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THE CROSS OF ST GEORGE AND THE BANNER OF THE RESURRECTION

Jeremy Goldsmith

*But on his brest a bloudie Crosse he bore,
The deare remembrance of his dying Lord,
For whose sweet sake that glorious badge he wore,
And dead as liuing ever him ador'd:
Vpon his shield the like was also scor'd*

Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queen* I i, 10-14.

In a recent edition of the *Coat of Arms* Jonathan Good provided a clear and erudite thesis on the origins of the flag of St George: *Argent a cross gules*.¹ The subject has been one which has excited considerable comment over time, but which is still the cause of much debate and confusion. While it appears that the first mention of St George in connection with a red cross banner is contained in *The Golden Legend* by the thirteenth-century Genoese prelate Jacopo da Varezze (Jacobus de Voragine), the origins of the form may yet be older. In particular I would like to suggest that the attribution of these arms to St George is to be found earlier, in the Banner of the Resurrection.

A significant problem in tracing the source of the blazon *Argent a cross gules* is its very simplicity. As we have seen these arms as civic heraldry are not restricted to Genoa, but are also found in other cities; they are additionally used by a range of individual armigers, both real and legendary. The proliferation of these arms complicates any attempt to show a clear development from one source to another, whether they influenced each other or developed – as is perfectly possible – independently. The most problematic aspect of this is the very real possibility that such simple arms were devised due to practical considerations rather than symbolic ones.

It is already acknowledged that many of the more basic heraldic designs may have originated in the application of bands to a shield to make it stronger.² This difficulty aside, because of the national independence of heraldic authorities from the medieval period onwards, it was perfectly possible that two individuals or locations could possess the same or similar arms.³ To the range of attributions that have been cited may also be added the Istrian town of Rovigno (now Rovinj, in Croatia), and the regions of Georgia, Liguria, and Catalonia (of whom St George is patron). Also the island of Sardinia has the cross of St George as its arms, with the addition of four

¹ J. Good, 'Argent a cross gules: the origins and English use of the arms of Saint George', *CoA* 3rd ser. 3 (2007), no. 213, pp. 9-18.

² C. W. Scott-Giles, *The Romance of Heraldry* (London 1929), p. 4.

³ T. Woodcock and J.M. Robinson, *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* (Oxford, 1990), p. 14

moors' heads; the saint was reputed to have intervened at the Battle of Alcoraz (1096) in order to defeat a Saracen invasion, so the heads were added to his own arms.⁴ This would support an earlier date for the arms than the *Golden Legend*, though the earliest surviving image now dates only from 1281.⁵

Thus the *Golden Legend* is not the only evidence for St George's banner, and the possibility for a different source should not be ruled out. Several decades ago, a point was first raised about the similarities with the banner of the Resurrection, though it seems that no-one at that time developed it further.⁶

In the early centuries after the life of Christ, there was a sensitivity about the most appropriate artistic vocabulary. Depictions of humans were avoided in the beginning, and in particular so was the cross, seen as a symbol of torture and humiliation; because of this it was only around the time of Constantine that the image of the cross became liberated into a symbol of power.⁷

The use of the cross as a banner design has been linked with the reign of Constantine, particularly following his vision of a cross in the sky before his victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312.⁸ Writing of Constantine in the fifth century, the church historian Socrates (i 18) observed that the emperor, 'placing his confidence in the Christian banner, he completely vanquished his enemies'. The iconographic evidence, though, is somewhat lacking in the early medieval centuries, images of the Resurrection – and of St George – lacking banners of any description.

It may fairly be admitted that Jacopo da Varazze, writing in 1275, was the first to report the connection between the red cross and St George, and may even be considered the inventor of this tradition. On some level this may be regarded as a patriotic impulse. St George was the patron saint of Genoa – the cathedral was dedicated to him and later the Banca di San Giorgio (founded 1407) was to be named after him. As a good Genoese and the city's archbishop, Jacopo would want to make this saint stand out from his work not merely by heroic deeds, but a clear and identifiable banner.

An early example of the banner of the Resurrection in art can be found in Giotto's painting of the subject in the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua (1304-6). Earlier manuscript illuminations show Christ with the resurrection banner as early as c. 1200 (**Figure 1**). This visual continuity would suggest that the red cross banner was first associated with the resurrection long before the writing of the *Golden Legend*, and that the association with St George may have grown out of the earlier tradition.

From the clerical perspective that Jacopo da Varazze would have adopted, St George could be viewed as an analogy for Christ, as one who sacrificed his life for the sake of the church. The additional association with the Crusades, with St George

⁴ Barbara Fois, *Lo stemma dei quattro mori. Breve storia dell'emblema dei Sardi* (Sassari 1990), p. 15.

⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶ John B. Wainwright, "'The Banner of the Resurrection': the flag of St. George", *N & Q* 12th ser. 4 (June 1918), p. 160.

⁷ F. Farrar, *The Life of Christ as Represented in Art* (London, 1894), p. 24.

⁸ James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (rev. edn., London 1979), p. 122.



Figure 1: The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Ms 76 F 5 (vellum, 255 x 165 mm; north-west France, c. 1200). Left (a), fo. 21v: scenes of Christ's resurrection. Right (b), detail of Christ emerging from his tomb and holding the 'banner of the Resurrection'.

aiding the warriors of God, which was still a rich theme in the thirteenth century, adds yet another layer to the legend. This connection of war, sacrifice, death and resurrection continued in the European cultural imagination so that, in the opening lines of Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*, he would instantly link the cross of the crusaders and of St George with that of the Resurrection of Christ.