

“God for Harry, England and Saint George”

A Research Article about Saint George at Salute Zero Five with Wargaming tips for young gamers

The ultimate quote from Shakespeare's Henry V is indeed a profound declaration; this literary battle cry was forged in time by England's greatest playwright. His choice of words is wilful, dynamic, and direct. It would stir your blood and ingrain belief in a nation's greatness. This is how many of us see Saint George, but who was he and where did it all start?

This year Salute is being held on the 23rd of April: Patron Saints day in England and many other countries around Europe and the Middle East. The tale of George of Lydda is really quite widespread: In fact you will find him venerated by Christian and Moslem alike. To research the myth of Saint George. I had to embark on a bit of a mission, no pun intended. The available text on George of Lydda has many tributaries which combine in meandering river of tales and stories that would take us on a trip into ancient mythology and ecclesiastical manipulation. The job was how to sift the recorded historical accounts and define the truth about this man. It is easy enough to understand how all the mystery came about: Very little hard fact is known about George, a lot of the reference material attributed to George is commentary on the mythology of the man. This mystery has left the door open for artistic and literary licence through the years.

Some would have us believe Saint George never existed. Some claim he is a Christianised version of older pagan legends, mixed with the story of martyrdom by Saint Michael. These claims have made it difficult to separate the information on what is, from what was. Then there are the other tales that smoulder in the pagan stories about George. In short (The dragon legends). Where did they come from you may ask? It depends on how far back you wish to go. The tale of Andromeda and Perseus from Greek mythology rings true with particular edits and soundings that would convince most of us of the pagan roots behind the tale of George & Dragon. The slaying of great beasts and dragons has always been a tale that - pound for pound - has had the listener's ear down the centuries. Many sources on this topic may be found in early Anglo-Saxon legend. Dragon tales have always been of particular favourite to the ancient narratives. But these tales are not George the man. They may have simply served to embellish the story of the Christian martyr to the pagan audience, appealing to their sense of mythology and legend. Every great hero (or in the twelfth century, "Bishop") should kill a fearsome dragon and forever be hailed as a saviour. There is also another angle from Christian eyes. Pagan beliefs were considered to be a terrible beast. To be slain without mercy, to be rooted out and vanquished as you would a demon Dragon, chased and dispatched with lance and sword. To convert people from their pagan beliefs to the way of Christ would have been compared to the slaying a great and be-devilled beast in the minds of the early Christians. This metaphor is what many Christian followers attribute to the Martyrdom of Saint George.

Well what do we know of the Man?

It has widely been accepted that George was of noble birth and was born in the ancient province of Cappadocia in modern-day Turkey (Anatolia) in the late 3rd century AD. We must not confuse him with "George of Cappadocia", Bishop of Alexandria, who was lynched by a mob for his corrupt dealings c362AD. The suggested dates of 'our' George's birth range from c263-270AD, and that he died on 23rd April c303AD. His parents were both Christians. His mother was from the city of Lydda - "Roman Diospolis" - in the ancient province of Judea in Palestine. His father was from Cappadocia, and was killed when George was just a boy. His mother left without a husband (which in the late 3rd century was a serious dilemma) decided to return to her homeland in Palestine, where she raised and educated the young George. When he was of the permitted age he joined the Roman Army, and served with the elite guard under the western Roman Augustus Diocletian (245-313AD) and over time was promoted to the rank of Tribune.

How was he Martyred?

We now focused our search on the periods of the Christian purges in 302- 303AD. Two similar accounts of a Christian soldier serving in the Roman Army, in the time of Emperor Diocletian, founder of the Tetrarchy (leadership of four) in 293AD, The soldiers defied his decree on persecution, and were summarily tortured, marched through the streets, and decapitated. There are other tales, but these are expansions of the theme or further embellishments on the two recorded accounts to suit the varying cultures that have embraced the legend of Saint George.

The first account of George is told to us in the writing of Eusebius of Caesarea, c. 322AD, (Caesarea was a town in Palestine, see map 2) Eusebius was a Christian chronicler within living memory of the Martyrdom of Saint George. He was a respected and learned man who enjoyed the favour of the Emperor Constantine the Great c272-337AD. In his writings there is a record of a man of noble birth, a high-ranking officer in the Roman army no less. The soldier was resisting the brutal campaign on the Christian population: he was arrested, questioned, tortured and humiliated, finally being murdered by decapitation outside the walls of the Ancient Bithynian City of Nicomedia, 23rd April 303AD (see map 1).

This is all we are told by Eusebius of this man; there is no mention of his name, his country of birth or place of burial. It is possible that this tale is of Saint George considering these two points. The date recorded as the death (April c303AD) of the soldier, concurs with our know date of Georges death. Secondly, the brutal statement made by Diocletian in having him beheaded outside the city walls, would have served as an act of martyrdom in the eyes of the persecuted Christians, who somehow would have recorded his slaying and final resting-place. After a short time they removed his body to its recorded burial site at Lydda (see map 2)

It is possible that this account from c322AD was the foundation of the Christian legend of Saint George. It dates from very early in the history about George, and looks to have been the original record. It is very possible that this record was adjusted over time to reflect a more spiritually motivating second account from Palestine.

In the second account we find a man serving in the Roman army and stationed in Judea. Under the Roman Caesar Galerius Maximianus c303AD, second in command too Diocletian. It was at the insistence of Galerius that the first of the celebrated edicts of persecution against the Christians took real meaning. Galerius carried out these more avidly than Diocletian himself. During these purges (c302-303AD) a man of noble birth and serving as tribune in the army was horrified by the oppression and cruelty towards the Christians and took the dangerous steps of voicing his protests directly to Diocletian...with dire consequence. He was summarily tortured and beheaded near the city of Lydda, his body left for the wild dogs and birds until it was buried with reverence by the Christian community.

These are the two most related accounts of the story of Saint George. In comparing these two accounts there is reason to believe that they are one in the same with one fundamental difference. The second account describes the martyrdom at Lydda, the place recorded as hosting the grave of George, an area in the Middle East already charged with Christian reverence from early times. Lydda is only 23 miles from Jerusalem and the church of the Holy Sepulchre where the inner sanctum is believed by many to host the body of Christ. Has there been simple change from Nicomedia to Lydda as the place of martyrdom? For what purpose would this have happened? Maybe it was to consolidate the story to a common place of worship for early pilgrims and Crusaders.

Ultimately, which ever account you favour, George's nobility did not protect him from the wrath of the Roman Emperor and the violence of the sword.

A point not well related about Saint George is that he may have personally known Constantine the Great (272-337ad) the first Christian Roman Emperor. George served in the Emperors Guard under Diocletian, and Constantine served in the court of Diocletian as a political hostage to keep his father Constantius Chlorus (250-306AD Roman Caesar in the East and one of the Tetrachy) more agreeable. There is record to confirm that Eusebius of Caesarea saw Constantine with Diocletian in Palestine in (c296AD) during a stay there. George was in his late twenties then and from the dates recording the respective births, it can be deduced that they were around the same age. Was it possible, that they might have been comrades in arms or even friends? Every tribune would have known of Constantine, son of the Eastern Roman Caesar Constantius, whilst George had a reputation for being a brave and fearless cavalry warrior and would have been honoured by all, as was the custom. The late Roman cavalry was a far cry from the auxiliaries of old and held better rank within the echelons of the army. By this time if you were a nobleman's son you would enlist in the cavalry, George was the son of a nobleman as was Constantine. This fact alone would permit the two men to meet in heir everyday activities.

Constantine went on to be proclaimed Emperor of Britannia, Gaul & Spain by the western Army on the death of his father whilst he was visiting him at York c306AD. This was just three years after the death of St. George. Is it possible that his legend first travelled to England with Constantine's entourage and was adapted in to local folklore? Was it only the Christian memory he served, when Constantine build the first church on the burial site of George at Lydda. There can be no doubt that the martyrdom of Saint George had an effect on Constantine. Is it possible that he was witness to the death of his George? In earlier Roman times the army practised a procedure of decimation. The killing of every tenth man in a military unit for failure to perform in the field. This act of ritual murder was carried out by your own comrades, the very men you served with. There is no doubt that George was beheaded by the military, not as part of decimation, but as a brutal example to the rest. How would this have affected the man who later became the first Christian Emperor?

It is recorded that Constantine embraced the Christian religion with great vigour. He built on Golgotha a beautiful basilica and church with the original edifice of the Holy Sepulchre, now hidden by a later 16th century edifice within the church of Remembrance. During his reign, he moved his Capital city from Rome to Byzantium - the then eastern Roman capital - and renamed it Constantinople. This move split the Empire in two for all time dividing the once great Roman Empire to the prosperity of the east and the final decline of the west. In time the eastern empire became the Great Byzantine Empire, defenders of the Christian faith for over a thousand years, and birth place of Saint George. There are many depictions in art of Saint George and the Dragon by famous artists such as Raphael c1483-1520, and Ucello c1395-1475. These are the images most familiar to us as we gazed upon depictions of this man.

In c700ad George was adopted as a warrior Saint in England. In c1200ad during the third Crusade, Richard Coeur de Lion (Richard the Lion Heart) is said to have seen Saint George in a vision before a great battle with the Saracens, he immediately declared Saint George patron saint of the army and went on to be victorious over his enemy.

We plan to have lots more on the history of Saint George at Salute Zero Five on exhibit W: 234. Why not pop over to the exhibit and see how deep the tale of George and the Dragon really goes in English folklore, and how he became patron Saint of England.

Wargaming with Saint George

In c296 Saint George fought in the Persian Campaign under the command of Galerius. This first campaign ended in a crushing defeat near Callinicum upon the Romans. However, in c297 this was turned around in a decisive victory over Narseh (c292-303) the king of Persia. Following up this advantage, Galerius took the city of Ctesiphon in c298, and Narseh finally sued for peace. There is no evidence that Saint George ever carried the ensign of England as his personal banner, this is a much later flag that has become the single most recognised emblem of Saint George in history.

For all you young Wargamers coming along to Salute Zero Five. There are armies to complement the above campaign and your Saint George figure. Ask the manufactures about their 28mm Byzantine ranges. One of the main suppliers of this period is Gripping Beast on the lower Ground Floor. Or maybe you may wish to game a scenario from the Crusade with George appearing on a plus 2 combat factor as a hero to battle along side Richard the Lion Heart. There are lots of skirmish scenarios you can use your miniature of Saint George to combat dragons and horrible beasts. If you are designing a gaming system it is a good idea to keep it simple.

Ideas for a Skirmish game

Use a standard movement stick to calculate the movement of men, cavalry and beasts. For example; if you use a 3 inch move as your standard movement Stick.

Movement Rates

Men or similar troop type, move 3 inches
Cavalry or similar troop type, move 6 inches
Dragons & Beasts, move 9 inches, and so on.

It will also help to use standard combat, and defence factors. Allowing each player to have a round of "To hit" combat for each turn played.

Combat Factors

Men "To hit" on 3 plus D6, and defend on 3 plus D3
Cavalry "To hit" 4 plus D6, and defend on 4 plus D3
Beasts "To hit" 5 plus D6e, and defend on 5 plus D3, and so on.

Combat Outcome

If you score higher than your opponent, push back 1 move, if you double your opponents score, remove for two turns, and mark position. Return after two moves anywhere within 4 inches of your original position, with one point removed from your defence factor

Special "Warlords" Dice D3 and D6e, Available from the South London Warlords Club Stand.

You can experiment with this simple game system and then design your own. Maybe you can add some combat factors for Heroes and Armour.

Saint George; Patron Saint of England.

By Declan Canning, Warlords