In Search of Mar Girgis

The Church of St. George in Cairo, Egypt

Thoughts on Cairo, History, and the Saint We All Share

by Leslie Cohen '08

A few stops down the metro line from Cairo's infamous Tahrir Square sits a sleepy neighborhood with an intriguing window on Egypt's early antiquity. Mar Girgis—or in English, St. George—is a place I've visited several times since moving to Cairo. For a Saint George's alum, it holds a mystique and poses some questions I've been mulling over for a while.

As you step off the train, you are met by a large sandstone wall that conceals some of the oldest and most unique houses of worship in three world religions. These include Egypt's oldest surviving synagogue, dating to the 9th century, and the country's first mosque, erected first in 642 following the Arab conquest of Egypt, and rebuilt twice, lastly in 1179 by Saladin (of crusade fame). Winding through cool and quiet alleyways, you come next to the Christian heritage sites, which bear an intriguing departure in style from the cathedrals and chapels seen throughout Europe and the United States. Safeguarding these are the walls of the late Roman Fortress of Babylon, erected under Emperor Trajan in the 1st century. This marked the border between Upper and Lower Egypt in early antiquity and served as a strategic base for Roman troops. It also housed the entrance to the Canal of the Pharaohs (an ancient waterway dug to link the Nile with the Red Sea).

Fixed atop one of the fortress towers is the Church of St. George (rebuilt multiple times since the 10th century, most recently in 1909). Wandering through its lovely nave and contemplating several representations of the Saint in his dragon-slaying pose, I began to wonder how his legend emerged and grew into a symbol adopted and adapted by so many cultures and traditions over the years.

Here in Cairo, St. George is so clearly embedded in the Christian faith that no one would mention him outside that context. Yet at Saint George's School, which was founded as an Episcopalian school in 1955 but became secular a mere two years later, he is something else entirely. Closer to the myth of King Arthur perhaps, a hero, certainly, but… the story is malleable. We often celebrate the dragon more than the knight, and yet "Dragon Slayers" is another facet of the school's identity. So how did this come to be? What is it about this story, this figure in history, that retains meaning for us even as it morphs into something new, thousands of years and miles removed from the life of the man in question?

What we know about George himself is limited. He is believed to have been born in Cappadocia (modern Turkey) and served as a high-ranking officer in the Roman army. His execution was ordered by Emperor Diocletian, near Lydda (in modern Israel) in 303 AD, for refusing to renounce his Christian faith. Stories of his courage spread quickly following his death, with accounts emerging that he had been killed several times during a protracted torture, but miraculously risen each time until his ultimate beheading. He was canonized in 494 by Pope Gelasius, and by the 9th century his Saint's Day on April 23rd was celebrated throughout Europe.

English kings from the 12th century onward took an interest in the saint, invoking his name and image as protection in battle, and he became patron saint of England under King Henry VIII. While this might be how George eventually made his way into Spokane, WA, he is by no means owned by the Western tradition. Christians (as well as Muslims, who associate him with a mystical Quranic figure known as Al-Khidr—the Green One) from Ethiopia to India, throughout Eastern Europe and the Middle East, have revered him and celebrated his day for centuries (on May 6th in Orthodox calendars). Colorful traditions, like dressing children up as dragons and chasing them through the streets, or bringing one's horse to church to have it blessed (George being the patron saint of horses too), have abounded. In Romania, the festival also marks the return of spring and is celebrated alongside pre-Christian traditions, like hanging fresh leaves over the door, or laying the leftovers of the day at the roots of fruit trees to ensure a bountiful season.

But the dragon? While we may have to consign any actual dragon-slaying to myth, the story of how George became associated with a dragon is fascinating. The legend goes that George happened upon a town (perhaps in Cappadocia, or maybe in Libya) where a vicious dragon had been holding the villagers hostage for some time. First, it devoured their sheep, and when those ran out, began demanding a yearly human tribute chosen from among the people. When George arrives on the scene, the town's princess has just drawn the short stick and is on her way to give herself up to the dragon. George of course rescues her, leashes the dragon, and pledges to kill it for the townsfolk if they agree to convert to Christianity on the spot. They do and he does.

What's interesting is that this story existed in many forms, represented in different faiths, in carvings and paintings from ancient Babylonia, to Egypt, to Rome, centuries prior to the Christian era. The image of a hero fighting with a serpent-like being represented the basic struggle of good against evil, with good and evil variously interpreted. By the time it was adopted into Christian iconography in the 5th century, George wasn't even the one playing the hero! Saint Theodore held the honor until sometime in the 11th century when it was transferred to George (a motif from the interim shows them tackling the beast together, with the help of St. Demetrius).

What we know of today is a fine story and a fine hero, pasted together and immortalized in a collection of hagiographies called the Golden Legend, compiled by Italian chronicler Jacobus da Varagine in 1260 AD: a combination of Christian doctrine and primeval myth, captured in an image that has been modified and reproduced thousands of times throughout history. So how can a religious icon be so easily adapted into a secular

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Sculpture adorning the Church of St. George, depicting the saint as a Roman officer (as opposed to later Medieval renderings, which show him as a knight or crusader)

Part of a tapestry depicting St. George slaying a dragon (circa 18th century)

school's name, spirit, mascot, and colors, without anyone worrying whether its "inherent Christianness" would pose a problem? Perhaps because the meaning behind the symbol is broader and deeper than any one faith or interpretation.

There are whole branches of study devoted to understanding symbols and the way they work in our minds and societies (it's not just Chad Rigsby). Images drawn from nature, and everyday life can be made to stand for things we all agree on through processes of repetition in different forms, and they become shorthand for ideas we want to share. Take the snake. In Western culture, we draw to mind words like 'danger' and 'treachery', images of smooth-talking serpents that hypnotize and seduce people into eating apples. Yes, it's in the Bible, but it's also in Norse and ancient Babylonian mythologies (see: Jormungandr and Tiamat), and it's in Disney. When Jafar transforms into a terrifying cobra in the final battle with Aladdin, it slides right into our psyches and we accept it as somehow essentially right, because that vizier was scheming and lying the whole movie through.

Sign of the Nunnery of St. George (circa 10th century)

Dragons are often characterized by historians as an amalgam of the animals people feared most, like lions, crocodiles, and snakes. In most Western traditions, then, they represented that primal evil, that humans must ever confront. In Christianity, that may be Satan, and the armor our hero wears may stand for Christianity, or faith in God.

But there are other interpretations. The psychiatrist Carl Jung, for example, who loved his symbols, held that religious iconography (like Mary with the baby Jesus, or Dionysus with his grapes) emerges from a deeper layer of symbolic knowledge that all humans share because they speak deeply to our psychology. We can interpret them religiously, or in a number of other ways.

In the Jungian tradition, St. George's battle with the dragon represents a battle we all must fight within ourselves, because we contain the hero and the dragon both. To control the dragon is to establish our identity as individuals, against the chaos, raw instincts, and formlessness from which we came. This is very much a coming-of-age assignment. In this version, St. George would not be killing the dragon, so much as coming to terms with it, and learning to work with it throughout life (some iconographies do come closer to this, with a horseman enveloped by the snake and merely staring at it, or leading it gently by his side).

Is this why the mascot of George and the Dragon still works at a little, non-religious school so far away from the time and place of its namesake? Is it why we're able to celebrate both dragons and dragon-slayers, without getting caught in the contradiction? And is it why I feel a small sense of hominess when I visit Mar Girgis, and look up at an image not too different from one I grew up wearing on a T-shirt to basketball games?

It's something small, but it brings a sense of satisfaction at the end of all this wondering. And while many things about Egypt make me feel at home—most of all the people who've gone out of their way to do so—the little shared cultural artifacts where you least expect them also play a part. Of course, people feel their own sense of ownership over symbols like this one, and we needn't all agree. But it is lovely how much is shared across cultures and centuries, and how deftly a simple image can remind us of it.

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