Chapter One

St George as Martyr

The life and identity of St George are shrouded in mystery. Very little can be said with any certainty about the real man around whom a legend has formed. And yet it is now generally accepted by most historians and writers that a real St George did exist. If these two statements seem at odds, then this is another of the many contradictory aspects of the cult of St George.

In the earliest written material about the life of St George, there is considerable variation in circumstance and detail but a basic, recognisable story can be discerned behind all the seemingly endless re-tellings. George is described as a man of high birth and rank who lived around the third or fourth century AD. He was a Christian, ordered by a pagan ruler to sacrifice to a pagan god (usually Apollo or Bacchus) who refused and was tortured and eventually be-headed for his defiance.

Almost every detail of this account changes in the surviving early Christian texts or 'hagiographies' that describe the lives of the Christian martyrs. The changes of detail are at times so bewildering that some have argued that the figure of St George never actually existed at all. However, there are also powerfully persuasive reasons for believing that St George was a real person who met his death as a Christian martyr.

Before examining the early texts in detail, it is worth outlining some of the general statements made about his cult. It is widely stated that St George was martyred at the town of Lydda in Palestine. Today this town is known as Lod and, during the Roman occupation, was referred to as Diospolis. A cult of St George centred on Lydda has existed since the early Christian period and this alone lends weight to the belief that St George existed. It was a centre of pilgrimage and worship and a Greek orthodox church dedicated in his honour can still be visited, standing in close proximity to a modern airport. Lydda lies 24 miles from Jerusalem and is located on the plain of Sharon. St. George is also often linked with the town of Joppa, whose modern name is Jaffa and which stands about 12 miles from Lydda.

Another location that is consistently linked with St George is the region of Cappadocia which forms part of central Turkey. (The name Cappadocia was first used when the area was part of the Roman Empire.) However, in the centuries since the death of the saint, which is generally said to have taken place on 23 April 303 AD, the tradition of referring to St George of Cappadocia has given rise to much confusion and controversy. The confusion about St. George's links with Cappadocia arises from the fact that it is known that another George of Cappadocia definitely existed. Most famously, Edward Gibbon linked the two figures in his epic *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788). The identification of the two men is something that the humanist Gibbon seems to have taken spiteful delight in, because the historically recorded George of Cappadocia was a heretical Archbishop of Alexandria of dubious character. He is recorded as having sold 'questionable' pork to the Roman Army and was known to have been a believer in the Arian heresy. The Arians formed a

religious sect that doubted that Jesus Christ had been anything other than a mortal man. This George of Cappadocia was murdered at the hands of a raging mob in 362 AD.

Gibbon enjoyed undermining some of the more fanciful aspects of Christian belief but he is now thought to be mistaken in connecting the two figures. The long tradition of St George's martyrdom at Lydda tends to contradict Gibbon's assertions. The George who was Archbishop of Alexandria has never been linked to this area. Perhaps most conclusively from a modern perspective, the discovery in the 19th century of two early churches dedicated to St George in Syria tends to discredit the theory that he came from Cappadocia. A church at Shakka in Syria had a Greek inscription over its doorway that stated that it was 'the house of the holy and triumphant martyrs, George and the saints who suffered martyrdom with him.'(Budge, *George of Lydda*, p.15).

The second inscription, also written in Greek, at Ezra (Azra or Adhra) describes how this previously pagan temple had been re-dedicated to St George. The translation makes for fascinating reading and states that:

1. The habitation of demons hath become a house of God.
2. A saving light hath shone in the place where darkness was enshrouded.
3. Where there were sacrifices of idols there are now a choir of angels.
4. Where God was roused to wrath He is now propitiated.
5. A certain man, a lover of Christ, the noble John, the son of Diomedes.
6. As a gift from his own money he hath offered to God a building meet to be seen.

7,8. Having placed therein the honourable relic(s) of the splendidly triumphant holy martyr George, who appeared to John himself.

9. Not as in a sleep (or a dream) but visibly.
   (Quoted in Budge, *George of Lydda*, p.16).

The appearance of St George to his believers and supporters will rapidly become a recognisable aspect of his cult. Perhaps unsurprisingly, accurate dating of the churches has proved difficult. Some scholars have dated them to around 346 AD but others have suggested they were dedicated as late as 515 AD. As I said earlier, little can be said with certainty of the 'real' St George. However, the possibility that a known heretical Archbishop would have been made a saint and adopted with such fervent belief seems unlikely. It may be that details of his life were mistakenly grafted on to the life of St George.

The earliest written source that may relate to St George is supplied by the chronicler Eusebius of Caesarea writing in 322 AD. He tells of 'a man of the greatest distinction' who was ordered to be executed by the Emperor Diocletian at Nicomedia on 23 April 303. However, he does not record the name of the man, where he was born or even where his body was buried.

The earliest known written account of the life of St George was found in an incomplete manuscript under a pillar in the Cathedral of Qasr Ibrim in 1964. Excavations had been taking place there prior to the building of the Aswan Dam. This narrative, written in Greek, has been dated to the years between 350 and 500 AD. The manuscript describes George as being the son of a Cappadocian who lived in Nobatia, Northern Nubia, an area that forms part of the Nile valley between Khartoum and Aswan. It states that he was born during the reign of Aurelian (270-275 AD) and that he was baptised as a Christian by his mother Polychronia. This was done secretly without the knowledge of his father Gerontius who was opposed to it. George enters the Imperial Service and rises rapidly through the ranks. Later he travels to the city of Diospolis or Lydda to gain promotion. On reaching the court of Diospolis he finds that a pagan ruler has issued a decree sentencing Christians to death. George denounces the worship of Apollo at court and is arrested and gruesomely tortured. He is forced into iron-spiked shoes, his skull is crushed and he is scourged. However, the Archangel Michael heals his wounds and frees him from his imprisonment. As a result of this miracle and St George's preaching following his ordeals, a great number of people convert to Christianity. Even the wife of the pagan ruler becomes a Christian. St George attacks the temples dedicated to Apollo and Heracles and is then beheaded by order of the furious ruler. Many who have converted are similarly punished. This version of the life of St George describes him as having lived in the same region of Nubia as other warrior saints, such as Mercurius, Theodore and Demetrius, who were all martyred as Christians by the Emperors Diocletian and Decian.

During the reign of the Emperor Diocletian who ruled between 284 and 305 AD Christianity had been widely accepted. It was the religion of many, even those of high status. Indeed Diocletian's wife and daughter were both Christians. But this tolerant attitude changed when a number of Christian soldiers were accused of disobeying commands and a number were killed as punishment for this around 300 AD. Events worsened when a plot emerged that appeared to involve Christians. Diocletian issued an edict that Christians were to be banned from meeting and worshipping and ordered the destruction of churches and religious texts. Every soldier was instructed to make proper sacrifice to the gods of Rome.

Diocletian ordered the Praetorian Guard to destroy the great Cathedral of Nicomedia and this was carried out on 23 February 303 AD. The emperor's edict was brutally enforced across the Roman Empire. These events may form the background to the martyrdom of St George, although some, including Sir Ernest Wallis Budge, have argued for a different date. Budge, who was the author of *George of Lydda, the Patron Saint of England* (1930), was also keeper of Near Eastern Manuscripts at the British Museum. He was an important figure in the history of research relating to St George and believed that the generally accepted date of his martyrdom (23 April 303) was incorrect. He argued that the martyrdom had taken place 50 years before that date.

Another important early Christian text relating to the life of St George is known as the Vienna Palimpsest. (A palimpsest is a manuscript which has had its text erased and new material written onto

it.) This manuscript is written in Greek and dates from the fifth century. Like other similar works from this and later centuries, it describes events in terms that veer away from realistic detail and move further towards fantasy. Yet, this version is thought to have proved very influential on later accounts of the martyrdom of St George. It purports to have as its basis another document which was written by, or perhaps more properly, authenticated by a servant of George called Pasicrates. (This was a tactic used quite frequently by writers of the lives of the saints, the hagiographers, to lend their accounts gravity and credulity.) In this version, George is again identified as being of Cappadocian extraction but is said to have lived in Palestine.

He has excelled within the Imperial Army and seeks promotion from the ruler Dadianos. Once again, the pagan ruler has attacked and banned Christianity and has ordered his subjects to give sacrifice to the gods. George is defiant, gives away his money and belongings and refuses to sacrifice. In this account, George becomes engaged in a heated argument with the emperor about his actions and is cruelly tortured. A magician called Athanasius gives him poison but he is unaffected by it.
As a result Athanasius is converted to Christianity and put to death by Dadianos. St George is killed on a wheel fitted with knives but he is restored to life by the Archangel Michael and the Lord. When St George appears before the king, his general Anatolius and his entire army convert to Christianity. They too are executed. Dadianos has molten lead poured down the throat of St George who, once again, survives through the help of God. The significance of this account is that it establishes the tradition that George suffers four deaths, is resurrected three times by the Lord and gains his martyr's crown on the fourth occasion. The saint is also described as having the power to resurrect the dead himself and also causes a number of wooden thrones to grow roots, flower and bring forth fruit. The miracles that George performs persuade the Empress Alexandra and many thousands to convert to Christianity.

The evil ruler Dadianos is often described as being a terrible tyrant or dragon and this could be one origin of the much later medieval account of St George's fight with the dragon. The 'Princess' or 'Empress' Alexandra is converted from the worship of Apollo to Christianity by St George and so is 'saved' by him. Interestingly, there is a tradition within the imagery of Greek Orthodox icons that portrays St George on horseback trampling down a man with a sword and shield rather than the mythical dragon.

Sir Ernest Wallis Budge argued that the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh influenced the story of the martyrdom of St George. The hero Gilgamesh was two-thirds god and one-third mortal man. Budge suggested that early followers of the cult of the saint may have identified him with the Babylonian hero, 'If St George were three parts God and one part man, the four killings would be understandable'. (Budge, *George of Lydda*, p.43).

Ironically, the increasingly fantastical nature of the stories of George's martyrdom led to the first definite reference to the saint that we have. In 494 AD Pope Gelasius produced the first Index or list of works that were believed to be apocryphal. The 'Passio Giorgi' is amongst them. Gelasius condemned

certain lives or 'Acta' as being absurd because of their increased tendency towards fiction and sensationalism. However, he concluded, significantly, that George was to be grouped with saints 'whose names are justly reverenced among men, but whose actions are known only to God'. As well as a dismissal of the extravagant claims made for him, this is an acknowledgement that a 'real' St George did exist. However, the efforts of Gelasius and his council to control and limit the accounts of the life of St George that were circulating were largely ignored and subsequent martyrologies proved to be just as fantastical. George's conflict with a human foe metamorphosed over time into a fully-fledged fantasy about battles with dragons.

Another possible influence on the development of the cult of St George is thought to have been the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great who was born on 27 February 272 AD and died on 22 May 337 AD. Constantine is often referred to as the first Christian Emperor. As a young man Constantine served at the court of Diocletian in Nicomedia. His father, Constantius, later became emperor and, when Constantius was in Britain, campaigning against the Scots and Picts of Caledonia, he became ill and subsequently died. The day Constantius died, 25 July 306 AD, was the day Constantine was proclaimed 'Augustus' or Emperor at York in Britain by his loyal troops. Constantine became Western Emperor, since the Empire was divided at this time into two halves, Eastern and Western. During his career Constantine re-founded Byzantium, which came to be known as 'Constantinopolis' ('Constantine's city'), on the site of modern day Istanbul. Constantine held the Council of Nicea in 325 AD an event that legalised Christianity throughout the Empire for the first time in history.
The Council of Nicea, together with the earlier Edict of Milan, issued in 313 AD, were instrumental in paving the way for the growth of Christianity.

Constantine the Great is reported to have built a church at Lydda in honour of St George. Sir Ernest Wallis Budge, amongst others, have suggested that the church contained a bas-relief of Constantine which depicted him standing on top of a dragon or serpent and holding the banner of the Cross in his right hand. It is thought that early followers of St George's cult, either intentionally or accidentally, may have identified this sculptural image with the saint and the result was a merging of the imagery of the two figures.

It is also worth noting that a number of Roman coins depict human figures standing over the body of a serpent. Valentinian III is shown on a gold 'solidus' in just such a pose with his right foot on top of a serpent with a human head. In his right hand he is holding a cross and, in his left, he is holding an orb decorated with an angel of victory. A bronze coin struck during the reign of Constantine shows the Emperor transfixing a serpent with the 'labarum', an early Christian motif.

The Edict of Milan of 313 AD, issued by Constantine, had granted religious tolerance and freedom but Licinius, who was the Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, broke the agreement in 320 AD. He began to persecute Christians, a policy that finally resulted in the civil war of 324 AD. It became a war of religions as Constantine's army fought under the banner of the labarum against the pagan armies of

Licinius. Constantine and his troops emerged as the victors and this is often viewed as marking the end of the pagan Empire and the beginning of a new Christian era . However, many at the court of Constantine retained pagan beliefs and the Emperor himself, earlier in his career, used the Roman gods Mars and Apollo in his official representations.

Other traditions, usually regarded with some scepticism, are said to link Constantine and St George and Britain. It is sometimes said, for example, that Constantine formed an order called the Constantinian Angelic Knights of St George in 312 AD and Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his 12th century *History of the Kings of Britain*, wrote that the mother of Constantine, Helena, was actually the daughter of 'Old King Cole' who founded Colchester and had been ruler of the Britons. Geoffrey's claims are largely spurious – inventions designed to create a noble lineage for the British kings. He also claimed that Constantine was made 'King of the Britons' at York rather than Roman Emperor.

During the medieval period stories developed that St George had travelled to England as a tribune in the Roman army on the orders of Diocletian. He is said to have been a friend of Helena., the Empress who, it was claimed, discovered the 'True Cross' upon which Christ was crucified. This friendship, according to tradition, led her to build a church to St George in Jerusalem adjoining or near to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This story reflects the development of the cult of St George in England and his gradual identification with the country of which he would later become patron saint. Other traditions claim that St George visited the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, who was his relative, at Glastonbury. St George is also said to have travelled to the Roman garrison town of Caerleon-on-Usk in south Wales. The British chronicler Gildas describes Caerleon as having been a centre of Christianity in the early fourth century. Other traditions claim that St George and Constantine had served together under Diocletian and had been based at York.

The reputation of St George as the epitome of bravery and the champion of Christ and the poor and defenceless spread widely in the centuries following the believed date of his martyrdom. The 6th century historian Procopius records that the Emperor Justinian built a church in his honour in Armenia and, in France, Clovis (466-511 AD), the founder of the Merovingian dynasty, built a monastery in the saint's honour at Baralle. Pope Zacharias (741-752 AD) found the head of St George the martyr in a reliquary in the Lateran Palace. (The reliquary was identified by a Greek inscription that described its contents. It was to be one amongst many such reliquaries containing innumerable heads and bones of the martyr that would be discovered. Some of them may even have been authentic.) Its appearance at least attests to the veneration of the saint at this time. The English historian the Venerable Bede (673-735), records St George in his martyrology. He describes the saint as having been martyred on 23 April by the ruler Dacian (or Datian) who is called a 'Persian king'. Bede also includes a story told by Adamnan, who was Abbot of Iona in 679 AD. From a bishop called Arculf, who had been to Lydda and visited the shrine of St George, the abbot had heard of a miracle. Arculf related that a man had promised to hand over his horse to St George in exchange for the saint's protection as he travelled from Diospolis. However, the man reneged on his promise and St George made the horse wild and

unmanageable, so forcing the man to keep his vow. Arculf would also have seen the statue of Constantine in the church of St George.

The Anglo-Saxon writer Aelfric produced an account of the life of St George around the year 1000 AD. He describes the saint as being a ‘rich eorldorman, under the fierce Datianus, in the shire of Cappadocia’. A monastery dedicated to St George was founded at Thetford whilst Canute was king (1017-1035). It is also known that a church of St George was in existence during the Anglo-Saxon period in Southwark in South London. Budge reported that a church of St George had been built at Windsor before the first crusade and that the Collegiate Church at Oxford had been dedicated to St George after the Norman invasion in 1074.

It is worth noting that not all early accounts of the life of St George refer to him as a soldier. The earliest known image of the saint is a Byzantine icon of the sixth century that shows him on the right hand side of the Virgin who is accompanied on her left by St Theodore. Although both are known as soldier saints Samantha Riches has noted that St George ‘is not obviously presented as a military figure, although it has been argued that armour is discernible beneath their robes’. (Samantha Riches, *St George, Hero*, *Martyr and Myth*, p.12).

St George may or may not have been a military figure but the themes of bravery and courage linked to his stories are undeniable. In Greek, George is referred to as the ‘megalomartyr’ meaning the great martyr and, in the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches, he is known as the ‘victory bearer’ and the ‘trophy bearer’. An Irish martyrology of the ninth century also records his association with the theme of triumph. In it, a writer called Oengus describes him as ‘a sun of victories’. St George’s reputation for courage, which stemmed from the accounts of his refusal to desert his faith, would be the defining feature of the breath-taking growth of the cult that surrounded him. His powers as intercessor, defender of the faith and, as we shall see in later chapters, his abilities as a healer would win him many followers in countries as diverse as Egypt, Ethiopia, Spain, Hungary, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Syria and, of course, England.