

ST. GEORGE, THE PATRON SAINT OF LEPERS

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The legends and stories about Saint George (St. Georg, St. Jörgen) are many. The Near East, as well as England, Aragon and Portugal claim him as their patron saint. Living in the third century, he belonged rather to the Christian Church as a whole than to any locality. The Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the Greek Church, the Syrian Church and even the Mohammedans revere him. Central Europe, too, has its legends concerning him.

Saint George was born in Cappadocia, of pious Christian parents. As a military man he led victorious Christian armies as far as Britain. When Diocletian began to persecute Christians, Saint George in a personal interview with the emperor strongly disapproved of the latter's attitude. He made public profession of his faith in Christ, resigned his military position, and became an ardent crusader against the persecution of the Christians. He tore in pieces the proclamation of the emperor, which decreed that Christians must recant or be killed and which had been openly posted for public inspection. This enraged the emperor against him and he was arrested. After all kinds of tortures, in spite of which he would not deny his faith in Christ or uphold the emperor in his persecution, he was finally put to death at Neocomedia on the 23rd of April, 303 A. D.

Although originally buried at Lydda, his remains are said to have been carried later to the French village of La Maine, where many miracles are said to have been performed by means of them. Others, again, claim that his bones were taken to the Holy Land. More than one George claims this martyr's death, while several legends attributed to this martyr do not mention the name of George. As early as 500 A. D. many legends had grouped about this name. All are difficult to prove historically.

An old German picture from the Middle Ages illustrates the story of St. George killing a dragon with a spear. This story is found in the Golden Legend by Jacobus de Voragine, and resembles a Christianized form of the ancient legend of Perseus slaying the

sea monster to save Andromeda, or of the sun god as the conqueror of darkness. More recent crusaders against leprosy have revived the legend and refer to St. George as fighting leprosy, the dragon destroying the health of the Middle Ages. This idea has some historic significance, since in that period St. George was honored already as the patron saint of lepers, and an order named after him, the Knights of St. George, took much interest during the Middle Ages in nursing lepers.

The Second International Leprosy Conference, held in 1909 at Bergen, Norway, under the secretarial supervision of Dr. H. P. Lie, used the old legend in its emblem, and in 1932 the International Leprosy Association adopted a slightly modified form of this emblem as that of the new organization. Thus we see legends live on, modifying their forms as time and circumstances demand.



TEX-FIG. 1. Saint-George, from an old German picture.

REFERENCES

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- (2) DER RITTER. *St. Georgus des Geschichete, Legende, und Kunst. Zeitschr. f. Wissensch. Theol.* 30 (1887) Heft 1.
- (3) *Encyclopedia Britannica*, article on Knighthood.