

# INTRODUCTION

## *Image Networks of George in the Eastern Mediterranean and Transcaucasia*

In the spring of 1555, the Flemish ambassador Baron Ghiselin de Busbecq and his entourage traveled to eastern Anatolia for an audience with the Ottoman sultan Süleyman the Magnificent and stopped at a dervish lodge near the town of Amasea. Their hosts told the embassy the story of a saint “whom they declare to be identical with our Saint George and to whom they ascribe the same achievements as we ascribe to our saint, namely, that he rescued a maiden by the slaughter of a huge and terrible dragon.”<sup>1</sup> So begins Baron de Busbecq’s account of Saint George in Islamic traditions, purportedly written in a letter to a fellow diplomat, Nicholas Michault, and published in his memoir, the *Turkish Letters*. In the *Letters*, Baron de Busbecq identifies the Muslim Saint George as “Chederle,” a translation of Hızır-Ilyas, the Turkish name for the fusion of the biblical prophet Elijah and the Qur’anic holy man / prophet Khidr (or al-Khidr). The commemoration of Hızır-Ilyas, which occupied a prominent position in the vernacular belief systems of Turks in Anatolia, overlapped with the feast day of Saint George.

Busbecq’s account of Hızır-Ilyas includes his slaying of a dragon to rescue a maiden, his activities as a military patron and savior who assists “the righteous” regardless of their religion, his drinking from the spring of immortality, and his journey as a companion of Alexander the Great. He sums up his report of Hızır-Ilyas with this pronouncement: “The Turks have no idea of chronology and dates, and make a wonderful mixture and confusion of all epochs of history; if it occurs to them to do so, they will not scruple to declare that Job was master of the ceremonies to King Solomon, and Alexander the Great his commander-in-chief, and they are guilty of even greater absurdities.” He continues with a list of “superstitions” related to Chederle and concludes: “I must not omit to mention that the Turks are much amused at the pictures of St. George, whom they declare was their own Chederle, in the Greek churches.”<sup>2</sup>

Busbecq tells the story of Hızır-Ilyas, whom he mistakenly believes to be identical to Saint George, from a Christian and Western European perspective. George was an Eastern Christian saint, renowned as a military patron and dragon slayer, who became extraordinarily popular in Europe during the Crusades. By the time Baron de Busbecq visited Ottoman Anatolia, George was so firmly entrenched in European devotions that Busbecq could refer to him as “our St. George.” More tellingly, his Muslim hosts could explain their own hero Hızır-Ilyas as a Muslim analog to George, revealing their in-depth knowledge of the Christian saint. The comparison is revelatory of long-standing hagiographic exchanges. Muslims revered Khidr as the Qur’anic companion of Moses, who joined him on his quest for knowledge and drank from the spring of immortality. His quest for knowledge associated him with another world explorer, Alexander the Great. Anatolian devotions frequently paired Khidr and George (as Mar Jirjis), and, over time, the two figures came to resemble each other. Just as Khidr acquired a dragon-slaying miracle, so George became known as a figure of rebirth.<sup>3</sup> This early modern encounter is more a parable of mistranslation than a sign of interfaith awareness and acceptance. Busbecq ridicules the Turks for their ignorance in a passage rife with his own misunderstandings. Still, the account reveals that, by the sixteenth century, an Eastern saint could be used in a cross-cultural encounter to help a foreigner understand the qualities of a local saint. The complex circuits of exchange that led to this situation are the subject of this book. It asks the question: how did Saint George become an exemplar and mediator of cross-cultural encounter in the eastern Mediterranean?

The story of Saint George, who would become one of the most important saints of the Middle Ages, begins in the early fourth century. There is scant evidence for a historical George, whose martyrdom circulated in two main versions. The most common one describes a general in the Roman army, who lived and died during the persecution campaigns of the Emperor Diocletian, which took place from 303 to 312. After leaving the army, George demanded that Diocletian cease persecuting Christians. To prove the power of Christianity, he performed extraordinary miracles of revivification and resurrection and endured horrific tortures, dying three times before his final execution. Each time God revived him, rejoining his dismembered limbs so that he might continue his struggle against the corrupt pagan ruler. After his death, George was interred at a shrine in Lydda, Palestine, where his relics worked miracles.<sup>4</sup> Likely composed during the fifth century, after the memory of the Roman persecutions had faded, the tale of the martyrdom of George offered a sensationalist and phantasmic story of imperial resistance and triumph.<sup>5</sup>

Over the course of the Middle Ages, George traversed the world. Having emerged in the eastern Mediterranean in the fifth century, his story traveled east along the Silk Roads, north through the fur routes into Kievan Rus’, south along the Nile into Ethiopia, and west across the Mediterranean into Europe.<sup>6</sup> Though veneration of George was not truly global, he was known across vast swaths of Afro-Eurasia. Indeed, by the

year 1400, he was venerated from Mosul to Moscow and from Ethiopia to England. His devotees included rival rulers, religious leaders, armies, and even Muslims. It is difficult to think of a postbiblical saint that enjoyed the same degree of mobility—let alone one whose global nature was celebrated as he crossed cultures. A fifteenth-century Greek hymn thus celebrates George as a universal patron by citing his veneration in a multitude of languages, cultures, and religions.<sup>7</sup> The extraordinary appeal of George was due, in part, to his unusual martyrdom, a bricolage of early Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian motifs and themes, synthesized to create something striking and new.<sup>8</sup> The story of George, native to no single culture, was available at all.

Representations of George played a key role in defining his persona as a powerful divine patron and universal hero for cross-cultural and cross-confessional audiences. A thirteenth-century portrait of George, today at the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai, depicts him as a youthful man, wearing a muscled cuirass over a richly patterned split skirt and blue tunic, a red cloak, and a general's sash tied about his chest (fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> He stands ready to fight, holding a spear aloft, wearing a sword suspended from a baldric, and resting his hand on a circular shield by his side. Framing this central portrait are narrative vignettes that represent episodes from his life and martyrdom, including his slaying of a dragon and the myriad tortures he endured. The scenes emphasize the inextricable link between image and narration in how beholders apprehended the meanings of the saint. They also foreground his universal appeal. Devoid of topological features or confessionally specific scenes, the image is designed to convey messages of Christian power and sanctity to the diverse audiences that visited Mount Sinai during the thirteenth century.<sup>10</sup> The addition of a donor portrait inscribed "Peter the Iberian (Georgian)" to George's side underscores his role as divine patron and adds further layers of encounter, between saint, devotee, local artists, and traveling Christians. In this sacred image, portrait and narrative scenes combine to present George as a model of sanctity and a protector for all peoples, regardless of confession or creed. George's easy translatability should alert us to the connectedness of devotional cultures, guiding our understanding of artistic and cross-cultural exchange in the Middle Ages.

Whether retold through texts or images, George's story presents an extraordinary example of global transmission and translation. The martyrdom first appeared in Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Latin, and Armenian in the fifth century.<sup>11</sup> From there it moved in multiple directions. Manuscript fragments in Sogdian (a Persian dialect that served as the lingua franca of central Asia) preserved at Turpan in China document its eastward trajectory.<sup>12</sup> After the seventh century, the story was rendered into Arabic, Persian, and Uighur, facilitating its transmission into Islamic traditions.<sup>13</sup> Around the tenth century, it was rendered into Georgian, Slavic languages, Nubian, and Ethiopian—though earlier knowledge of George in these communities is likely.<sup>14</sup> In the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, vernacular versions of the story began to appear in Germany, France, England, Italy, Spain, and elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> Astonishingly, in the course of its travels, George became



a combatant against the demons inhabiting Buddhist “idols,” the Islamic prophet Mar Jirjis, and a chivalrous knight. Yet he is best known as a warrior saint and dragon slayer. In this guise, he was designated the patron saint of far-flung places, including Georgia, England, Ethiopia, Russia, Catalonia, Malta, and numerous cities in Italy. The travels of George resonate with Geraldine Heng’s description of the story of Barlaam and Josaphat as a paradigm of “global multilingual encounter and *translatio*.”<sup>16</sup>

The corpus of medieval imagery associated with George is so vast that no single scholar can master it. Accordingly, most studies adopt one of several approaches. Art historians, such as Samantha Riches, have considered George within a single cultural milieu, focusing on pictorial traditions in medieval England.<sup>17</sup> Others have taken up a particular iconographic type, as exemplified in Georges Didi-Huberman’s investigation of George slaying the dragon in early modern Italy.<sup>18</sup> Most frequently, George is treated in studies that focus on a single icon, narrative cycles of his life, or a cluster of geographically related monuments.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, a number of articles have drawn attention to George’s cross-cultural peregrinations, typically charting the movement of images from the Byzantine Empire and Frankish States to Western Europe or transformations of his portrait within Mediterranean regions under Frankish rule.<sup>20</sup> The latter investigations, which form an important framework for this book, draw attention to the eastern Mediterranean as a launchpad for the long-distance circulation of George’s images. Less attention has been paid to the region as a crucible of cross-cultural imagery in its own right.

This book takes a different approach, investigating images of George as an exemplar of global translation in the eastern Mediterranean and Transcaucasia from the eleventh through fifteenth centuries. It thus encompasses a period of time that scholars of Islamic art typically divide into the era of the city-states (1050–1250) and the rise of “global empires” (1250–1450).<sup>21</sup> Ushered in by the Seljūk capture of Baghdad in 1055, the period of the city-states was marked by political fragmentation, as the Byzantine and caliphal empires gave way to these smaller polities. The Crusades and establishment of Latin Christian kingdoms in the Levant at the end of the eleventh century further transformed the East. For the next century, the regionalization of political authority fostered unprecedented mobility, bringing together peoples with formerly separate histories, religions, and languages. This region experienced another shock when, in 1258, the Mongols sacked Baghdad and incorporated parts of Anatolia, the Iranian Plateau, and Transcaucasia into a trans-Eurasian empire. Though Mongol rule lasted for less than a century, it set the stage for the emergence of strong political dynasties, including those of the Mamlūks and the Ottomans, who captured Constantinople in 1453. In this environment of continuously shifting alliances, geopolitical borders, and religious affiliations, devotions to George flourished, catalyzing the production of diverse image types that artists still employ today. Over the course of this period, image makers reenvisioned George as a divine military patron who intervened on the battlefield, a savior

FIG. 1  
Narrative icon of Saint George, attributed to the early thirteenth century. Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai, Egypt. Photo by permission of Saint Catherine’s Monastery, Sinai, Egypt / Photograph courtesy of Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to Mount Sinai.

of Christian souls who rescued the enslaved, a dragon slayer who combated the forces of evil, and a pagan slayer who exacted retribution against Christian persecutors. As I argue, the representations of George that emerged in this period performed a significant function, providing the diverse Christian communities of the eastern Mediterranean with a way to envision their place in a world of rival faiths and polities.

Over six chapters, the case studies in this book investigate how competing communities reconfigured George in accordance with local cultural values and agendas, instrumentalizing his story both to comment on the nature of cross-cultural encounters and to negotiate cross-confessional and political tensions. Different communities (and the constituencies within them) employed images of George to make claims about the relationship of their faith to the wider world. In his earliest incarnation as a military martyr, George provided a model for defying corrupt worldly rulers and a wondrous tale of dismemberment and revivification that captured the imagination of early Muslims. In reinventing George as a warrior saint, Christians sanctified military violence as a form of religious devotion, paving the way for the sacralization of warfare. In this guise, he performed military miracles that legitimized rival states and armies. As a dragon slayer, George came to embody ideals of manliness and chivalry that took shape through cross-cultural encounters. His miracles of liberation, in contrast, evoked and assuaged Christian fears and fantasies of conversion. Most striking, perhaps, Christians across the eastern Mediterranean regarded George as a real and symbolic victor over paganism—having returned to Earth after his death to slay his persecutors, he dramatized resistance to authority and the protection of Church autonomy. The miracles attributed to George afforded him many instrumentalities, making him a universal hero and a force of transformation in his own right.

This study places discrete groups of images, primary sources, and monuments, both secular and sacred, that depict or evoke George into historical context and traces the nature of their cross-cultural meanings and relationships. It considers hagiographic texts and chronicles, poetry and advice literature, religious polemics and eschatologies. To capture the image system that gave George his meanings and significances, it moves among local, regional, and transregional scales of analysis. I focus on thematic continuities, rather than confining sacred images to the realm of religious practice and thought. Though somewhat unorthodox, this approach uncovers larger dialogues in which the images participate, elucidating the stakes involved in evoking particular versions of George. The chapters move across multiple milieux, tracing themes in synchronic and, to a lesser extent, diachronic frameworks. Exploring diverse images from distinct historical contexts side by side is an unusual practice in the field of Byzantine art history. But it is only by moving beyond disciplinary boundaries and specializations, taking an approach that is both comparative and focused on specific images, that we can understand George's significance.

The emergence of George as a universal hero coincides with a period of profound instability in the East. Prior to the eleventh century, the region was governed by three major empires that competed with one another for territory and dominion. The dominant force in the Christian sphere was the Byzantine (or, as they called themselves, the Roman) Empire, with its capital in Constantinople. The Islamic world, in contrast, was divided among the 'Abbāsid Caliphate, based in Baghdad, and the Fāṭimid Caliphate, a counter-caliphate, with its capital in Cairo, which also ruled Jerusalem. Each of these states claimed universal authority, established alliances with neighboring territories, and maintained client-states in their hinterlands.

This uneasy balance of power came to an end in 1055, when armies from central Asia conquered Baghdad and established the Great Seljūk Empire. The Seljūks were nomadic ethnic Turks from the Eurasian steppes, who had long been in contact with the 'Abbāsid Caliphate. As early as the eighth century, the 'Abbāsids incorporated units of Seljūks into their armies, facilitating their gradual conversion to Islam over the course of the tenth century. The Seljūk invasions of the eleventh century, however, brought them to new political prominence. Though they claimed nominal allegiance to the caliph in Baghdad, the Seljūk sultans posed a significant threat to the authority of the 'Abbāsid Caliphate and also to the Fāṭimid Caliphate and Byzantine Empire. In 1071, Seljūk armies defeated Byzantine forces at the battle of Manzikert, establishing a foothold in the region and setting the stage for military campaigns in Anatolia. In 1095, after the loss of extensive territory, the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos (r. 1081–1118) wrote a missal to Pope Urban II requesting military aid against the Seljūks. Rather than sending the requested mercenaries, Urban II responded by delivering a speech at the Council at Clermont and raising a massive military force to wrest the Holy Land from Muslim control.

Events at the end of the eleventh century had a profound effect on both the eastern Islamic and Christian worlds. In the Islamic sphere, the Crusader campaigns, decline of Fāṭimid power, and death of the Seljūk Sultan Malik Shāh (r. 1072–92) destabilized the region. The fall of Jerusalem to the Crusader armies in 1099, followed by the establishment of Latin Christian kingdoms (the Frankish states), presented an ongoing threat to caliphal authority. It was not until the mid-twelfth century that Nūr al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn Zangī (r. 1146–74) raised a military force, galvanized by jihad and the promise of a Sunni revival, to regain Jerusalem. In 1171, his nephew Saladin defeated the Fāṭimids and, after Nūr al-Dīn's death, led a military campaign that ended with the successful liberation of Jerusalem in 1187. The Frankish states moved their capital to Acre and endured until 1291. From the twelfth through thirteenth centuries, the central Islamic lands witnessed a proliferation of small polities, as regionally based warlords replaced

the former caliphal empires. These included the Seljūk successor states in Anatolia and Iran, the Kurdish Ayyūbid Federation in Egypt and Syria, the Zangids and their Atabegs in Mosul, and the Artuqids in the upper reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, known as the “Jazira.” Rather than centralizing authority, the Seljūk, Kurdish, and Turkish dynasties that emerged in this period distributed power among multiple actors.

In the Christian sphere, the advent of the Seljūks, the establishment of the Frankish states, and the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204 resulted in the fragmentation of Byzantine hegemony. Although the Latin empire of Constantinople (1204–61) was short lived, it created conditions for the strengthening of the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia (1080–1375) and the Bagratid Georgian empire, both of which were poised to become the most powerful Christian states in the eastern Mediterranean. The fall of Constantinople also led to the establishment of three Byzantine successor states, including the empire of Nicaea (1204–1261), the despotate of Epiros (1205–1246), and the empire of Trebizond (1204–1461). In 1261, the Nicene emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1261–82) liberated Constantinople from Latin rule and reinstated the Byzantine Empire (1261–1453). Despite the revival of Byzantine rule in the city, the empire of Trebizond continued and even outlasted the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans. Throughout the period under investigation, each of these rival Christian states claimed universal rule and positioned themselves as the rightful heirs to the Byzantine/Roman legacy.

A further shock to the eastern Mediterranean came in the form of the Mongol conquests. Having proclaimed himself the ruler of the Great Mongol State in the Eurasian steppes in 1206, Chinggis Qan (Ghengis Khan) turned his attention westward. In rapid succession, Mongol armies forced the capitulations of the Armenians and Georgians in 1236 and of the Seljūks of Rūm and the empire of Trebizond in 1243. By the fourteenth century, the East was dominated by three strong political dynasties: the Ilkhanids (Turko-Mongols who were recent converts to Islam) based in Tabriz, the Turkic and Circassian Mamlūks in Cairo, and the Palaiologan Byzantines in Constantinople. These major dynasties were complemented by numerous smaller ones, including the Ottomans, who gradually incorporated Christian polities in the Balkans and Anatolia, setting the stage for the conquest of Byzantine Constantinople in 1453.

This study focuses on representations of George in Egypt, Syria, the Frankish Levant, Anatolia, and the lower Caucasus. In the period from 1000 to 1400, these regions were connected through their shared experiences of conquest, conflicts between settled communities and nomads, widespread migrations, and intensified circuits of exchange. The states that variously rose and fell in these places were all characterized by the fragmentation of political power, the fortification of urban landscapes, and the incorporation of linguistically, ethnically, and religiously diverse populations. At the elite level, religious affiliation was only one of several factors in forging military alliances and political allegiances. Marriage between Christians and Muslims was a common practice in the

period, which contributed to the creation of transcultural norms, artworks, and religious practices. Regional rulers also employed Eastern Christians at their courts, including Melkites, Maronites, Jacobites, Nestorians, and Copts. These communities were divided by distinct institutional histories, religious doctrines, and a host of cultural differences, including how to make the sign of the cross, the gesture of blessing, and their liturgical languages. Each claimed a privileged relationship with God, as the one true Christian community. The mixing of populations produced responses that ranged from a heightened awareness of religious differences to a tacit agreement to overlook them.

While this study touches on many of the places and peoples mentioned in this brief historical overview, its main foci are the Franks, Georgians, Anatolians, and Copts, all of whom claimed a special patronage relationship with George. It also considers other communities, such as the Jacobites and Trapezuntines, who employed George as a source of inspiration for transforming their own warrior saints. When viewed together, it is clear that the political conditions of the period engendered both widespread veneration of George and the proliferation of the images that continuously (re)defined his saintly nature.

## Image Networks

Most art-historical investigations of George in the East approach him through the lens of the Byzantine Empire, defining his significance through his role as a holy warrior and patron of the imperial army.<sup>22</sup> Well known to scholars of Byzantine culture and history, the holy warriors are an echelon of saints conceptualized and depicted as military heroes and referred to as “the generals” in Greek devotional literature. This expansive group included a smaller cohort of powerful patrons, known as the *megalomartyrs*, which comprised George, Theodore Stratelates (“the General”), Theodore Teron (“the Recruit”), Demetrios, Mercurios, Procopios, Sergios, and Bacchos. With the exception of Demetrios, all these saints served in the late Roman army and met their deaths after refusing to perform sacrifices to pagan gods.<sup>23</sup> While Sergios and Bacchos were companions, the other saints did not meet in life. They emerged as a distinct class during the period of Byzantine imperial expansion in the ninth and eleventh centuries, when artists began to envision the heavenly court through the lens of Byzantine *taxis* (order) and when they performed battlefield miracles on behalf of the army. Not coincidentally, it was during this period that Byzantine artists began to depict the saints in armor, replacing an earlier convention of portraying them as courtiers. Their militarization was affected, in part, through images.<sup>24</sup>

The eleventh-century mosaic program at the church of Hosios Loukas in Greece illustrates the representational system that Constantinopolitan artists developed. In the arch soffits supporting the main dome are paired images of divine generals, including



Saint George  
Between Empires

Procopios and Mercurios, Theodore Teron and Demetrios, and George and a now-lost companion. In accordance with hagiographic descriptions, George is portrayed as a youthful general with curly hair and a clean-shaven face, equipped with weapons and dressed in ceremonial Byzantine armor: a gilded cuirass over a tunic, a knotted sash about his chest, and a cloak (fig. 2). The other warrior saints wear variations on this armor, identifying them as a cohort based on their shared membership in the heavenly army. Differences in physiognomy, in conjunction with inscriptions, enabled beholders to distinguish the warrior saints from one another.<sup>25</sup> Together with military miracles, such images transformed the military martyrs into warrior saints, who, having died for Christ, returned to earth to defend the Orthodox ecumene.

There is little doubt that Byzantine elites played an influential role in elevating George's status and establishing his image. Image makers beyond the borders of the empire drew on the conventions seen at Hosios Loukas, suggesting that artforms pioneered in the capital were seen as a venerable source of authority. Yet to place the Byzantine Empire at the center of George's story is to overlook his trans-

cultural roots and trajectories. Indeed, even the Hosios Loukas George cannot be fully understood without reference to cross-cultural interactions since he appears in a church that displays pseudo-Arabic inscriptions on the exterior brickwork and the interior mosaic program. The former likely functioned as a trophy, recalling the tenth-century Byzantine conquest of the Muslim emirate of Crete, which was prophesized by Saint Luke (the titular saint of the church). Over time, pseudo-Arabic and Arabic became geographic signifiers of the Holy Land, and the pseudo-Arabic inscriptions on the shield of two of the warrior saints, Procopios and Demetrios, within the church have been interpreted by Alicia Walker as an attempt to "remind the viewer of the Christian duty

and ability to challenge [Muslim] subjugation” of the Holy Land.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the mosaics incorporate foreign script to signal Christian imperatives, appealing to local audiences steeped in older stories of Byzantine religious and military triumphs and new hopes for the liberation of Jerusalem. The church alerts us to the constitution of George’s image—and Byzantine art more broadly—through the interpenetration of various artistic heritages and shifting desires.

Indeed Hosios Loukas provides a familiar and discrete example of a larger phenomenon. In the period of the city-states, images took elliptical journeys along the trade routes connecting the polities of the eastern Mediterranean to one another and to more distant regions. Trade was not just in silk, metalwork, enameled glass, and spices but also in icons, manuscripts, and pilgrimage ampullae.<sup>27</sup> Some images provide remarkably direct evidence for the cross-confessional adaptation of George’s portrait in the eastern Mediterranean. Well known to scholars of Crusader art is the Freiburg leaf (fig. 3). Likely produced in the Levant by an upper Rhenish artist working in the Mediterranean around 1000, it depicts, in the upper half, a scene of Christ and Zacchaeus from Luke 19:1–6 and, in the lower half, images of George and Theodore on horseback.<sup>28</sup> The leaf, discovered in a municipal account book of 1655 in Freiburg, is a rare example of the models created and employed by traveling artists.<sup>29</sup> It renders the two warrior saints in sepia with red ink, closely following the format and pictorial details of icons and wall paintings produced in the Levant, Syria, and Cyprus.<sup>30</sup> The main features—the charging horse, upright spear, martyr’s crown, fluttering cape, and lamellar armor—can all be seen in a wall painting of Saint George in the church of the Panaghia at Asinou in Cyprus (fig. 4). Dated to the fourteenth century, the portrait similarly depicts George as an elegant equestrian warrior, wearing a lustrous embroidered textile, holding his spear aloft, and carrying a shield studded with gems and decorated with heraldic symbols. The latter takes the form of a cross in a crescent, a device used on Byzantine coins minted by the Komnenian dynasty, perhaps denoting a saintly allegiance with the empire.<sup>31</sup> The iconographic inspirations for these images are diverse, including Byzantine, Eastern Christian, and Frankish visual culture.<sup>32</sup> Both speak to interimperial encounters, the interactions between and within states.<sup>33</sup> Produced

FIG. 2 (OPPOSITE)

Mosaic of Saint George on arch soffit in naos, Hosios Loukas, Distomo, Greece, first half of the eleventh century. Photo: author.

FIG. 3

Saint George and Saint Theodore below Christ and Peter with Zacchaeus on the drawing known as the Freiburg leaf, attributed to the early thirteenth century. Freiburg im Breisgau, Augustinermuseum, inv. no. G. 23, fol. 1C, r. Photo: Hans-Peter Vieser / Augustinermuseum, Freiburg im Breisgau.



FIG. 4  
Fresco of Saint George in  
the narthex, church of the  
Panaghia, Asinou, Cyprus,  
fourteenth century. Photo:  
Alfredo Dagli Orti / Art  
Resource, New York.



during the period of Lusignan rule on Cyprus, the Asinou painting of George expresses Byzantine affiliations through the heraldic symbols on his shield, while the Freiburg leaf participates in a larger Frankish project of fostering relationships with eastern Mediterranean saints.

The Freiburg leaf also traces transcultural traditions of George, for its production speaks to Frankish adoptions of Eastern saints and devotional practices around sacred images. As the armies of the First Crusade marched across Anatolia toward Jerusalem, George became an ally in battle and a model for virtuous violence.<sup>34</sup> But the version of George the Franks encountered was already connected to broader cultural histories. In the eastern Mediterranean, ideas about the warrior saints as exemplars of violent piety developed in conjunction with an array of Islamic traditions. The concepts of spiritual warfare developed in books of jihad, treatises on the merits of jihad, and early hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad) indirectly prompted the production of Byzantine military treatises that overtly wedded military and religious practices, as well as Eastern Christian hagiographic texts that stage battles between the warrior saints and mujahideen, amplifying the similarities between them.<sup>35</sup> The images on the Freiburg leaf thus weave together iconographies and themes from several traditions: Greek, Arabic, Syrian, and Latin. It demonstrates not only the local reception of cosmopolitan forms but also the connected histories of Western European enterprises in the eastern Mediterranean.

Other images trace the adaptation of George's images across religious boundaries, as seen in a contemporary milieu shaped through successive waves of conquest and resettlement: Seljūk-ruled Anatolia. A painting of the Islamic angel Shāmḥūrāsh found in a late thirteenth-century copy of the *Daqā'iq al-ḥaqā'iq*, a Persian work on astrology and magic written by the geomancer and court astrologer Nāṣirī for the Seljūk sultan Kaykhusraw III, demonstrates the transmission of Christian motifs and themes within the medieval contact zone of Anatolia (fig. 5). Executed in muted tones, Shāmḥūrāsh is presented as a mature bearded man, riding a leaping horse and swinging his sword to strike a blow at an attacking dragon, whose scaly tail twists into a pretzel knot beneath his horse. The format of the image, in conjunction with the sinuous serpent, recalls portraits of George in the guise of a dragon slayer, which could be seen across Anatolia, the Jazira, and the lower Caucasus.<sup>36</sup> Though these often appeared in wall-painting programs, some took the form of sculpted apotropaia, as seen in the dragon-slaying George situated above the entry to the monastery of Mar Behnam in Mosul, which signifies the saint's defeat of demonic forces (and the people inspired by them) (fig. 6).<sup>37</sup> Like George, Shāmḥūrāsh battles a dragon, although he wields a sword instead of a spear. Viewed together, the Eastern Christian and Islamic images shed light on the transmission of pictorial motifs and ideas about divine protection, pointing to dynamic relations among the saint, peoples, and states.

Ranging from wholesale appropriation to piecemeal adaptations, the Freiburg leaf and painting of Shāmḥūrāsh reveal the interactive and improvisational nature of artistic production in the context of interimperial encounters.<sup>38</sup> In this way, both reinventions of George bear traces of how the regionalization of power generated new visual themes and forms. Most significant to this study is the fragmentation of the Byzantine Empire in 1204, which led to the rise of multiple and competing centers of production. Among them were Jerusalem, Sinai, Trebizond, Cilician Armenia, and Georgia. The rulers of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries systematically drew on earlier Byzantine court art to produce local transcultural monuments, at once appropriating and resisting Byzantine hegemony to create universalizing forms. Many of them employ pictorial lineages and themes of divine ordination, suggesting how the need to define one's place in the world was a primary motivation for artistic production in this period of shifting geopolitical borders.<sup>39</sup> If the desire to situate specific communities in relation to past and present cultures was a driving force behind artistic production, then visual translation, the transposition of motifs, and multidirectional influences became customary artistic modes.<sup>40</sup> Under these circumstances, the meanings of Byzantine (or "byzantinizing") styles were increasingly fluid and contingent. The artists of the period freely combined Constantinopolitan with local and regional styles, creating images of George that crossed older boundaries in order to redefine them.

The communities investigated in this book invented their own versions of George. To capture their meanings and significance, I approach George's portraits as part of



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خاتم اهل  
عالم و صانع  
عالم و صانع

دور ملک شمر و شمر اینست

خاتم طوق  
و کاه امان  
و کاه امان

از ملک و نوحان  
و نوحان و نوحان  
و نوحان و نوحان



FIG. 5 (OPPOSITE)  
The angel Shamhūrash, from  
*Daqā'iq al-ḥaqā'iq* Anatolia,  
mid- to late thirteenth century.  
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale  
de France, MS pers. 174, fol. 83.  
Photo: BnF.

FIG. 6  
Relief carving of dragon-slaying  
saint, entrance to the sanctuary  
("Royal Gate") of the Jacobite  
monastery of Mar Behnam /  
Deir al-Khiḍr, southeast Mosul,  
Iraq, thirteenth century. Photo:  
Yasser Tabbāa Archive, courtesy  
of Aga Khan Documentation  
Center, MIT Libraries (AKDC@  
MIT).

what I am calling an image network. By this I mean a set of overlapping and related image systems characterized by obscure origins, nonlinear trajectories, and a tendency toward the development of variations, resulting in a rhizomatic structure.<sup>41</sup> Images in these networks existed in a state of dynamic tension, in which no iteration of a theme was considered more original or authoritative than the others; that is, each image held equal miraculous power and validity, and images acquired their legitimacy through formal resemblances to one another rather than to any one prototype. The iteration of each image further gained meaning through its relationships to earlier, concurrent, or later versions of the same theme—as well as its intersection with other visual systems (including, but not limited to, sartorial codes and pictorial languages of imperial power). These systems were autopoietic in the sense that they contained inner mechanisms for their own dissemination.<sup>42</sup> George's portraits were able to move across devotional audiences because they thematized cross-cultural encounters (the joining of cultures through conquest, conversion, or seduction) or articulated universalizing themes (resistance to imperial authority or metaphysical union with the divine).<sup>43</sup> As his images crossed cultural lines, they were recontextualized to make sense to different audiences and to navigate local ethnic, religious, and political tensions. Each new image was thus not a neutral translation but a site of transformation embedded in "matters of local dominance, assertion, and resistance."<sup>44</sup> A fundamentally decentered phenomenon, the image network of George reflected and refracted the fragmented visions of the multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural communities of the medieval East.

In adopting the image network as a framework of analysis, I am following on the work of art historians and literary critics who have investigated the relational and contingent constitution of meanings in images and texts. Of particular importance is Daniel Selden's work on the text networks of antiquity, itself in dialogue with translation and systems theory.<sup>45</sup> Finally, this framework raises questions about the "work of the imagination" in transforming circulating forms to serve specific localities.<sup>46</sup> Focusing on the translation of George's story and portraits, I investigate their role in negotiating local and regional cross-cultural encounters. In doing so, I show that George was significant not just because he traveled across the medieval globe but also because of how he transformed as he crossed linguistic, cultural, and religious boundaries.

### George in the Connected Histories of the Medieval East

From roughly 1000 to 1400, the eastern Mediterranean facilitated the movement of George's story and images across trans-Eurasian paths of exchange. The ancient Greek geographer Ptolemy conceived of this expanse as the "Afro-Eurasian ecumene," a conception articulated in the visualizations of Eurasian mapmakers.<sup>47</sup> Viewed from a global and historical perspective, the eastern Mediterranean was central to the political, economic, and religious developments of the period. It played a vital role in facilitating the circulation of goods and people, joining Western Europe to Asia through both sea routes and overland networks, which extended across northern Africa, the western Asian Plateau, the Caucasus, and the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>48</sup> The eastern Mediterranean was the historical and cultural center for Christian and Islamic peoples, defined by Mecca, Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Baghdad. By the fourteenth century, it was seen also as the center of George's saintly domain. A portolan chart produced circa 1321 by the Genoese mapmaker Pietro Vesconte, employs portraits of Saint George and Saint Francis to frame the eastern Mediterranean, defining the region through its connection to a warrior saint and a mendicant, who sought to join cultures through conversion (fig. 7).<sup>49</sup>

In focusing on the East, this book acknowledges several decades of work on premodern world systems that identify the eastern Mediterranean as the center of numerous intersecting world systems. In *Eurocentrism*, political theorist Samir Amin recasts the medieval West as a part of a "regional [tributary] system" centered in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>50</sup> His work echoes that of Janet Abu-Lughod, who proposed the existence of a thirteenth-century world system centered on the eastern Mediterranean some four decades ago.<sup>51</sup> By taking the *longue durée*, historians have revised standard narratives in the field, revealing that many of the developments associated with early modern Europe have their roots much earlier and farther east—or south—than has long been assumed.<sup>52</sup> The same strain of scholarship has uncovered considerable links between Christianity and Islam, challenging scholarship that separates East from West, Christianity from

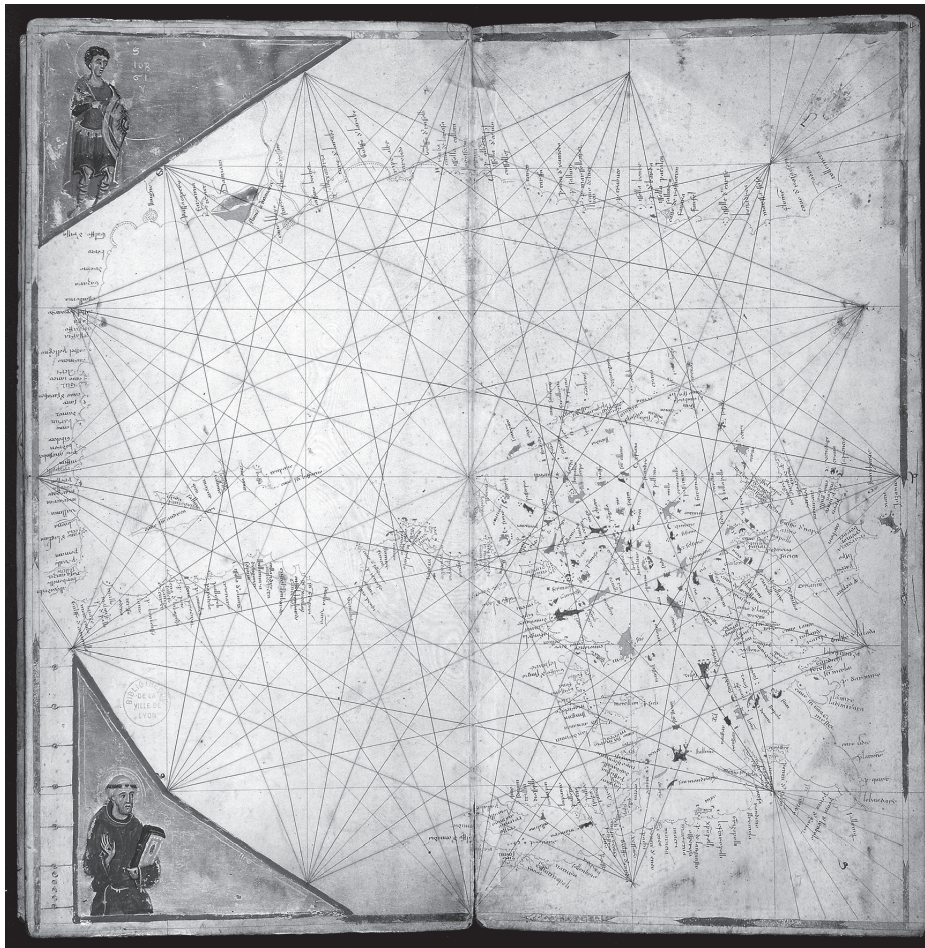


FIG. 7  
Saint George and Saint Francis  
on the portolan chart of  
Petrus Vesconte, 1319. Lyon,  
Bibliothèque municipale, MS  
175, fol. 4. Photo: Bibliothèque  
de la Part-Dieu—Lyon.

Islam, and the Middle Ages from the early modern era.<sup>53</sup> This body of scholarship calls on us to investigate what Sanjay Subrahmanyam calls “connected histories” and to retrain our focus on the medieval East, which has seldom received the nuanced attention it deserves.<sup>54</sup>

Most studies of exchange in the Middle Ages trace East-West relations, reinforcing the centrality of traditional disciplinary foci and undermining the supposed openness of global approaches. Instead I investigate the relations among Eastern Christian communities (the Copts, Jacobites, Melkites, Georgians), Latins, Byzantines, and Muslims, paying attention to how they employed art to constitute themselves dialectically in relation to one another and an array of Islamic polities, each with its own internal diversities.<sup>55</sup> Numerous art-historical studies that focus on interactions between the Christian and Islamic polities of the East have paved the way for this study, along with investigations of Arabic-speaking Christian societies.<sup>56</sup> These investigations have done important work in revising long-standing assumptions regarding center-periphery relations, which cast

the Byzantine imperial court as the major innovator in art and culture and “peripheral courts” as imitators, producing lower-quality works that “misunderstand” their models.<sup>57</sup> The renewed attention to exchange, in particular, has exposed the poverty of this model and points to the importance of what Eva Hoffman calls “pluritopic models.”<sup>58</sup> This aligns with the aims of global histories, which call for an investigation of networks, multiple centers of production, horizontal ties, and rhizomatic structures.

Studying the eastern Mediterranean region in a cross-cultural and comparative perspective presents numerous challenges. Faced with the extremely fluid nature of its ethnic, religious, and political composition, most scholars have chosen to focus on single regions or polities rather than on broader histories.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps the most difficult aspect of studying the eastern Mediterranean is the persistence of local languages (such as Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, and Hebrew), the diversity of imperial languages (Greek, Arabic, and Persian), and the late eleventh-century introduction of Latin and romance languages. To further complicate matters, many communities produced texts in which their own language was written in Arabic script. Mastering all these languages is a daunting—if not impossible—task. Yet Xinru Liu’s work on the interaction of Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Roads demonstrates the value of working with texts in translation, as I do.<sup>60</sup> Working with translations cannot replace knowledge of primary languages. Yet when approached with cultural sensitivity, translations can enable us to produce a more accurate and nuanced understanding of historically complex regions and places.

By investigating the circulation and localization of George through his portraits, this study engages recent work on “worlding” in medieval literary studies. As defined by Sharon Kinoshita, this concept refers both to the study of literature within a global context and to a critical stance that emphasizes the contingency of global and historical trajectories. The latter urges us to consider historical trajectories that bypass the route that leads from antiquity to the Renaissance.<sup>61</sup> Uncovering these histories necessitates an investigation of literature and cultural production in relation to the functioning of social power and the politics of translation in premodern tributary empires. This book “worlds” representations of George by focusing on how they were continuously translated among the communities of the eastern Mediterranean, each of which employed the saint to navigate the tensions inherent to tributary empires, which were characterized by a particular dynamic. They simultaneously incorporated local communities and subordinated them within hierarchical orders of diversity, creating refractory elements that posed a continual threat to the stability of the state.<sup>62</sup> Capturing these transactions requires paying attention to both the instrumentalization of George’s images and textual evocations of him, which relied on a network of meanings to make sense to audiences and patrons.

Rather than attempting to document every instance of cross-cultural imagery, I focus on themes that elucidate the phenomenon of George’s transcultural nature.

Each chapter investigates the mechanisms that enabled George to move across different communities, how local adaptations of his image negotiated political and interfaith relations, and how the interplay of Christian and Muslim cultures shaped his cross-cultural circulations. The Georges discussed here often straddle military engagements and religious polemics, pointing to this period as one in which both creative imagination and destruction inspired artistic production.

The book begins with a key aspect of the George legend, his veneration by Muslims, which contributed to Christian perceptions of his influence and aura. Chapter 1, “A Muslim in the Faith of Jesus,” traces the adaptation of George into Islamic traditions, focusing on his shrine in Lydda, the translation of his martyrdom into Arabic, and his role in mediating interfaith encounters in Seljūk Rūm, where the Sufi poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273) employed George as a figure of renewal, offering an invitation to Christians and ensuring his place in Byzantine anti-Islamic polemics. George was not, of course, solely a figure of rebirth. Indeed he was best-known as a holy warrior, and chapter 2, “Holy Warriors and Imperial Aspirations,” investigates how the Frankish states and the kingdom of Georgia employed George as a military patron, placing him at the center of a medieval political language based on holy war and supporting rival claims to the Byzantine imperial heritage. Viewed in relation to contemporary Islamic discourses of jihad, this iteration of George emerges as a Christian analog for a militarized Prophet Muḥammad. Turning to George’s most famous incarnation, chapter 3, “Dragons and Charismatic Heroes,” investigates representations of George and the dragon in Georgia and Anatolia. Reading Christian and Islamic images together reveals comparable processes of composition in which different confessions adapted stories of dragon slayers from rival communities to promote their own agendas. The resultant images employed a visual language that at once indicated religious superiority and extended an invitation to conversion. Chapter 4, “The Culture of Slavery and the Salvation of Souls,” turns to representations of George rescuing a captive, a popular theme in the thirteenth-century Frankish Levant that redefined the military patron as the savior of souls. These images, I argue, expressed Christian fears of conversion in the context of slavery, relating them to transcultural literature that employed enslaved servants—often cupbearers—to explore themes of cultural seduction, the captivation of the captor, and same-sex desires.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to community-specific images of George, elucidating how Eastern Christian communities mobilized a period-wide language of spiritualized warfare and divine patronage to advance their own confessional agendas. Turning to Egypt, chapter 5, “Spiritual Combat and Coptic Authority in Ayyūbid Egypt,” investigates Coptic monastic representations of George slaying non-Christian enemies who insult or injure the Church. I relate paintings of George as the defender of Church autonomy to contemporary ecclesiastic politics, arguing that monastic audiences would have seen George as both a model of spiritual combat against human enemies of the faith and

a source of authority during a period of eroding commitment to Church leadership. The final chapter, “Jacobite Histories of the Crusades,” considers how representations of George served as a model for those of the Syrian saint Sergios as a Crusader hero during a period in which Jacobite religious elites sought to assert their place in the new world order created by the Crusader victory at Jerusalem in 1099. Focusing on Jacobite monastic art, I read portraits of Sergios and his companion Bacchos bearing crusader standards in relation to contemporary religious polemics, which redefined the significance of the Jacobites within eschatological and providential histories reconceived in relation to the First Crusade. In a similar fashion, images of Sergios as a Crusader attributed to Syrian saints the liberation of the Holy Land, foregrounding Jacobite pride and preeminence.

Together these chapters reveal the fundamental mutability of saintly identities during the period of the small states and emergence of new imperial dynasties. By focusing on adaptations of George, the book shows a process of mutual transformations, in which different confessional communities changed, remade, and imprinted images of the saint, to fashion their relationships—whether bellicose, antagonistic, or welcoming—to one another.