than negotiated coexistence. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Claude Lévi-Strauss, René Girard, Pierre Clastres, and Claudio Povolo, we have seen how Saint George becomes a mythological agent of juridification. He replaces ritual substitution and intermediation with sanctioned destruction in the name of religious truth. This transformation mirrors a shift in legal culture, exemplified by the codifications of canon and secular law in the twelfth century (e.g., *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, *Siete Partidas*), which sought to stabilize social order through hierarchical norms rather than communal negotiation.

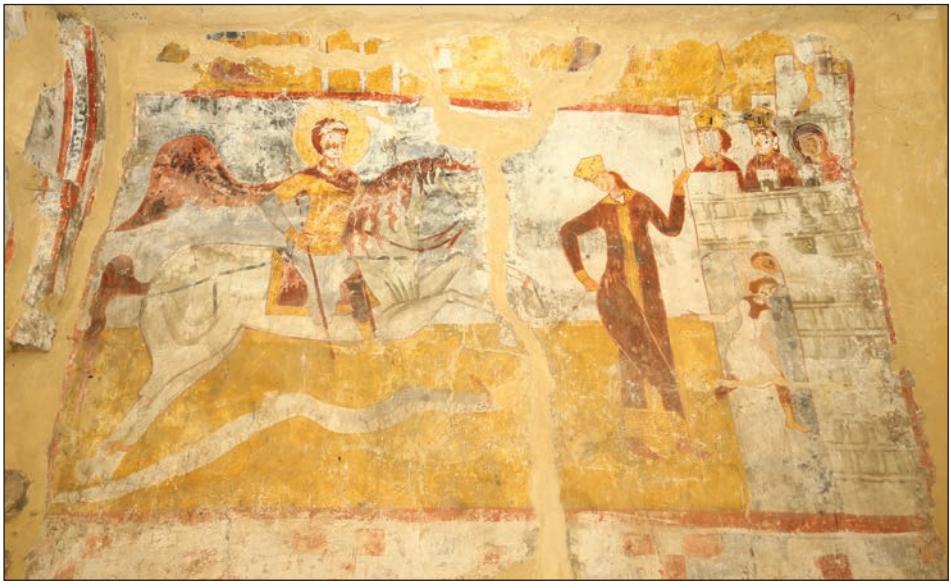

Fig. 25: The earliest depiction of the scene of St. George rescuing the princess (Gedevanishvili, 2025, 149) is to be found in the church of St. George of Hadiši / Adishi (Upper Svaneti). The fresco created in the late eleventh or early twelfth century represents the Miracle of Lassia (photo: Zurab Tsertsvadze. © Ekaterine Gedevanishvili).

Although the legend of Saint George does not function as a juridical text prescribing behavior, it operates as a symbolic discourse that shapes mentalities and provides moral justification for specific forms of violence. The dragon is not a real creature, nor is George a legislative agent; rather, the legend offers a narrative logic through which certain conflicts—especially religious or cultural—can be rendered meaningful and resolvable. Such hagiographic narratives do not dictate action in a legal sense, but they authorize imaginaries, legitimizing the eradication of perceived evil in the form of externalized others. In this way, they contributed to the ideological underpinnings of historical campaigns such as the Crusades, where myth and action became mutually reinforcing.

Unlike earlier mediators in customary or prelegal systems—figures who brokered peace through symbolic gestures, kinship exchange, or mythic animal intercession—Saint George is a militant enforcer of theological orthodoxy. He does not reconcile; he conquers. His sword is not an instrument of arbitration, but of purification. His victory is not over an adversary in a balanced dispute, but over an ontologically evil other, whether pagan, heretical, or later Muslim. In this sense, George represents a convergence of two major transformations: the institutionalization of Christian ideology into systems of coercive authority, and the narrative restructuring of hagiography to justify religious violence under the guise of divine mediation.

The image of the princess in bridal dress underscores this logic. As the ultimate surrogate victim, she signifies both the inadequacy of traditional sacrificial resolutions and the need for a higher, totalizing intervention. Her symbolic marriage to divine order via Saint George enacts a mythic submission of the polity to theocratic authority. The narrative thus collapses the boundaries between juridical, theological, and mythological orders: peace is no longer achieved by restoring balance within the community, but by aligning the community to an external, absolute mandate. The legend of Saint George ultimately becomes a prototype for a new model of social order, in which legitimacy derives not from communal consensus or symbolic mediation, but from violent revelation and doctrinal truth. This legacy would echo not only through medieval Christendom but into the very logic of crusading, colonization, and confessional state-building. The dragon slayer is thus not merely a medieval hero, but a cultural figure through whom Europe reimagines sovereignty, justice, and salvation.

Fig. 26: Fresco of Saint George slaying the dragon and rescuing the princess, Church of Saint George, Staraya Ladoga, Russia. Twelfth century. This is one of the earliest known depictions to include the princess, shown holding the dragon by a girdle. Far from being a passive observer, she plays a symbolic role in the ritual subjugation of chaos. The girdle, traditionally associated with purity and authority, signifies not only the taming of the beast but also the allegorical union between the ecclesiastical and secular powers. Her presence thus visualizes the sacred marriage between Church and Kingdom, affirming the saint's role as divine mediator and agent of cosmic order (source: Wikimedia Commons).

SVETI JURIJ, UBIJALEC ZMAJA: POSVEČENO NASILJE IN ALEGORIČNA ZDRUŽITEV POSVETNE IN CERKVENE OBLASTI

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POVZETEK

Prispevek obravnava preobrazbo legende o svetem Juriju iz zgodnjekrščanske zgodbe o mučeniku v srednjeveško pripoved o božjem bojevniku in ubijalcu zmaja. Ta sprememba, ki se v ikonografiji in hagiografiji utrjuje od 11. stoletja naprej, odraža širše kulturne in teološke premike, v katerih reševanje konfliktov preide iz simbolnega posredovanja k sakraliziranemu nasilju. Sveti Jurij ne nastopa več kot pasivni trpeči svetnik, temveč kot Božji zastopnik, ki z nasilnim posegom vzpostavi red. Zmaj postane simbol heretičnega ali poganskega kaosa, ki ga je treba izkoreniniti, da bi se znova vzpostavila božanska hierarhija. Takšna narativna struktura ne deluje kot dobesedno navodilo za ravnanje, temveč kot diskurzivni model, ki legitimira izključevanje, pokoravanje in versko čistost. Legenda o svetem Juriju tako postane simbolna matrica, prek katere se oblikujejo kolektivne predstave o oblasti, legitimnosti in svetem boju. Članek povezuje ta narativni prelom z vzponom križarstva, pri čemer sveti Jurij postane vzor bojevnika vere. Posebna pozornost je namenjena vlogi princese kot žrtvenega daru, ki simbolizira poroko med posvetno oblastjo in Cerkvijo.

Ključne besede: sveti Jurij, ubijalec zmaja, srednjeveška hagiografija, simbolno reševanje konfliktov, versko nasilje, darilna menjava, srednjeveška ikonografija, žrtvovanje, strukturna antropologija

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