

St. George at Prague Castle and Perseus: an Impossible Encounter?

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ABSTRACT

St. George and Perseus crossed their paths for the first time in the 11th century when the myth of Greek hero inspired the legend of a Christian saint. In the 14th century, the pictorial types of St. George, Perseus and Bellerophon fighting the dragon started converging. The famous bronze statue of St. George at the Prague Castle, which was created in 1373, represents an advanced stage of this process.

KEYWORDS

Perseus; Bellerophon; St. George; iconography; Prague Castle; classical tradition.

St. George, the paradoxical combination of warrior and saint, instantly sprung to my mind when I was thinking how to honour Jan Bouzek by a paper. The most ambitious medieval depiction of St. George fighting the dragon is the bronze group statue at the Prague Castle (Fig. 1).¹ We know that it was cast in bronze by Martin and George of Cluj in 1373 (BALBÍN 1677, III, 379). Nevertheless, we do not know for whom, by whom and where it was designed. In 1373, Cluj was in the Hungarian Kingdom, but the group statue has stood in the courtyard of the residence of the Bohemian kings at least since 1541. In 1562, a tournament was organized for the coronation of Maximilian II as the King of Bohemia. *'Many have looked,'* reports Jiří Trnický from Trnava, *'where one could see. They climbed up to the place where the casted statue of St. George, a masterpiece gloriously beautiful, was standing, perhaps more than a hundred years without moving'* (TRNICKÝ Z TRNICE 1798, 117-118). This reference suggests that at least from the 15th century, the group statue stood at the given location.

The literature on this unique work of art is enormous, but all attempts to define its provenience and original function failed to receive the universal recognition so far (BENEŠOVSKÁ 2007). In this situation, it is perhaps methodologically sounder to abandon, for the time being, the analysis of its artistic form. In this paper, I shall try to look at the Prague St. George statue from a different point of view. I shall not ask why it looks as it looks, but whether it could look differently. We know that depictions of Perseus influenced the iconography of St. George, it is, therefore, legitimate to compare this group statue with the pictorial type of this ancient Greek hero. Did it also influence the iconography of the group statue at the Prague castle? If yes, to what degree? To put it simply: when we compare this St. George fighting the dragon with other 14th century renderings of this theme, does it look more or less like Perseus?

1 All drawings in this paper were done by Nina Bažantová.



Fig. 1: St. George fighting the dragon. Bronze group sculpture, 1373. The original is in the Collections of Prague Castle.

The stories of Perseus and St. George are strikingly similar; both fought the dragon to release the princess. Until recently, it was therefore generally considered that the medieval St. George was a christianized pagan hero Perseus. The emergence of the saint's image type, however, had nothing to do with Perseus, because it roots in a separate pictorial and textual tradition (OGDEN 2008, 136; KILINSKI II 2013, 193–200). Those who started worshipping the saint were no more familiar with depictions of Perseus liberating Andromeda because the series ends in the 4th century AD (ROCCOS 1994). The series of depictions of St. George started two centuries later along with the beginning of the saint's veneration (BRAUNFELS 1974). A 6th century AD gem in the British Museum represents a saint on horseback attacking a dragon with a spear. The rider has a halo around his head, and his spear has a cross at its upper end. It was a protective amulet because on its reverse there is a Greek inscription: 'this God is the victor over evil' (Fig. 2). It was produced in the eastern Mediterranean, and the saint is depicted exactly as St. George was later portrayed. However, it could be any of saints-warriors fighting against the dragon, who were very popular in the Byzantine Empire (WALTER 2003). The pictorial type of Christian hero on horseback aiming with his lance at the head of the dragon was adapted from depictions of Bellerophon. In ancient Greek art, Bellerophon's struggle with Chimaera started being represented simultaneously with Perseus' fight with Medusa, in the 7th century BC (LOCHIN 1994). The type was repeated with slight variations until the end of antiquity, and it was later used also to represent St. George. The only difference was that the saint's horse was not winged, and the dragon replaced Chimaera.



Fig. 2: A saint slaying a dragon. Hematite gem, the first half of the 6th century AD? London, The British Museum inv. n. 1986,0501. 14.

On a processional cross from the 6th-7th century AD there is one of the oldest depictions of St. George. He is represented in military uniform with a shield; a halo characterises him as a saint. His name is mentioned twice on the vertical arm of the cross (Fig. 3). Above, there is a Greek inscription, 'St. George.' Below, there is an inscription accompanied by a request, 'St. George, help.' The applicant for assistance is a kneeling figure, which gives a hand to the saint - St. George is thus portrayed as a saviour. According to the inscription on the horizontal arm, the supplicant is Mesembrius Theognis, Byzantine general documented in the year 581 AD. The dragon-slayer St. George appears for instance on a ceramic embossed icon found near the Macedonian town of Vinica (Fig. 4). Since the inscription mixes Latin and Greek, the depiction dates before 733 AD when the area came under the jurisdiction of Rome. On the

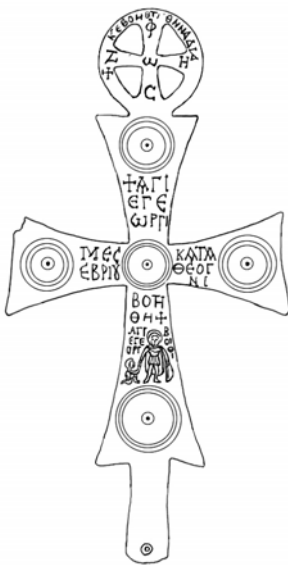


Fig. 3: Processional cross of St. George, bronze, 6th to 7th century AD. From Emesa, Syria. Paris, Cabinet des médailles, inv. Schlumberger 35.



Fig. 4: St. Christopher and George. Ceramic icon, before 733 AD. Skopje, Museum of Macedonia.



left, we see St. Christopher, on the right St. George. Both stand on snakes with human heads and aim at their heads with their spears. St. Christopher is depicted as a cynocephalus. By the time the icon was created, the saint was believed to have belonged to the nation of people with dog heads. The murals of a Cappadocian church from the beginning of the 7th century depict St. George on horseback (Fig. 5). He is represented here beside another saint, St. Theodore, in a fight with two dragons in the form of snakes coiling around a tree.

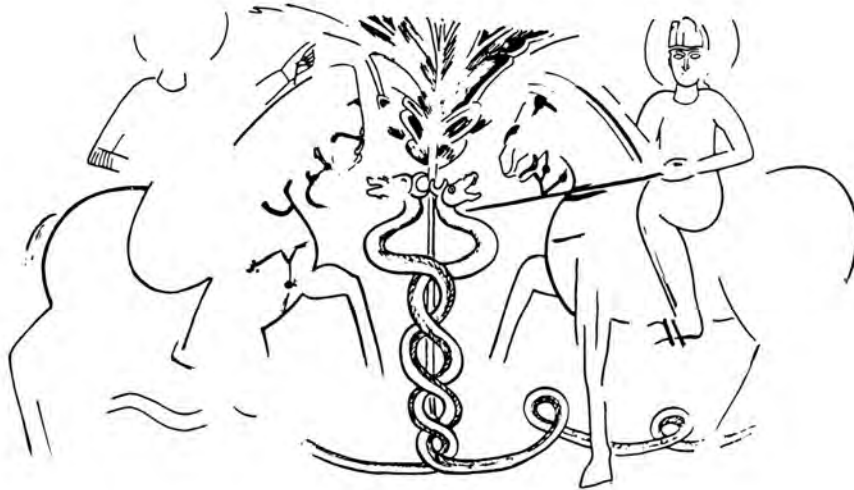


Fig. 5: St. Theodor and George struggle with snakes (dragons). Mural painting, early 7th century AD. Cappadocia, Turkey, church Mavrucan no. 3 (after WALTER 2003, Fig. 27).

In the 9th century AD, the popularity of St. George in the Byzantine Empire starts rising. In churches, pictures of the saint on horseback fighting the dragon are placed in honorary locations. Dragons are represented in different forms, as a snake, big lizard or a monster with multiple heads. In Carolingian Europe, the cult of St. George is also attested, but not his representations. Nevertheless, images of warrior saints on horseback spearing a dragon lying on the ground decorated the lost Carolingian pedestal of a reliquary silver cross (Fig. 6). In the years 820–830 AD, Einhard, the biographer of Charlemagne, donated it to the temple treasury of St. Servatius in Maastricht (STIEGMANN – WEMHOFF 1999, 700). The cross was destroyed during the French Revolution, but we know it from a drawing made in the 17th century. According to Einhard's words, it was modelled on ancient works. The pedestal had a form of a triumphal arch with the inscription, which says that it is a sign of eternal victory. The cross had thus a triumphal meaning inspired by the classical tradition. This meaning had also the riders fighting dragons who were represented on the inner sides of the gate. These riders made part of a series of ten unidentified warrior saints who were portrayed in the lowest section. It is to be noted that saints on horseback revolve around the axis of their lances. This ancient Roman pictorial type was revived in Italian art of the 14th century, and we find it also in the group statue of Prague St. George.

The earliest legend of St. George in which he saves a princess from a dragon is preserved in a Georgian text from the 11th century.² In the mythical country of Lasia, there lived a pagan

2 Jerusalem, The Patriarchal Library, cod.2. Russian translation (PRIVALOVA 1977, 73). The oldest Greek version is probably a translation of the Georgian text from the 12th–13th centuries in Rome, Bibliotheca angelica 46 (C.F.1), ff. 189–191v.

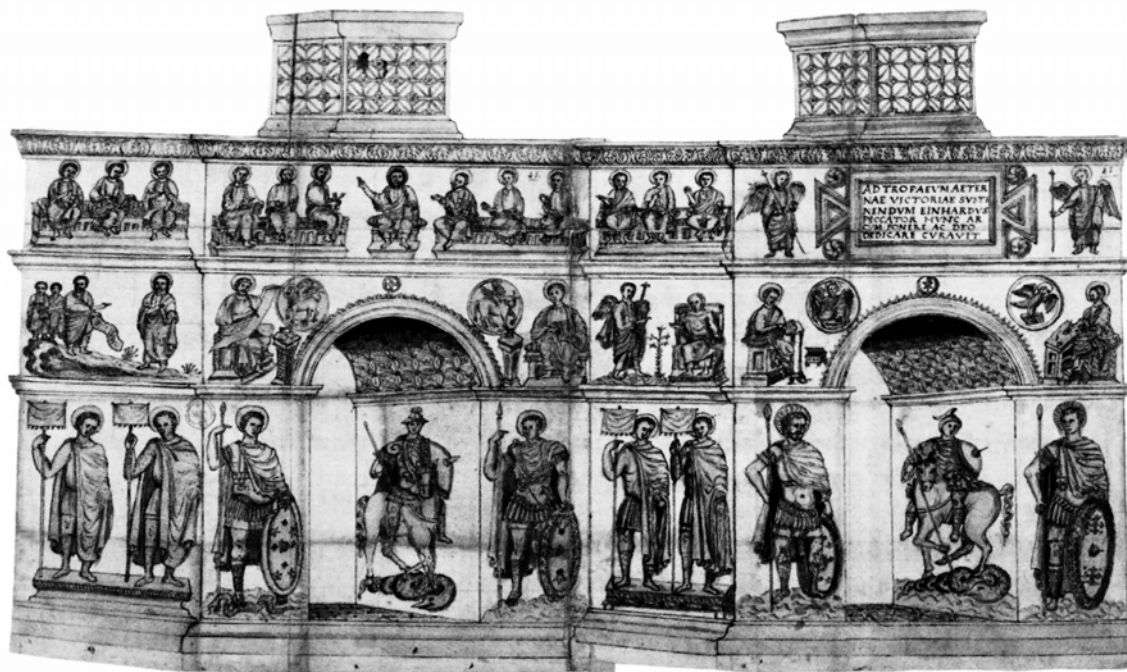


Fig. 6: Pedestal of the processional cross in the form of a triumphal arch of 820–830 AD, drawing, 17th century. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, fr. 10440, fol. 45.

emperor named Selinus. The God punished him for his paganism by settling an immense dragon in a nearby lake. To appease the dragon, the city residents were feeding it with their children. Finally, the turn came to emperor's daughter. At this moment, St. George had accidentally stopped there to water his horse at the lake. He was on his way back from the service in the Diocletians' army to his farm in Cappadocia. When he found a crying girl on the shore, he asked her the cause of her grief. The princess explained him everything and told him also that her compatriots were worshipping pagan gods. The saint asked the God for a miracle; the God fulfilled his wish, and the dragon fell at his feet by itself. The saint then lead the beast to the city on a belt, which the princess had lent him. People were frightened, but St. George told them not to be afraid and to adopt the Christian faith. When they did, he took a knife and cut off the dragon's head. All residents of the city were subsequently baptized. In Europe, this story enjoyed enormous popularity in the following centuries. Undoubtedly, due to the militant atmosphere of the Crusades (1096–1291), during which the heroism and chivalry of knights were celebrated in literary works and visual arts.

The initial situation of the pagan myth of Perseus and of the Christian legend of St. George is almost the same, so we may conclude that in the 11th century, the ancient pagan myth inspired the Christian author. In both cases, there is a guilty city to which a dragon was sent as a punishment. The beast settled in the water, and people appeased it with human sacrifices. When it came to the ruler's daughter, she was also exposed to be devoured by the beast on the shore. The hero returns home, accidentally sees the princess and talks to her. He decides to save her and kills the dragon. It is only from this point that the Christian legend starts departing from the pagan myth.

In the 12th century, Saint George slaying the dragon to rescue the Princess appeared for the first time in visual arts. The oldest depictions are, however, unrelated to the pictorial tradition of Perseus. In these depictions, the traditional pictorial type is combined with an



allusion to the legend mentioned above. We see the saint on horseback fighting the dragon to which a figure of the princess leading the dragon on her belt was added. This pictorial type combines two subsequent and very different moments of the story in a single scene. We see at the same time the fierce fight of St. George and its peaceful aftermath – the princess holds the tamed beast on her belt (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: St. George fighting the dragon, English alabaster statuette, 1370–1420. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art, Kress Collection, inv.n. K-1377.

In later centuries, the main source of the story about St. George was the ‘Golden Legend’ of Jacobus de Voragine from the sixties of the 13th century. In it, the links between the story of St. George and Perseus were further strengthened. St. George’s fight with the dragon takes place in Libya, and the dragon sits on the border of a lake, which was ‘as big as the sea’. Perseus fought with dragon also on the sea shore, and his adventure took place in Libya. In the earliest version of the legend, St. George asked God to tame the monster and the dragon immediately fell to his feet. In the ‘Golden Legend,’ the saint is fighting the dragon, like Perseus. Jacobus de Voragine wrote that when the dragon emerged from the water ‘George mounted on his horse, he crossed himself and boldly attacked the dragon coming at him. He mightily strokes it with his lance and recommended himself to the will of God. He seriously injured the dragon and knocked him to the ground’ (VORAGINE 1850, 261).

From the late 13th century on, depictions of St. George start conforming to the 'Golden Legend.' The saint fights the dragon and to heighten the drama of this duel, the princess does not interfere anymore. She just looks on from a distance. For this, medieval artists could find inspiration in depictions of Perseus' fight with the dragon in which Princess Andromeda did not take part either. The new pictorial type of St. George's fight with dragon respected the unity of time and space and in this way prefigured the later development of the iconography of St. George. We find this new type for instance in the Italian book illumination created before 1390 (Fig. 8). The Princess is represented in front of St. George raising her hands in astonishment. The saint pierced the neck of the dragon with his lance the broken end of which lies on the foreground. The horse set its teeth into the dragon's neck, and the saint raises his sword to cut its head off. The raised hand holding the unsheathed sword is a new attribute of St. George, which must make us pause.

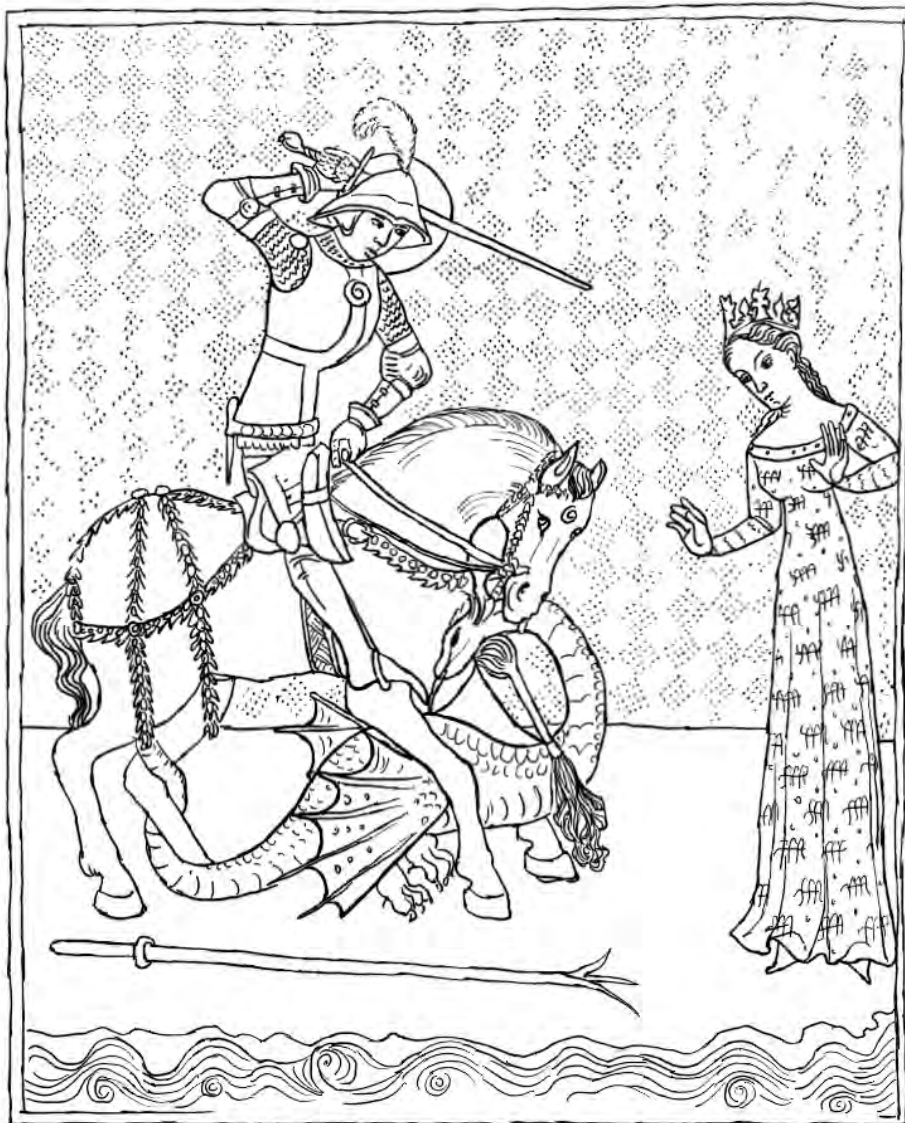


Fig. 8: Giovanni di Benedetto, St. George fighting the dragon, Italian book illumination, 1385-1390. *Mis-sale et horae ad usum Fratrum Minorum*, fol. 327v. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Latin 757.



In the 6th–11th century, St. George killed the dragon exclusively with his lance. From the 12th century on, the lance was occasionally replaced by the sword, which frequently appeared beside the lance from the 15th century on. In the 15th century, sword appears in the hand of St. George also in translations of the ‘Legenda Aurea.’ Representations of St. George with the sword was inspired by depictions of Perseus, who was never represented with a lance. He always fought with a special magic sword, called *harpe*, which means in Greek ‘a sickle’. We can see this *harpe* depicted in the popular and often illustrated work of Christine de Pizan ‘Letters of Othea’ (Fig. 9). In the French book illumination from the early 15th century, this *harpe* looks like a scythe. The fight takes place in a sea and Andromeda looks on from a rocky island. This detail was taken over from representations of Perseus in ancient Roman art, but the princess is not tied to the rock. She kneels in the traditional pose of a Christian saint awaiting her martyrdom.



Fig. 9: Perseus rescuing Andromeda, French book illumination, c. 1412. Christine de Pizan, fol. 98v. London, The British Library, Harley 4431.

Perseus is represented in medieval armour and mounted on Pegasus. For this, we have no textual or pictorial evidence from classical antiquity; in ancient Greece and Rome Perseus used exclusively his winged shoes and cap to fly. According to the ancient myth, Bellerophon was the first who tamed Pegasus and fought Chimaera from his back. In the 14th century, however, we

encounter Perseus riding Pegasus in texts of Bersuire (Berchorius) and Boccaccio.³ The new trait of Perseus might be a result of a mistake – an ancient depiction of Bellerophon without Chimera could have been easily misinterpreted as a depiction of Perseus. However, the main reason for this innovation was that this new trait assimilated Perseus to St. George, who was fighting from horseback from the very beginning. In the 14th century, St. George and Perseus borrowed traits from each other to stress that the pagan hero was a precursor of the Christian saint.

On a woodcut from the beginning of the 15th century, we find St. George in the traditional pose using his lance (Fig. 10). At the same time, he raises the other hand with a sword in the traditional gesture of Perseus. On the right we see the princess, who is represented exactly as Andromeda in the above mentioned French book illumination – she kneels with her hands clasped in prayer. At her side, we see a sheep, which alludes to the ‘Golden Legend.’ In the version of Jacobus de Voragine, the dragon was given two sheep every day. When the inhabitants of the city ran out of sheep, they gave one sheep and one boy or girl. Finally, the daughter of the king was offered to the beast together with a sheep. From ramparts of the town, king and queen look at the fight of St. George. The motif of the princess and her parents who watch St. George fighting the dragon was inspired by ancient Roman representations of Perseus fighting the dragon, in which Andromeda and her parents were often present. In the depiction of St. George’s fight with the dragon, king and queen appeared for the first time in the 14th century, the princess with a sheep started being represented a century later.



Fig. 10: St. George fighting the dragon, woodcut, 1515. Alexander Barclay, *Lyfe of Seynt George*, Westminster 1515, frontispiece.

3 Petrus Berchorius, *Ovidius Moralizatus* (ed. Utrecht 1962), Fa. 15: ‘*Tandem vero super pegasus id est corpus glorificatum per resurrectionem ascendit cum quo in ascensione in paradysum volavit*’; Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium libri*, XII, cap. XXV ‘*in Gorgonem expeditionem assumpsit, habuitque Pegasus alatum equum, et Palladis egidem, et talaria ensemque Mercurii.*’



Shortly before 1526, a monumental portal was attached to the south wall of the basilica of St. George at the Prague Castle (Fig. 11). It was founded before 921 when the saint started being venerated in Bohemia. In the pediment of this monumental portal, a relief sculpture was placed which shows the struggle of St. George and the dragon inspired by the 'Golden Legend.' The saint fights with a sword like Perseus, in the background we find the princess with a lamb on the left, and the king and queen are on the city ramparts' on the right.

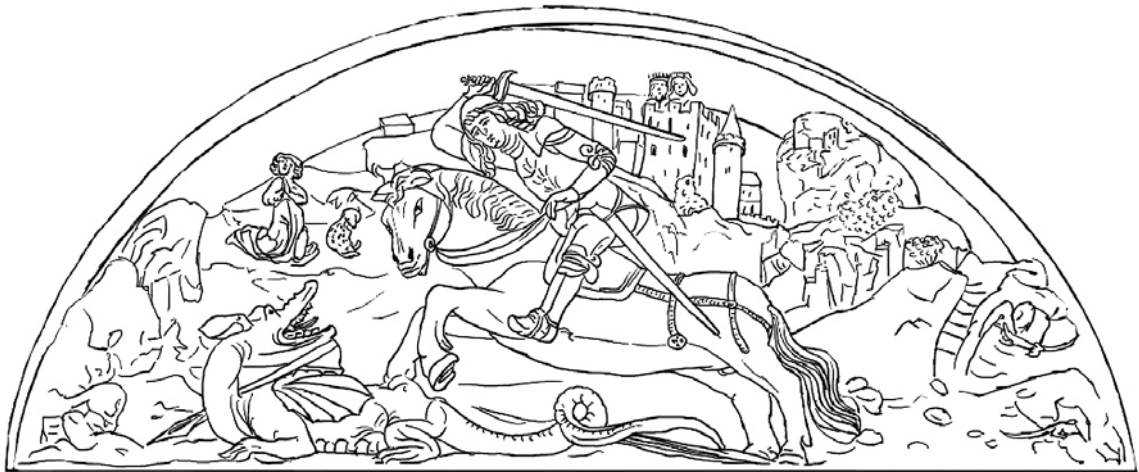


Fig. 11: St. George fighting the dragon, stone relief sculpture, before 1526. The original is in the Collections of Prague Castle.

At the time when the bronze group statue of St. George at the Prague Castle was created, in the third quarter of the 14th century, the Czech translation of the 'Golden Legend' had appeared. The group statue is one of the first examples of the new pictorial type influenced by this legend. The princess leading the beast on her belt is omitted, and the artist concentrated on the culmination of the duel between the saint and the beast. The artist adopted the ancient Roman dynamic composition, which was revived in the 14th century Italian art. Its axis formed the lance around which the saint and his horse revolved. The fight takes place on the rocky terrain and in front of the rider there is a protruding rock, on the top of which a water spout was fixed in 1543–1563 (Fig. 12). The rocky terrain can be satisfactorily explained only by the fact that at the height of the protruding rock a figure of the onlooking princess was initially placed (HLOBIL 2007, 14–15). When the sculpture was placed on the fountain, a waterspout probably replaced the figure of the princess.

On the bronze group sculpture at the Prague Castle, the saint fights with his traditional weapon – the lance, which was not replaced by a sword. We must stress, however, that in Renaissance art, St. George continued to be represented fighting with his lance, which was also adopted by Perseus by that time. In 1557, Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' were published with a very influential woodcuts by Bernard Solomon. In his representation of Perseus liberating Andromeda, we observe a synthesis of Greco-Roman and medieval pictorial traditions (*Metamorphose* 1557, 55). Solomon took over from the 14th century illustrations the figure of Perseus sitting on Pegasus. He assimilated Perseus to St. George also by putting a lance in his hands with which he replaced his canonical sword. A rock jutting out of the sea, to which Andromeda is tied, also originated in the 14th century depictions. In the background, we see on the right

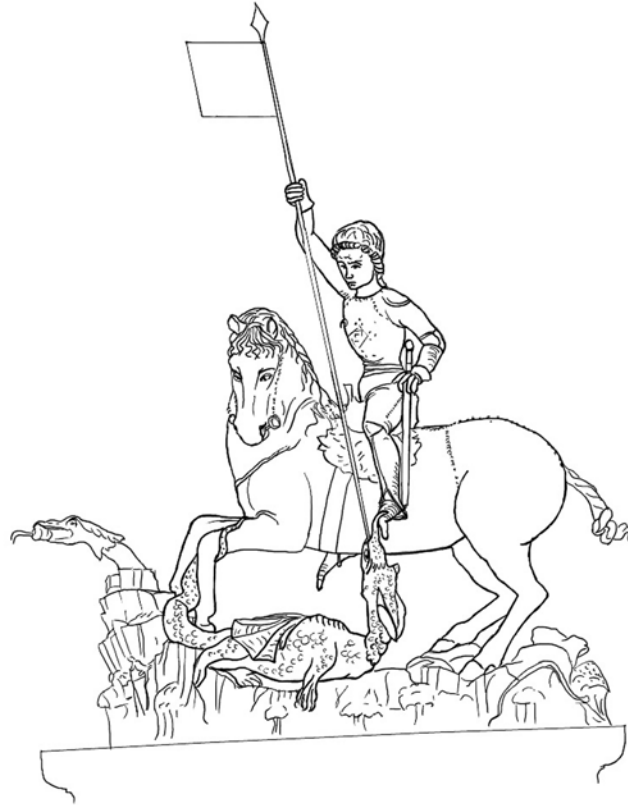


Fig. 12: St. George and the dragon, bronze group sculpture, 1373 (view from the side with the added lance and waterspout of 1543–1563, which probably replaced the princess).

a group of viewers, which represents the princess' parents and their courtiers. A free copy of Solomon's design by Virgil Solis contributed to its popularization. Solis' woodcuts replaced those of Solomon in numerous editions of Ovid's 'Metamorphoses,' which were being published until the middle of the 17th century (SPRENG 1563, 57).

Solis' illustrations of Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' were reprinted in the emblem book of Nikolaus Reusner (Fig. 13). The emblem with Perseus entitled 'the image of a right ruler' was dedicated to George, Duke of Brzeg (1532–1586). In the allegorical commentary, the liberation of Andromeda by Perseus is presented as a precursor of the liberation of princess by St. George. The dedication and commentary identify Perseus with St. George and Andromeda with the Holy Church.

CONCLUSION

We may conclude by stressing that in the 14th century, the pictorial types of Perseus and St. George started converging. Perseus borrowed the winged horse from Bellerophon, which made him more similar to St. George, who was traditionally represented on horseback. The saint was assimilated to Perseus by borrowing a sword that was the main attribute of the pagan hero. In Renaissance Europe, this trend gained momentum and Perseus was systematically presented as the precursor of St. George, from whom he even borrowed the lance. In the Prague group



Fig. 13: Nicolas Reusner, *Emblemata*, Frankfurt 1581, 254.⁴

statue of St. George of 1373, the traditional motif of the princess leading the dragon on her belt was omitted, and the saint thus looked more like Perseus. This link was stressed by the rocky terrain with the rock protruding in front of the saint, on which the princess probably stood initially. The late medieval St. George at Prague Castle thus prefigured the way the saint was represented in Renaissance Europe. This first monumental cast bronze statue group that was made after the fall of the ancient Roman Empire was thus up to date also in its iconography. Whoever designed it, he followed the latest trends in Western European culture.

4 From: <http://diglib.hab.de/wdb.php?dir=drucke/205-9-quod&distype=thumbs>. Accessed June 25, 2015.

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