



This work has been submitted to NECTAR, the  
**Northampton Electronic Collection of Theses and  
Research.**

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/4082/>

**Creator(s):** Mackley, J.

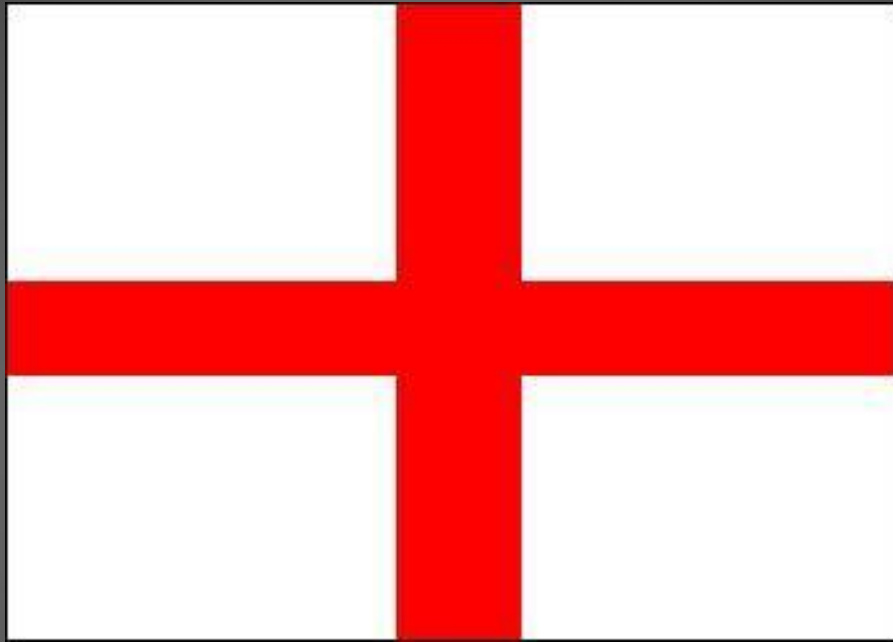
**Title:** The Pagan Heritage of St George

**Date:** 2011

**Originally presented to:** International Medieval Congress (IMC),  
University of Leeds, 11-14 July 2011

**Conference URL:** <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/ims/imc/imc2011.html>

**Example citation:** Mackley, J. (2011) The pagan heritage of St George.  
Paper presented to: *International Medieval Congress (IMC), University of  
Leeds, 11-14 July 2011.*



# The Pagan Heritage of St George



J.S. Mackley

This paper considers the argument that St George is a vague saint who should not have achieved such an importance status and his survival must be because his name has been attached to an older tradition. Thus the paper follows the roots of traditions associated with St George through the writings of religion and mythology, before tracing them down through English folklore to some surprising literary descendants.

IMC LEEDS 13 JULY 2011

**[PPT#2]**The name of St George is synonymous with all the virtues of Englishness – at least, when he's mentioned *in* England, because he is also Patron saint of other countries and states including Ethiopia, Portugal, Malta and Georgia, as well as cities including Barcelona, Antioch and Istanbul. The Cross of St George still has the power to unite England, no matter how it has been misappropriated**[ADV]**. In this paper, I want to look at the legend of St George and at possible pagan and pre-Christian sources for the legend, as well as some of the other literary descendants that may be associated with him.

**[PPT#3]**The legend of St George and the Dragon, as it appears in Jacobus de Voragine's, *Golden Legend* is a far cry from the fourth century martyrdom legend, for which St George was originally famous. In this version of the story, George, a Christian soldier from Cappadocia in Roman-occupied Palestine (present day Turkey), is persecuted by the Emperor Dardanius. He suffers terrible tortures and even three deaths but is resurrected. Shortly before his martyrdom, George converts the emperor's wife, Alexandra, and she is also saved. This part of the story was tacked onto the conflict with the dragon in *The Golden Legend*.

**[PPT#4]**However, the acts of the noble knight became the embodiment of chivalry, and, with the support of Edward III, George fought off two Royal saints for national patronage, Edmund the Martyr and Edward the Confessor, as well as English saints who had performed duties and sacrifices, for example St Augustine, who had brought Christianity to England; St Cuthbert of Lindesfarne who was an important monastic leader; or, like St Alban, had been martyred on English soil.

The story of the Christian knight saving the maiden and slaying the dragon may have been brought to England by crusaders who spliced the story of Minos, who demanded tribute of seven youths and seven maidens to feed to the Minotaur in the labyrinth (Ovid 176), with the

**[PPT#5]**story of Perseus saving Andromeda from the sea creature (Ovid 93–96). Perseus and the historical St George are both linked to Lydda in Palestine. However, as Marcus argues, 'analogy is no proof of evolution' (5), and it is a long time before a link is made between the Christian Martyr and the knight who vanquished the dragon. **[PPT#6]**The motif of overcoming the monster goes further back to, for example, the Mesopotamian hero Marduk who defeated the dragon Tiamat. However, while the symbolic precedents might be earlier, the story of George and the Dragon is a product of the Middle Ages (Good 41).

**[PPT#7]**In the nineteenth century, Sir E A Wallis Budge discovered an epithet for the cruel Pagan ruler was 'the dragon of the abyss' and so George did indeed save the princess from 'the dragon'; so, the whole episode was not so much allegorical as hyperbolic as an evil man was elevated to monstrous dragon in a story reminiscent of St Michael defeating the devil in the form of a dragon. However, Budge was unable to accept the details as they stood. He argues the accepted date of 303AD was incorrect and the events could have taken place some 50 years earlier during a previous persecution, which would allow an appropriate passage of time for the legends to become established by the time of Diocletian (Budge 1930 47).

**[PPT#8]** He suggests the martyrdom legend of St George is based on the actions of a particular figure: perhaps Eusebius of Caesarea's description in 332AD of a 'well-known [person]' who was tortured after tearing down the edict outlawing Christianity, and the perpetrator's subsequent execution, which suggested the *manner* of St George's martyrdom rather than being a direct report (Budge 1888 xxix–xxx; Eusebius 261).

However, Budge was also unable to correlate a minor, 'obscure' saint, with the prominence leading to national patronage unless it was a 'coincidence' of the feast day with certain 'immemorial observances of the peoples whom the devotion [of St George] was first propagated' (Budge 1888 vii; Thurston 27; Marcus 27). Thus, there may well have been a martyr, but the name of 'George' has been attached to a separate character who suffered under Dardianus, however, this legend was 'grafted' onto 'legends of gods and heroes and supernatural beings and much of the original form of the legend... was destroyed in the process' (Budge 1930 56). The name George may well be a corruption of an ancient god of hero, and details of *his* life have been inherited by the now-Christian saint (Budge 1930 42). Thus, George draws parallels other pre-Christian sources, and it is to these I now turn.

**[PPT#9]** St George shares his feast day with one of the oldest gods of the Middle East, known as *Al-Khidr* (also *El Khudr* and *Jiryis Baqiya*). St George is a translation of *Mar Gîyôrgîs*, and *Jiryis Baqiya* translates as 'George, the resurrected one' (Walker and Uysal 287). Commentators of the Koran describe Al-Khidr as one of the prophets, or as a guide for those who seek God. Al-Khidr is represented as a great soldier whom God sent to convert a Pagan king of *El Mauçil* (Mosil in Iraq); during his preaching, he is put to death on three occasions, but is restored to life (Hole 109–10; Baring-Gould 97). Consequently, as Budge argues, if 'St George was three parts God and one part man', as Al-Khidr was, then the four killings would be understandable. Thus we see similarities between the reputation of Al-Khidr and the deeds of St George. Likewise, the names correspond: Jacobus de Voragine posits that the name 'George' means 'earth worker', then as Al-Khidr is translated as 'The Green One', it suggests *his* links with the vegetation rites. However, Al-Khidr is also linked with the Greek sea deity, Glaucos, and the root of the story is Greek, rather than Muslim (Bussell 281).

**[PPT#10]** Ovid's *Metamorphoses* describes how Glaucos, a fisherman, discovered a herb that brought a fish back to life. Eating the herb himself, Glaucos became immortal, but he grew fins and a fish's tail (Ovid 322–27) and the image parallels the Philistines fertility god, Dagon who was half-man/half fish. **[PPT#11]** This method of immortality corresponds with the Mesopotamian myth of Ut-napishtim in the epic of Gilgamesh. In a parallel to the story of Noah, Ut-napishtim was a survivor of the Great Deluge with whom Gilgamesh discusses the secret of immortality. Ut-napishtim describes a plant that grows at the bottom of the ocean which would renew Gilgamesh's youth. Although Gilgamesh succeeds in retrieving the plant, it is stolen by a serpent as he bathes. The serpent is reborn and sheds its skin (Dalley 118).

**[PPT#12]**The story of rejuvenation is also echoed in the Greek *Romance of Alexander* written around the second century BC. Here, Alexander's cook, named Andreas, washes dried fish in water from a spring: the fish comes to life. The cook also drinks the water. Envyng his immortality, Alexander laments that 'it was not fated for me to drink from the spring of immortality which gives life to what is dead'. The cook is thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck: 'thereupon he became a spirit himself and went away to live in a corner of the sea' (Pseudo-Callisthenes 121-2). The Water of Life motif appears at the end of the dragon legend, represented by the healing spring in the church, while the water of Eternal Life is baptism. Furthermore, as well as the parallel with rejuvenation through nature, we also see the recurring motif of the Pagan ruler who orders the execution of the hero, which is followed by his resurrection, or a supernatural prolongation of the hero's life. The Khidr mythology deals with these traditions by explaining that Khidr's soul transferred to all of these characters (and others) through metempsychosis, the transmigration of the soul.

**[PPT#13]**There is also a tradition of linking Al-Khidr with Elijah, the prophet of the Kingdom of Israel in the Book of Kings. Khidr's name in Islam is *Ilyas*, which is the Turkish form of Elijah (Walker and Uysal 288). So, the deathless being becomes an eternal prophet. Because of Elijah's transcendence into heaven, he is regarded as a soul which has not passed through death.<sup>1</sup>

Hanauer describes how there is a place of Al-Khidr worship on the northern slope of Mount Carmel in northern Israel (48). Currently, this is a place where pilgrims travel in search of physical and mental healing, and is associated with Al-Khidr and the Fountain of Youth. However, in the Old Testament, Elijah goes to the mountain, rebuilds a ruined altar to God (1 Kings 18:32), and then defeats the prophets of Baal by calling down fire from Heaven (v.38). In a parallel to this story, St George calls down fire to kill the governors and the pagans before his execution.

The motifs of deaths and resurrections, shown by St George and Elijah (who will come again), are repeated in the mythologies of gods and heroes. In the tenth century, Muslims recognised elements of the St George legend in the mythology surrounding the Mesopotamian vegetation god Tammuz (Anderson 29). **[PPT#14]**Other Life-death-rebirth deities include: the Egyptian Osiris; the Greek Dionysius; the Aztec Quetzalcoatl; the Welsh and Irish legends of Bran; the Norse Baldr; and Odin, who became the Anglo-Saxon Woden; the Saxon Fertility Goddess Eostre; the Celtic Cernunnos; and even King Arthur, the Once and Future King. We can also match the traditions and rituals associated with these mythologies with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which bear similarities with the cult of Mithras (including the celebration of the Virgin birth of the saviour at the winter solstice, 25 December). Frazer

---

<sup>1</sup> The identification of Khidr with Elijah presented a problem as the mythology developed: Elijah is mentioned by name in the *Koran* (Book VI, 85 and XXXVII 123-30). Thus, it became necessary to create a character to become the close companion of Khidr/Elijah: this character became Elisha (Bussell 282).

argues that these stories form part of a much larger ritual process intended to personify the conflict between Winter and Spring and to restore fertility to the land (181).

**[PPT#15]** The representation of the conflict between the seasons and the supplication for the season's fertility is personified in many aspects of English Folklore. In *Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Green Knight is decapitated in a New Year game; however, he regenerates through the spring to complete his challenge to Gawain. The decapitation of the Green Knight may be a parallel with the beheading of St George. For the Green Knight the decapitation is about vegetation and renewal; for St George his beheading is his martyrdom, but he can expect to rise again in Heaven. The Green Knight might be considered a later incarnation of Khidr, a personification of the vegetation god; however, he enters the court of King Arthur, who we have seen is *also* an example of the dying and rising god. In effect, in this version of the legend, King Arthur and the Green Knight represent the tradition of brothers in conflict for supremacy, like the conflict between Cain and Abel. **[PPT#16]** It is also seen in the Mummer's play where the Turkish Knight (pagan) kills St George (Christian); however, as St George came from Cappadocia, he is *also* the "Turkish Knight". St George is then resurrected by the doctor, who represents either the divine, or the regeneration of the seasons (Weston 53).

The resuscitation during torture can be seen as a form of renewal, and this parallels Jesus's death and resurrection. Both of these are also seen in the rituals of the Anglo-Saxon fertility goddess Eostre, suggesting all are associated with nature symbolism representing death and renewal. Frazer describes how rituals were performed on St George's Day to ensure fertility, either for the crops or for the women. A sacrifice is necessary so the divine spirit in him might be transferred to the successor (Frazer 157; Weston XXVII). This may once have been a literal human sacrifice. The symbolic killing of the dragon is a movement away from the human sacrifices, those of pagan times, as well as those seen in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Chambers argues monsters dwelling in or near water suggests a bloodless sacrifice by drowning, although it could be argued that, as the texts are reworked by Christian hagiographers, the water is symbolic of baptism (138).

The Holly branch carried by the Green Knight represents the branch carried by Saturn, the Roman Agricultural god. The feast of Saturnalia is held for the winter solstice and extended to incorporate 17-23 December. Thus, the 'defeat' of the Green Knight by Gawain, denotes the defeat of the Winter by the Summer so the seasons can progress towards Spring.

**[PPT#17]** This cycle of the seasons is also shown in the conflict between the Holly King (Saturn) and the Oak King (Jupiter). According to tradition, the Holly King rules nature through the dark half of the year, from the Midsummer solstice until Midwinter, thus, the two kings are light and dark aspects of the complete identity (Broadhurst 37). The defeated king rests at *Caer Arianrhod* until the next battle. The Oak King is the Lord of the Greenwood, who mates at Beltane, identifying him as a symbol of light and fertility. Beltane is now secularised as the May Day celebrations.

Given St George's association with the 'green one', and that he is considered Patron Saint of farmers with a feast day in the planting season of spring, then it is a logical progression to see him as a pre-Christian form of a fertility icon in the foliate head that one sees in Churches. **[PPT#18]** Writing about the Green Man (with whom the Green Knight is often identified), Lady Raglan ties together various characters from English folklore including Robin Hood and the King of the May (Raglan 50), although Marcangelo objects to the association of the two, observing there were *two* plays and 'the play of Robin Hood was a different performance from that of King of May' (Marcangelo 180). However, that is not to say the two plays did not have a common root as Withington observes 'a great many cross-influences must exist' (Withington I 74). However, if Robin Hood represents the King of the May, then Marian becomes the May Queen who is crowned then sacrificed to Maia, the Roman Goddess of the Spring. The sacrifice occurs at the Maypole (itself a fertility symbol), as a parallel to the sacrifice in the St George legend (Ordish 329; Reader Digest Association 38).<sup>2</sup> Likewise, if we consider St George's thematic ancestry is with Al-Khidr, the 'Green One', then Robin Hood shares this ancestry as a representation of the Oak King or the May King who has evolved into the spirit of the Greenwood and become human.<sup>3</sup> Here, the cosmic order addressed by the conflict between winter and spring is symbolised by the redistribution of wealth in the Robin Hood legends which serve to create a sense of balance between the rich and the poor.

In conclusion, although we must take care not to follow analogy as evidence of evolution, there are themes that suggest that the 'history' of St George is based upon a conglomerate of stories that have been grafted onto pre-existing legends, or, at least, motifs. The martyrdom of St George shares similarities with Al-Khidr, the 'Green One', who, in turn, is associated with the Greek Sea God, Glaucos, as well as the cook in the *Romance of Alexander*, the Old Testament prophet, Elijah and Ut-napishtim in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, all of which point of the trope of life-death-resurrection deities across many mythologies.

**[PPT#19]** These legends have developed to be incorporated into English culture so they became more relevant to each successive audience. The principal themes of the story of St George also echo through the tales of other popular folk heroes including Robin Hood and King Arthur. Although, if there was an historical figure of St George, it was unlikely he ever came to England, but this is not a disadvantage: he was not linked with a specific location in England, and so he became a symbol for all of England.

---

<sup>2</sup> This was before the Julian calendar changed to the Gregorian calendar in 1752 and the days moved forward by 11 days (from 2 September to 14 September), consequently "old" St George's Day was (seasonally) the time of 4 May, which would have been the middle of the spring celebrations (Stewart 66; Broadhurst 29).

<sup>3</sup> The names Robin and Marion were traditionally associated with a shepherd lover and his lady in Medieval French ballads, particularly *Le Jeu du berger et de la bergère* by Adam de la Halle (Harris 103).