

Saint George in Folk and Ecclesiastical Traditions of Greece

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SAINT GEORGE IS ONE OF THE MOST CELEBRATED SAINTS IN THE Greek Orthodox tradition; in fact, he takes second place in popularity only to the Panagia (Virgin Mary). The number of churches and chapels consecrated in his honor, the number of children named after him, and the festivals observed in his memory throughout the Greek world bear clear testimony to his preeminent popularity. To the Church, the festivals associated with Saint George are occasions to commemorate him and events associated with him, e.g., his martyrdom and miracles performed while he was alive or after his death. In the ecclesiastical tradition, the Saint figures as a champion of the Christian faith as well as an example of piety and unconditional devotion to the will of God.

The commemoration of Saint George is not, however, limited to the religious history and practice of the Greek Orthodox Church; it survives in the tradition and folklore of the country as well. To the people the Saint's festivals offer an opportunity not only to participate in the special liturgical observances of the Church but, more importantly, to honor the Saint by ways of thought and action that are remarkably personal, and that have little and sometimes no connection with ecclesiastical doctrine. Thus, in the folk tradition Saint George is remembered not so much for his piety or martyrdom, as for his service to the community. The honors he receives from the people, be they members of the agricultural, pastoral, or urban communities, appear to base his popularity on the principle of "serviceability," or of supernatural aid provided to individuals or entire communities in distress.

In this study I intend to investigate the nature of Saint George's role as a provider of supernatural aid, and to trace the process by which he entered the realm of folklore. By examining early accounts of his life and martyrdom, ecclesiastical *encomia* and *martyria*, Byzantine sources, and current practices in Modern Greek folklore, I hope to clarify the Saint's function. This can, I believe, be established through a comparison of the ecclesiastical and folkloric evidence for the "cult" of Saint George with certain key elements of heroic action in the

mythologies of ancient Greece, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India. My focus will lie, in particular, on the function of dragon slaying, and on its relation to fertility or regeneration in the ritual act of freeing the vital water of rivers and springs.

In two fifth-century ecclesiastical *encomia* on Saint George attributed to Theodotos, Bishop of Ankyra and to Theodosios, Bishop of Jerusalem, it is said that the Saint was born of noble Christian parents in Melitene, a city in Cappadocia.¹ In these texts, Lydda or Diospolis, a city in Palestine, is also referred to as the ancient home of his family, where the Saint was born and where, by his own request, he was buried. The accounts also suggest that Saint George suffered martyrdom in the city of Tyre in the early fourth century probably, though it is not quite certain, during the persecution launched by the Emperor Diocletian. In the year 303, during his visit to Nikomedia, the Emperor ordered all Christians who would not conform to paganism to be executed.² In his account of the Emperor's persecution, Eusebios³ states that the first to be executed was a certain Christian of high rank who boldly tore down the edict from where it was posted and destroyed it in the presence of government officials and a multitude of people. This young man was arrested, and after other numerous and cruel tortures, was roasted to death. Eusebios does not give the name of the young man and the governor who ordered his execution. In Theodotos' and Theodosios' accounts which have survived in Coptic translations and which were based on earlier Greek *encomia* and *martyria*,⁴ a similar and more detailed story is told. The name of the young noble Christian was George, a tribune in the Roman army, serving in Cappadocia or Palestine; and the man who ordered his execution was Dadianos, governor

¹For the birth of Saint George and accounts of his life and martyrdom in Coptic, Ethiopic, and Syriac texts with translations and summaries, see E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Martyrdom and Miracles of Saint George of Cappadocia* (London, 1888); idem, *The History of George of Lydda* (London, 1930); see also K. Krumbacher, *Der heilige Georg in der griechischen ublieferung*, ed. A. Ehrhard (Abhandlungen der koniglich Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-philologische und historische Klasse 25, 3, Munich, 1911); F. Halkin, ed., *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*, 3rd ed. (Brussels, 1957) 1, nos. 669y ff. For a list of Greek writers on Saint George, see Fabricius, *Bibliotheca Graeca* 9, 79, 80.

²According to E. Gibbon, the man who urged Diocletian to issue his edicts of persecution against the Christians was Galerius, the emperor's associate. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York, 1962), 1, p. 285.

³Eusebios, *Hist. Eccles.* 8, 5; see also Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall*, p. 286f.

⁴The earliest account of Saint George's martyrdom is attributed to a certain Pasikrates who claimed to have been the Saint's servant and an eyewitness to his execution. A summary of his account has survived in Coptic and Arabic texts. Pasikrates' account was also known to Theodosios and Theodotos who based their *encomia* and *martyria* on his narratives.

or King of Persia or Anatolia.⁵ According to the narratives in these texts, Saint George was tortured for seven years at Tyre where he also met his death. Pasikrates, the accounts continue, took the body and transported it by ship to Joppa and from there to Lydda where the Saint was buried in the house where he had lived. On the burial site a shrine was built where it was believed the Saint worked extraordinary miracles. Here, within a comparatively short period of time, his cult flourished and spread into Egypt, Ethiopia, and across Anatolia into Europe.⁶

In the absence of adequate historical documentation, we cannot easily determine whether Saint George was the same young man who, in Eusebios' account, tore down the imperial edict and who subsequently suffered a cruel death on account of his bold defiance and open denunciation of paganism. If he was, that would explain the widespread honors the early Church paid to him in the East shortly after his death. Such a daring act and the subsequent courage with which he is said to have confronted humiliation, tortures, and death left a deep and lasting impression upon the minds of all who saw or heard of it.

Soon after his death, the life of Saint George became legend. In several popular versions of his life and martyrdom preserved in the *Acta* of Saint George, there are certain details so incredible and fantastic that they can only be attributed to the composer's imagination and fervent faith. Real incidents of the Saint's life have been exaggerated or altered by the narrators, be they pious pilgrims or skillful storytellers, who, anxious to glorify him, filled gaps in the history of the Saint with details that were suitable to them. There are stories where the origin, action, and attributes of Saint George are so confused with fantasy and fable that his real history is lost forever. In these tales, popular imagination has assigned to him tortures and multiple deaths which he could never have endured and have invested him with powers which he could not have possessed.⁷ In the early accounts, the Saint appears as a martyr who suffered tortures and death for his faith. But in the centuries

⁵Peter Heylyn identifies Dadianos, or Dacianos, with Galerius, who was born in Dacia, and who succeeded Diocletian. *The History of That Most Famous Saynt and Souldier of Christ Jesus, S. George of Cappadocia* (London, 1633), p. 173.

⁶See Hippolyte Delehaye, *Legendes Grecques des Saints Militaires* (Paris, 1909), p. 45ff; for Byzantine sources regarding earlier dates for the Saint's death, see D. Balboni, "Giorgio," *Bibliotheca Santorum* 6 (1965) p. 516; cf. F. Cumont, "La plus ancienne legende de Saint Georges," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 114 (1936) pp. 6-41.

⁷"He has been universally regarded as a helper of the poor and needy, a defender of the weak against the strong, a mediator between God and man, a benefactor of all mankind, a co-regent of the Holy Trinity in heaven and, in short, the traditions of Saint George have made him to usurp all the power possessed by man and beast upon earth, and the omniscience and omnipotence of God in heaven," Budge, *The Martyrdom and Miracles*, pp. xxxii-xxxiii. See also J. B. Aufhauser, *Miracula S. Georgii*, *Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana* (Leipzig, 1913).

following his death, something else happens: various aspects of Saint George's personality and attributes become part of the legend which suggest little or no connection with the historical person behind the name. These same aspects show striking similarities in function with those traditionally assigned to heroes and divinities in pre-Christian times. As Christianity assumed ascendancy over paganism, it became necessary, one can imagine, to ascribe to a Christian champion the attributes not of a martyr or a victim but of a hero or a victor. Since there are no specific heroic acts attributed to Saint George in the early legends, it seems likely that various acts and attributes of pagan heroes were ascribed to Saint George in order to provide him with the necessary heroic stature. His victory over the dragon is chief among these. The legend by which the Saint is best known throughout Christendom strikes me as the critical action in which to test the theory that the figure of Saint George as he is honored to this day in Greece emerged not only from a process of legendary accretion, but from a process of assimilation, transformation, and adaptation of pre-Christian traditions.

According to a thirteenth-century version of the legend, related in Jacques de Voragine's *Golden Legend*,⁸ Saint George's combat with the dragon took place in the city of Selene in Libya⁹ where the Saint came on his way to join his legion in Palestine. The inhabitants of the city were in great distress because a monstrous and frightful dragon had taken its abode in a neighboring lake, devastating the countryside, devouring the flocks and herds, and terrorizing the people who, in fear for their lives, had taken refuge within the city's walls. In their effort to prevent any further destruction, the people provided the monster with two sheep every day, and when the sheep were exhausted, children by lot were offered to it. After some time, the lot fell upon the King's daughter. In his despair, the King offered all his gold and treasures and even half of his kingdom to redeem her. His offer, however,

⁸Jacques de Voragine, *The Golden Legend* ed. F. S. Ellis (Temple Classics, 1927). For other versions of the legend of Saint George and the dragon, see Jon B. Aufhauser, *Das Drachenwunder des heiligen Georg in der Griechischen und Latinischen Ueberlieferung* (Leipzig, 1911); C. S. Hubst, *St. George of Cappadocia* (London, 1909). For the legend in Modern Greek folktales, see R. M. Dawkins, *Modern Greek Folktales* (Oxford, 1953); idem, *More Greek Folktales* (Oxford, 1955). See also Joseph Fontenrose, *Python. A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origins* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1959) pp. 515-20; Anna Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art* (Cambridge, 1890), 2, pp. 4-18. For representations of Saint George in art, see J. B. Aufhauser, *Das Drachenwunder*, pls. 4-7; Budge, *George of Lydda*, pls. 1-3, 6-12; D. Talbot Rice, *The Icons of Cyprus* (London, 1937), pls. 32-33; P. Lucchesi, "Georg-Ostkirche," *Lexicon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. E. Kirchbaum and W. Braunfels (Rome:Frieberg im Br., 1974), 6, pp. 365-73.

⁹In other versions of the legend cited by Aufhauser, the combat took place in Cappadocia or Palestine. Aufhauser, *Das Drachenwunder*, pp. 59, 108, 114, 120, 182, and 187.

inspired no one to rescue her from the dragon. Moreover, under pressure from his people to keep his own bargain, the King was forced to accept his daughter's lot. Dressed as a bride, the princess was led to the lake and left alone to wait for the dragon's coming. There, riding on his horse, Saint George found her weeping. Fearing for his safety, the princess told him to go away. Instead Saint George spurred toward the dragon that had emerged from its lair. After a long and terrible combat, the Saint pinned the dragon to the ground with his lance. Instead of killing it, however, he tied the princess' corded belt around its neck. Holding the other end of the cord, the girl led the dragon to the city. Seeing that the monster was still alive, the people fled in panic. Saint George, however, calmed them by promising to slay the monster if they and their King would embrace Christianity. More than fifteen thousand people, we are told, were baptized that day, while the King promised to cease his persecution against Christians, honor their priests, and maintain the churches. Then Saint George killed the dragon and rode away to Palestine. The people, the narrative concludes, built a shrine to the Saint in their city and established annual festivals in his honor.

The story comes relatively late in the Saint's tradition, for in the written versions that have survived, none can be traced farther back than the twelfth century. It is possible, however, that a tale which narrated the Saint's victorious combat with the dragon existed in the oral tradition before it appeared in written form in the prologue to a twelfth-century version of the Saint's martyrdom.¹⁰ In the early accounts of the life of Saint George, the earliest of which goes back to the fifth century, we find no reference to the Saint's encounter with a "literal dragon"; nevertheless, it may be possible to trace the origin of the legend there. In the accounts, King Dadianos, the chief persecutor of the Saint and Christianity, is the embodiment of evil, and is often called serpent of the abyss or simply dragon.¹¹ The accounts also suggest that in Saint George's opposition to Dadianos, the Church saw its own struggles

¹⁰Christina Hole, *Saints in Folklore* (New York, 1965), p. 18. In this early version of the tale, the Saint lacks heroic qualities. There is no actual combat and the Saint's victory over the dragon is attributed to his faith rather than to his human skills and courage. It is in the thirteenth-century version, related in Jacques de Voragine's *Golden Legend* that we see the Saint in all his heroic glory. It is in this form that the legend survived and is remembered by most Christians.

¹¹See Revelation 12.7-9, "And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought against his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world; he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him." It is possible that the biblical tradition and the legend of Saint Michael influenced the hagiographers in attributing similar qualities to Saint George.

to discredit paganism and establish Christianity as the true religion and the new order of light that Christ brought to a world of chaos, disorder, and darkness. Appropriately, the Coptic texts often refer to Saint George as the "sun of truth and the glorious star betwixt heaven and earth"; he is a true soldier in the army of Christ who wages an unending combat against Satan, the biblical dragon of darkness.¹² The *Golden Legend* represents the dragon over which the Saint prevailed as evil-minded and pagan. In view of this, it is possible that the early accounts of Saint George's life and martyrdom contributed to the Saint's role as a dragon slayer and to the entry of the combat myth into his tradition.

Dragon slaying tales are favorite stories among almost all peoples and ages. The mythologies of the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Indians, and Greeks are filled with folktales and legends of gods and heroes who encounter and defeat dragons. In these tales, the dragons are often identified with the primeval forces of evil and chaos and are depicted as gigantic and monstrous beings, often in the form of serpents. Opposed to these demons of disorder is a hero/god, champion of order, whose battle could not be won until chaos was defeated. Thus the victorious god would become dragon slayer and creator in the same act.¹³

In the Greek tradition, perhaps Apollo, Herakles, and Perseus are the best known of Greek slayers of monsters. With the rise of Christianity, the heroic feat was transferred to the saints, one of which, and perhaps the best known, was Saint George.¹⁴ The Saint's association with the dragon is due, in all probability, to the grafting of this old popular myth onto the life of the Saint. While the legend parallels Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Indic variants, certain details in Saint George's tale correspond closer in theme and locale to the Greek, especially to the Perseus legend.¹⁵

In the early versions of the combat, it was in the city of Joppa¹⁶ on the coast of Palestine that the hero Perseus killed the sea-monster, or *ketos* as it was usually called by the Greeks. On his way home to deliver the head of the Gorgon Medusa to King Polydektes, Perseus

¹²In his reference to the Syriac version of the Saint's martyrdom, Budge states: "The 'dragon' mentioned in the early portion of the narrative is no other than Dadhyanos, who is called 'Hevya Garsa,' i.e., 'Serpent Viper,' Budge, *George of Lydda*, pp. 53, 34.

¹³For a detailed treatment of the subject, see J. Fontenrose, *Python*, p. 219.

¹⁴Other Saints invested with similar qualities were Saint Mercurios, Saint Sisinios, Saint Demetrios, and Saint Theodore. The former two were regarded highly among the Copts in Egypt.

¹⁵In a Bosnian folksong, the scene of Saint George's combat with the dragon is placed in Troy; thus the tale corresponds closer to the Herakles-Hesione legend. See E. S. Hartland, *The Legend of Perseus: A Study of Tradition in Story, Custom and Belief* (London, 1894), p. 41.

¹⁶Strabo, *Geographica* 1.2.35, 42f., 16.2.28, 759; Pomponius Mela, *De Situ Orbis* 1.11; Plynii, *Natural History* 5.12.69, 6.29.182, 9.5.11; Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 4.35.9. Ethiopia and Libya as the scene of Perseus' combat with the dragon are not mentioned in any sources earlier than Euripides' *Andromeda*.

came to the city of Joppa where he saw Andromeda chained to a rock. She was the daughter of Kepheus, King of Joppa or of all Syria and his wife Kassiopeia who, according to the myth, had offended certain sea-nymphs by boasting of her beauty. To punish the queen for her arrogance, the god Poseidon sent a sea-monster which destroyed the land and the people. According to Apollodoros,¹⁷ it was prophesied that the troubles would come to an end if the princess were offered as a sacrifice to the sea-monster. Forced by the prophecy and the people, Kepheus had his daughter chained out on the rocks to be devoured by the monster. The sight of the chained girl stirred feelings of pity and love in Perseus, who offered to kill the monster and rescue the princess if he might marry her. The king consented and Perseus, after a long and furious combat, killed the sea-monster and married Andromeda.

The legend of Saint George, in some details at least, is remarkably similar to the Perseus tale. These details include the presence of the dragon/*ketos* as an instrument of god's punishment to the king of the city and its inhabitants, the exposed bride-princess as a sacrificial victim, the hero/saint's fierce combat with the dragon on the shores of a lake or sea, somewhere in Palestine, and finally the killing of the dragon and the subsequent rescue of the princess.¹⁸ Of course, the mere existence of similarities and parallels between the two tales does not prove direct survival of the pagan legend into Christian tradition, or that Saint George is Perseus in disguise, as some scholars have suggested.¹⁹ The similarities do suggest, however, pagan influences, assimilations, and/or transformations of pre-Christian tradition into the history of Saint George. Other important elements that may suggest similar pagan influences are found in the folk tradition of Modern Greece. Though the versions of Saint George's legend narrated in the folktales of the country are more recent than those found in various manuscripts of the Middle Ages and thus subject to later influences, there persists an old and interesting feature that can be traced far back into the combat myths of ancient Greece, the Near East, and India. That is the folk motif of the withholding of the waters. In a folktale from Karpathos²⁰ the dragon Saint George fought was a huge snake that had taken possession of the village spring or well, the only source of water for its people and animals. The only way the villagers could

¹⁷Apollodoros, *Bibliotheca* 2. 43, 44.

¹⁸Unlike Perseus, in the Christian version of the tale, the hero, being a Saint, cannot marry the rescued princess. The marriage motif, however, has survived in modern Greek folktales and rituals. There the saint either wins the girl and rides away with her or he finds a suitable substitute, usually a noble young man, whom the princess marries. See Dawkins, *More Greek Folktales*, pp. 126-28.

¹⁹See Hartland, *The Legend of Perseus*, p. 38.

²⁰See Dawkins, *More Greek Folktales*, pp. 123-28. Aufhauser, *Das Drachenwunder*, pp. 126, 129.

get their daily supply of water was to sacrifice a child, chosen by lot, to the monster/serpent. The lot fell on the King's daughter. As the serpent was approaching its victim, the Saint appeared riding on his horse. After a long fight, he killed the snake, rescued the princess, restored the water to the villagers and rode away. In a different version,²¹ the Saint did not kill the serpent; rather, he forced it back into its subterranean lair which he sealed with a heavy stone.

In another Modern Greek version of the legend, the withholding and freeing of water is such an important part in the Saint's combat with the serpent that it is dramatized in a unique festival observed annually on Saint George's Day, usually April 23rd, in the village of Neo Souli in Northern Greece near the city of Serres. A young man crudely dressed as Saint George rides his white horse through the celebrating crowd to the Saint's chapel near a fountain whose waters the villagers have blocked the day before. In accordance with the local version, a huge serpent/dragon guards the fountain and keeps the water from flowing freely into the village and the fields. Upon arriving at the fountain and with a few strokes of his lance, "Saint George" kills the snake and subsequently releases the waters by removing the blocks. He then rides back to the village square where the "princess" has been waiting her rescue. The young man lifts her onto his horse and together they ride away, the beautiful maid and her handsome young saint, a strange romantic couple that the ecclesiastical version of the tale has ignored.

The hero's victory over the dragon and his subsequent release of the life-giving waters figure in the myths and legends of many cultures. In the Near Eastern, Egyptian, Greek, and Indian traditions, they appear conspicuously in the combat myths of Marduk and Tiamat, Horus and Set/Apep, Apollo and Python, and Indra and Vritra. In these tales, the monster is depicted as a serpent or serpent-like dragon, female or male, who takes possession of springs, rivers, lakes, or wells. It is evil-minded and brings disaster upon people, animals, and crops by attacking them or by not allowing the waters to flow freely. Furthermore, the dragon is associated and often identified with the primeval chthonic forces of chaos and disorder. In his effort to free the vital waters, a young god or hero must battle against the dragon. The struggle often results in the hero's symbolic or actual death, only to be followed by his revival. Furthermore, the heroic feat is often associated not only with restoration of life, but also with a new religious or socio-political order which the hero establishes. Thus, Marduk, Horus, Indra, Apollo, and Saint George figure not only as dragon slayers and spirits of

²¹J. C. Lawson, *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1910), p. 261.

regeneration, but also as representatives of a new social and religious order.

In the ancient Greek tradition, the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (c. 7th cen. B.C.) provides the earliest known literary reference to the dragon and its relation to the springs. The Hymn relates that soon after his birth on Delos, Apollo wandered over the sea and land looking for a suitable place to establish his shrine. His search brought him to Mount Parnassos on the site of Delphi where he laid the foundations of his temple not far from a local spring.²² While at work on his shrine, the spirit of the spring appeared to him in the form of a female dragon/serpent. In an attempt to defend her territory, the she-dragon attacked the god who, after a long and fierce combat, shot the dragoness with his arrows. While the Hymn does not connect the combat directly with the release of the waters, it does suggest Apollo's restoration of the spring to his worshippers.

In Mesopotamian mythology,²³ springs are often guarded by serpent/dragons which, according to tradition, are identified with demons of death and fertility. The serpent Hahhimas, for instance, figures as a death demon who withholds the waters, thereby spreading death and destruction among all creatures. Closely related to Hahhimas is the fertility demon Telipnu who vented his wrath upon men and beasts by causing springs and rivers to run dry. In the *Enuma Elish* (the Epic of Creation), Tiamat, whom the hero-god Marduk fights and kills, is also referred to as a snake dragon, a guardian and possessor of the waters of death and fertility.

In the Egyptian mythology, Set and Apep were often identified with water monsters. They were literally dragons who often took the form of crocodiles, the lizard-like dragon of folklore, or roaring serpents in their conflict with Horus, son of Osiris.²⁴ In their dragon form, both Set and Apep are described in the Egyptian texts as being extremely evil, poisonous, and fire-breathing monsters set out to destroy Ra's sun-boat. Horus, under the command of Ra with whom he was often identified, attacked the water dragons from the sun-boat. During the long combat, Set knocked out Horus' eye (equated with the sun) and it was swallowed by Apep.²⁵ With a spear or sword or his arrows, Horus

²²The Castalian spring is often identified with the dragoness' lair. The spring is located at the entrance of the Castalian gorge at Delphi.

²³For a more detailed treatment of Mesopotamian dragon combat myths, see J. Fontenrose, *Python*, pp. 121-76.

²⁴On the Horus-Set combat, see Samuel A. B. Mercer, *Horus, Royal God of Egypt* (Granflon: Society of Oriental Research, 1942), pp. 68-78, 93-95, 195.

²⁵It is interesting to note that, in some details, Horus' combat with Set parallels the Greek myth of Apollo's combat with Python, which sometimes is identified with Typhon,

killed the serpent dragons, cut them to pieces, and imprisoned them in the depths of the earth.

As in Greece, Mesopotamia, and Egypt, tales of combat with water dragons figure extensively also in Indian myths of cosmogony. The most illustrative perhaps is the myth of Indra's combat with the dragon Vritra.²⁶ In several Vedic Hymns, Vritra is described as a huge, monstrous snake that was evil and destructive. Like his mother Danu, Vritra was a demon of regeneration. He was identified with the waters of Chaos and Order, of life and death; for, in some versions, it is related that he had swallowed the waters in which the sun was also enclosed and, therefore, contained them within him. Like the Egyptian Set/Apep, the Mesopotamian Tiamat, and the Greek Python/Typhon, Vritra had to be destroyed in order for life and cosmic order to come into being. Against Vritra the gods found their champion in Indra who, after a long and terrible battle, killed Vritra with his arrows. In the *Rig Veda* 10.113, Indra freed the waters and the sun by splitting Vritra's body in half. Subsequently, he disposed of the dragon by casting him into the outer darkness. In other hymns, it is said that Indra did not kill his enemy, but rather bound and imprisoned him in the depths of the earth.²⁷

Indra's triumph over Vritra came after a long struggle; in a number of hymns it is related that the champion himself suffered injuries, defeat, and even temporary death before his final victory. In one hymn, Vritra's terrible blows broke Indra's jaw. In the *Mahabharata*, Vritra seized Indra and put him in his mouth to swallow him, only to be rescued by the spirit of yawning which forced Vritra's mouth to open and thus allowed Indra to escape. The injuries and his temporary death in the mouth of the dragon caused Indra to lose his strength. He withdrew to regain his power and then returned to resume the fight which ended with Vritra's death. In this detail, the Indic myth parallels the Mesopotamian myth of Marduk and Tiamat in the *Enuma Elish*, where,

the traditional enemy of Zeus. According to an early version of the myth, Apollo, like Horus, lost an eye to Typhon during their fight. In Fontenrose's words, "this is Egyptian rather than Greek myth, but it is important to notice that by the fifth century B.C., Apollo had been identified with the slayer of Set, while Set had been equated with Typhon. This may mean that before the fifth century, some Greeks, if not all, called Apollo's opponent Typhon," Fontenrose, *Python*, p. 91. For the ancient sources for Apollo's identification with Horus, see Herod., 2.144.2, 156.4; Plut., *Moralia* 373b-c.

²⁶Indra's combat with Vritra appears in several Vedic hymns. See especially *Rig Veda* 1.32, 1.52, 1.80, 2.11, 3.32, 4.18, 5.32, 6.17, 8.96, 10.113; and *Taittiriya Sanhita* 2.4.12, 2.5.2f., *Mahabharata* 9-16; cf. Fontenrose, *Python*, pp. 209, 240, 451f.

²⁷Similarly, in a Modern Greek folktale, after the combat Saint George imprisons his serpentine enemy in the depths of a well. The tale is cited by Lawson, *Modern Greek Folklore*, p. 261.

before her final defeat, the serpent Tiamat opened her jaws to swallow Marduk. Through her open mouth, Marduk shot his arrow which cut the dragon's heart in half.²⁸

A similar episode is narrated in the Egyptian variant, only there Apep, the dragon of chaos and darkness, did swallow Ra. The sun god, in the form of Horus, slew the serpent Apep and freed himself and his boat and thus restored order and light on earth. An echo of the primitive myth in which the hero experiences temporary defeat or death during combat with his enemy can also be seen in the Greek myths of Zeus and Typhon, Apollo and Python, and Perseus and the *ketos*. In the latter, according to one version, Perseus, like Herakles and Jason, was swallowed by the sea-monster.²⁹ Once inside, he killed the dragon by cutting off its liver, then he slashed open its belly and came out to free Andromeda.

The hero's death is also suggested by his withdrawal into the outer edges of the world during the combat or after his final victory over the dragon. In the *Mahabharata*, it is said that feeling guilty over Vritra's death, Indra fled to the end of the world where he hid himself. ". . . and so he went to the edges of the world and lay there in water like a snake, unconscious and unrecognizable. Then the earth became barren, rivers and lakes dried up. The gods found Indra and at Vishnu's command, he purified himself by a horse sacrifice and recovered his powers."³⁰ In these details, the Indic myth parallels the Apollo/Python myth. According to one version, cited by several ancient authors,³¹ after killing Python, Apollo fled Delphi and withdrew to Tempe or Crete where he remained until he was cleansed of blood pollution. In his absence, pestilence fell upon the earth. In the myth, the god's return to Delphi is connected with the restoration of life and order upon the earth.

In their capacity to restore life, Indra and Apollo become assimilated with the spirit of regeneration with which the defeated dragon was originally identified. In view of this, we can suggest that in overcoming their opponents, the hero-gods absorbed their powers and qualities. Perhaps this process of assimilation can be seen more clearly in the Indic variant where Indra was represented as a snake lying in the waters at the edge of the world unconscious and unrecognizable. Indra's physical resemblance to his enemy is obvious. Moreover, the

²⁸Certain details in the text suggest that Marduk suffered defeat and temporary death. It is not clear, however, how he returned to life to resume his fight with Tiamat.

²⁹For Herakles' descent into the monster's belly, see Hellanikos 59f., 1.122J:277; for Perseus' similar experience, see Lykophron, *Alexandra*, pp. 837-41.

³⁰Fontenrose, *Python*, p. 198.

³¹Paus., 2.7.7, 10.6.7, 10.7.2. Aelian, *Var. Hist.* 3-1, Stat., *Thebaid* 1.569f.

waters at the end of the world were often identified with the waters of death which were the embodiment of Vritra. Could it be, therefore, that the assimilation was completed in the underworld, the realm of Vritra, where Indra withdrew and from where he emerged as a demon of regeneration? The connection of the water with death and the god's identification with the spirit of fertility can also be seen in Apollo's withdrawal to Tempe after Python's death. While in Greek mythology the valley of the Tempe and the river Peneios are not identified with Hades, they are connected, however, with the death of Python. According to one version of the myth, the god pursued the wounded Python to Tempe where it had fled. Upon arriving there, Apollo found that the dragon had already expired on the banks of the river.³² In this respect, the details suggest that, like Osiris, Tammuz, and Adonis, Indra and Apollo function as dying gods, for their return is connected with the restoration of order and life on earth.³³

In the Christian legends, Saint George is said to have undergone a similar experience. Like his pagan counterparts, the Saint also suffered injuries, defeat, and temporary death at the hands of his enemy before his final victory.³⁴ In the early accounts of his life and martyrdom, it is related that, in his opposition to King Dadianos, Saint George was put to death three times before his final execution. He was tortured, thrown in prison, cut into pieces, cast into pits and fire, poisoned, drowned, and three times he came back to life with his strength renewed to resume his struggle against the pagan "dragon." Thus, like Tammuz, Indra, Apollo, Adonis, and the other dying gods of pre-Christian tradition, Saint George's identification with the indestructible forces of regeneration is suggested not only by his ability to overcome his own death, but also by the powers with which he is often invested in popular tradition, to bestow life upon people, animals, and vegetation. According to Syriac, Coptic, and Arabic accounts, the type of miracles the Saint allegedly performed after each resurrection and even after his final death connect him with the powers of regeneration and fertility. It is said that he raised to life numerous dead animals as well as men, women, and children, some of whom had been dead for more than two hundred years. In other miracles, he is said to have caused the wooden pillar in a widow's house to take roots and grow

³²Plutarch, *Moralia* 293c.

³³Apollo's identification with the serpent and its connection with fertility can be seen clearly in the myth of Dryope. Transforming himself into a snake, the god impregnated Dryope, who later bore Amphissos. See Nic. ap. Ant. Lib. 32.2 sq.

³⁴Like the Mesopotamian serpent demon Tiamat who was destroyed by fire sent against her by the sun god, the "dragon" Dadianos was also consumed by fire called down from heaven by the prayer of Saint George.

into a tall tree twenty feet higher than any building in the town. Similarly, he made the legs of seventy chairs put forth roots and leaves, to blossom, and to bear fruit.³⁵ He is also believed to have healed the sick, the blind, the lame, and the possessed. His reputation as a healer became widespread among people of all sects. "The place where his body was buried soon became an object of pilgrimage to local Christians. Very soon men and women felt that a visit to the tomb of the Saint improved their health and many found themselves cured of certain diseases. The tomb obtained a reputation for effecting healing of all kinds of diseases, and pilgrims and caravan men began to take away dust from the tomb to protect them and their families and their flocks, herds, and houses."³⁶

The Saint's identification with fertility powers is further suggested by several miracles of conception he allegedly performed on barren women. After the Saint's death, it was believed that visits of barren wives to his tomb would promote or restore their fertility. Such visits continued to be observed by women in Syria and Palestine until recently. According to Frazer, barren women of all sects, Christian as well as Moslem, would visit the Saint's shrines which were scattered all over the country in hope to obtain offspring. "For in Syria it is still believed that even dead Saints can beget children on barren women, who accordingly resort to their shrines in order to obtain the wish of their hearts."³⁷ This practice was not confined to women in Syria and Palestine alone, for it was widely observed among Slavic women. According to a Southern Slavonic custom, "a barren woman, who desires to have a child, places a new chemise upon a fruitful tree on the eve of Saint George's Day. Next morning before sunrise, she examines the garment, and if she finds that some living creature has crept on it, she hopes that her wish will be fulfilled within the year. Then she puts on the chemise, confident that she will be as fruitful as the tree on which the garment has passed the night."³⁸ In several parts of Greece, on their wedding night, young brides often pray to Saint George to bless their womb with a child. In Cyprus the Saint enjoys a great reputation also among young girls who pray to him in hope to find a suitable hus-

³⁵See Budge, *Martyrdom and Miracles*, p. 214ff.

³⁶Budge, *George of Lydda*, 11.

³⁷J. Frazer, *The New Golden Bough* (New York, 1959), p. 69.

³⁸*Ibid.* p. 115.

³⁹Cf. Roderic Beaton, *Folk Poetry of Modern Greece* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 65-69. It is customary for girls of marriageable age to visit the Saint's church on Saturdays. They knock on the door, saying: "As we knock on the door of your church, may a bridegroom come and knock on our door." Cited by D. Talbot Rice, *The Icons*, p. 163.

band or to protect and defend them against undesirable suitors.³⁹

In several parts of Greece, Saint George is honored especially by farmers and shepherds. They regard him as their patron Saint who not only protects their crops from natural disasters and warns their flocks against predators, but also bestows upon them health, fertility, and productivity.⁴⁰ Among pastoral communities in Greece, the Saint's Day is observed with great reverence. On this day men and women abstain from serious labor and they are careful not to utter curses or swear by the Saint's name lest they offend him and thus bring harm upon themselves and their flocks. On this day also they observe the ceremonial rite of milking their sheep and goats and making their first cheese of the year, portions of which they must offer to the Saint for the health of their flocks. In some pastoral communities, it is also customary on Saint George's Day to collect the morning dew. They put it in milk to make the first yogurt of the season which they use as a starter throughout the year.⁴¹

In agricultural communities fertility rites are also linked with Saint George's Day. In several parts of Greece, precautionary measures are often taken to assure the fertility of the crops. Village priests, attended by men and women, carry Saint George's icon into the fields. The priest leads the procession ceremonially around the village thus forming an imaginary circle around it. It is believed Saint George, whose powers they invoke, will keep the evil away from people and crops.⁴² The re-enactment of the Saint's fight with the dragon and his subsequent release of the waters in the village of Neo Souli, narrated earlier, is another illustration of the Saint's connection with the productivity of the fields.

Such rituals are not confined to Greece. Among Balkan Slavs the Saint is known as "Green George." In certain parts of Serbia, Croatia, and Bulgaria, until recent years, young people observed the Saint's Day with dances and games. They would sing spring songs as they swayed on swings hung from tree branches. These kinds of activities are often connected with fertility rites in almost every culture for they

⁴⁰Shepherds would often bring their sheep or goats that had been sick or unable to conceive to Saint George's chapels. It is believed that the Saint will restore their health or will bestow fertility upon them. Cf. J. K. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 341ff.; Richard Blum and Eva Blum, *The Dangerous Hour* (New York, 1970), pp. 91-92.

⁴¹Blum and Blum, *The Dangerous Hour*, p. 90.

⁴²In Cyprus, Crete, Lesbos, and other parts of mainland Greece, the Saint's Day is observed also on the third of November which coincides with the sowing season. On this day, special festivals are held in commemoration of Saint George the Farmer. See D. Talbot Rice, *The Icons*, p. 162; N. G. Politis, "Οκυτοκία," *Λαογραφικά Σύμμικτα* 2nd ed., p. 366; H. Papazoglou, "Βούλιμου Ἐξέλασις Ἐθιμον Καθαρτήριον καὶ Γοιμικόν," *Ἀθηνᾶ*, 68 (1965) 27ff.

symbolize vitality and virility. Moreover, in Croatia, young men led by a "Green George" would dance through the village streets "singing songs welcoming nature's rebirth and calling for the fertility of the soil."⁴³ In Syria, Arab Christians and Moslems regard Saint George as a spring deity and often identify him with Al-Khudr, "the green one," who in the Arab tradition figures as a personification of the spirit of vegetation.⁴⁴

At this point we can put further discussion aside and summarize the main points. The chief feature of the legend of Saint George in the new form, his struggle with and victory over the dragon, does not belong to the earliest biographical or legendary accounts. It becomes part of his legend, at least in written form, more than five hundred years after his death, and at a time when Christianity had already been established. But the specific form of his victory over a dragon can be traced to two interlocking motives of two interlocking groups. For the official Church, Saint George's heroic act represents the victory of Christianity over paganism, good over evil, and light over darkness; and derives from the biblical accounts of the victory over Satan which it parallels. In the popular, non-ecclesiastical tradition, however, Saint George is more a natural than moral force, honored more for his service to the community than his saintliness. In the folklore of Greece, the Balkans, and the Eastern Mediterranean in general, the victory of Saint George over the dragon is the victory of fertility over sterility, health over sickness, life over death. The popular tradition, I suggest, has preserved something of what the ecclesiastical tradition has wished to suppress. For in his guise as champion of fertility and in the specific form of his triumph over the dragon, Saint George has become assimilated to pre-Christian heroes and has kept intact at least one part of a powerful ancient and pagan worldview.

⁴³Traian Stoianovich, *A Study in Balkan Civilization* (New York, 1967), p. 12.

⁴⁴Budge, *George of Lydda*, pp. 44-46.