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Dying Again and Again – Remarks on the Legend of Saint George in Jindřichův Hradec (Neuhaus)

The legend of Saint George, painted on the walls of one of the rooms of the castle at Jindřichův Hradec (Neuhaus/Böhmen) in 1338, belongs to the largest monumental vitae of the Saint, important for many countries in both Western and Eastern Europe. The cycle contains the motif of the repeated death and resurrections, which has the roots reaching back to the oldest legends of Saint George. The first attempts to rationalize legendary reports about multiple deaths and resurrections have been made by the Church as early as around 500 in the East and possibly in the 7th century in the West. Nevertheless, the versions of the legend, which contains repeated dying and resurrections did not lose its influence on the imagination of subsequent generations. The efforts of the Church to remove the improbable and unbelievable moments from the legend were only partially successful.

The first death of Saint George shown in the cycle stands at the peak of a sequence composed from very drastic scenes. The martyr was boiled in the cauldron full of molten lead, hung over a burning fire, cut into the pieces. The pieces of his body are boiled again and buried. The following picture changes the drastic tone of the narrative into a message of hope: George is resurrected by Christ with an assistance of angels. Typically for the argumentative strategy of the cycle, these images are combined with the fight against idolatry. After some missing scenes he is beaten and killed again by being cut into seven pieces. Thereafter he is buried and once more resurrected. The iconography of death reaches its peak at the end of the cycle. Firstly, the common death of George with Alexandria, the converted wife of Dacian, was represented. The image of their martyrdom contrasts with the death of Dacian and his followers, burned by heavenly fire.

Owing to the miracles, the saintly hero was able to overcome his own death and his prayer had the power to raise people from death. The complicated question of the moments of continuity between Christian thought about death and resurrection and its pagan predecessors should be seen in context of the history of ideas about resurrection in Christian culture. The bits of saintly body, buried in the ground, closely associate with the seed metaphor, used already by Saint Paul (I Cor. 15.42-44), which could be read as a commentary to the resurrections of Saint George. Nevertheless, the resurrections of George resulted primarily not in a spiritual body, but in a material recreation of the natural body. This rather materialist interpretation of the resurrection was formulated in the first centuries of Christian era.

The social and psychological functions of seemingly illogical dying and resurrections in their historical contexts could work with the military metaphor, used already by Tertullian, stressing the value of ascetic life of the soldiers as a preparation for martyrdom. He also promised that the body will not suffer even during the torture, if their mind will be in the Heaven. The martyrs could surely offer an example for mediaeval soldiers, departing for a heavy and risky fight. This surely contributed to the cult of Saint George among the crusaders.

On many places of Europe, the scenes of martyrdom of the Saint and of his fight against pagan idolatry were offering a direct ideological support for crusading military activity. The large coats of arms of noblemen, placed in a long row under the pictorial narrative, represented participants of the crusades in Lithuania and Prussia. The warriors from different countries were united under the flag of Saint George (*vexillum* or *bandarium sancti Georgii*). The room with the legend could serve as a meeting place of noblemen, who should be motivated for the next crusade against the heathen adversaries. The images might give the knights powerful inspiration; hope in supernatural intervention and a shining role model on how to confront the physical suffering.