About the story

The people of Silene, in Libya, are living a miserable life. Their town is under siege from a dragon that lives by a lake outside the town, and not only breathes fire but also carries the plague, spreading disease and destruction wherever it goes. To keep the poisonous creature happy, and to stop it from coming any closer, the townspeople have started feeding it two sheep each day. However, this remedy cannot last.

One day, the townspeople find they have no sheep left, and in desperation they begin to feed their own children to the dragon, choosing them by drawing lots. In one of these lotteries, the king’s daughter is chosen. The king offers half his kingdom if the people will spare his daughter, but they refuse.

So the terrified princess goes to the lake to be the dragon’s next meal. Saint George, a Christian knight returning from battle, rides by. Seeing the princess, he offers to protect her. The knight has God on his side, and so has the strength to fight the dragon. He charges on horseback, and is able to wound the creature with his lance. Then he asks the princess to throw him her girdle (belt), and puts it around the dragon’s neck like a leash. The dragon follows him as obediently as a dog.

The princess and Saint George lead the dragon back to Silene. The people flee in terror, but Saint George calls them back. He promises to kill the dragon if they all agree to convert to Christianity. Everyone agrees at once, and Saint George slays the dragon in front of them.

Origins of the story

The legend of Saint George and the Dragon has been told many times and in many different ways, passed down by word of mouth and changing as it was told and retold.

The first well-known written version of the story appeared in a book of saints’ lives called The Golden Legend, collected by an Italian bishop, Jacobus de Voragine. The dragon-slaying represents the defeat of evil by the forces of good, and the conversion of pagans to Christianity.

De Voragine’s version of the tale was the first to be set in Libya, which from the point of view of a European was easily far enough away to imagine that a creature as strange as a dragon might live there. The story may be based on much older legends of dragon-slaying heroes, such as the Greek myth of the god Apollo and the dragon-like serpent Python.

To this day, Saint George is the patron saint of a wide range of places and institutions, from the countries of England, Portugal, Ethiopia and Georgia in Central Asia, to the city of Beirut in the Lebanon and a sports club in São Paulo, Brazil. The emblem of Saint George is a red cross on a white background.