The Chimera of Saint George

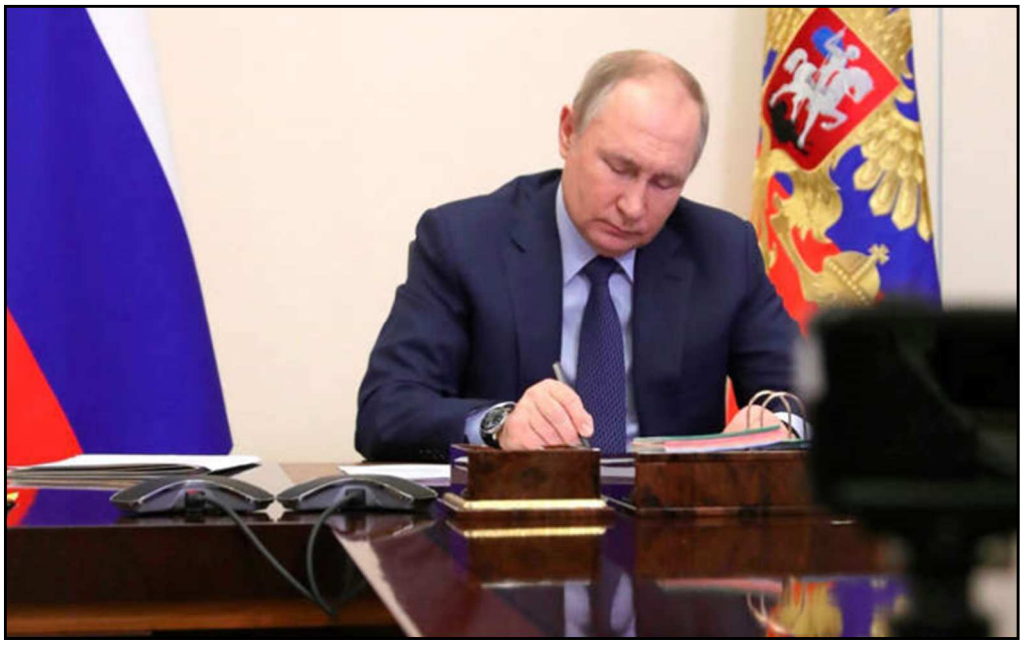
Dominic Kirkham says some things are not quite what they seem.

I owe this reflection to Vladimir Putin, and also a coincidence. Perhaps you have noticed that when the President of Russia presents himself to the world on TV his preferred position is at a business -like desk between two flags. As befits a tyrant he speaks with solitary authority. But he is also a man keenly aware that symbolism also speaks – remember that twenty foot table at his meeting with President Macron? So those two flags are important if you take the trouble to notice them.

On his right side is the national flag, the rather plain tricolour of white, blue and red (originally copied from the Dutch by the czar, Peter the Great – he just changed the positioning of the colours), but on his left side is the presidential standard created in 1994 that incorporates the old imperial crest of the double headed eagle bearing a central image of St George slaying the dragon. You will perhaps notice that when this flag is draped next to Putin, it is folded so that it shows clearly the icon of St. George, patron and protector of Russia.

At first sight the care taken to display the image of St George might seem incongruous from a man who grew up with no religious allegiance and became an agent of a militant atheistic state. But Putin is a man who has realised not only the importance of religious belief and symbolism as a factor of political power but also its historic role in shaping the national identity of Russia. A cynic might say he sees the utilitarian value of religion but there are indications that he takes it seriously, so much so that Patriarch Kirill has described his rule as 'a miracle of God' and given him enthusiastic support. They have visited the cathedral of Saint Sophia in Kiev, the burial place of the first Kievan princes and birthplace of Russian Christianity.

What is clear from Putin's reflections on Russian identity, particularly his speech on the eve of his 'special military operation' in Ukraine, is that he regards the religious history of Ukraine and Russia as indivisible and seminal to national identity. Integral to this understanding of history is the Orthodox doctrine of the three Romes: that two Romes (Rome and Constantinople) have fallen, the third (Moscow) stands, and a fourth there will not be. This medieval concept is endorsed by Kirill, entitled Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, who has blessed the current 'special military operation' as a holy war and crusade of reunification, distributing icons of the Mother of God to the Russian National Guard to ensure its success. In this narrative Russia always providentially triumphs over adversity, good over evil, as did St. George



It certainly informed the content of his February speech in which he denied the right of Ukraine to exist and derided dissolute Western liberalism with its post-Christian perversions, such as gay rights and trans-gender advocacy. It is a

narrative that is clothed in Christian garb and is encapsulated in that icon of a militant St George that hangs just to the left of Putin's shoulder, the silent embodiment of all he says.

An empire of violence

It was whilst listening to this speech on the TV that I was struck by a remarkable coincidence, for I had just been watching a documentary on the mosaics discovered at the site of the Roman villa of Lullingstone in Kent. Not much connection there you may think, other than that one mosaic depicted exactly the same image as that on Putin's flag – and I mean exact in almost every detail. The mosaic had originally been discovered in the 1750s by some labourers digging postholes to fence a deer park, but nothing more was thought about it until further excavations in the 1950s. What these excavations revealed was the remarkable story of a villa that had been commissioned by a wealthy family in the latter part of the first century CE, possibly as a seat for a provincial governor. It had continued to be added to for a further three centuries. It was at a later date in the fourth century that the aforementioned mosaic is thought to have been created.

The image of the mosaic – a writhing creature being pierced by the lance of a mounted warrior – is, like the accompanying mosaic of the rape of Europa by Zeus (Jupiter), a representation of extreme violence. Such scenes of violence were created for admiration, even amusement, and seem to have been favoured by the Romans, since they were widespread across empire. It is indicative of the systemic violence of Roman culture and the Roman Empire that contradicted the narrative of sophistication and civilisation.

The Christian transformation

But the excavations at Lullingstone give an unexpected twist to this story. As the villa expanded, rooms were added over the centuries, so too were different decorations. One cellar room was known as the 'cult room' It had a well and a spring and was decorated by water nymphs, though these had later been replaced by busts of other figures.

In another room, that had been added in the fourth century, archaeologists found plaster fragments that when reassembled revealed six

standing figures with outstretched arms in the traditional prayer posture, *orans*, of early Christians. Another symbol found was the so-called *chi-rho* that uses the first two Greek letters of the name 'Christ'. The dating of these art works is exactly the period when the new secretive cult of Christianity was spreading across the empire and the room itself could well have served as a house-church – amongst the earliest of its kind ever to be found – dating from the time that the empire had become officially Christian. Thus the changing structures of the villa coincided with the changing structures of belief.

What Lullingstone reveals is a unique insight into the arrival of Christianity in Britain. But what it also reveals is the surreptitious nature of this period of transition. In this it reflected the nature of the movement that became Christianity. The beliefs of the villa's owners changed from paganism, but at first in a seemingly secretive way. Is this the reality behind the *chi-rho* symbol? Did the well in the cult room become a baptistery? The acrostics on the walls are indicative of the original phase of Jesus groups across the empire, whose members identified themselves through a secretive language. The empire's oppressive official ideology was elided and even subverted by a new ideology concealed in the hidden messaging.

Amongst the later addition was the large dining room where the floor mosaics, mentioned above, were located. They indicate that the owners were well versed in classical mythology. As well as the abduction of Europa by Zeus (Jupiter), there can be little doubt that the other mosaic is of the Greek Pegasus myth, depicting the hero Bellerophon, mounted on Pegasus, slaying the fire-breathing chimera (a composite mythical monster that has since become synonymous with any

grotesque product of the imagination). But here the story itself becomes chimerical. The mosaics are topped by Latin inscriptions. By starting with the first letter of the second line and then taking every eighth letter that follows it is possible to spell out the name 'Jesus'. Or is this just conjecture based on coincidence?

The martyr's testimony

Today we may instinctively want to identify this image as St. George. But why? At the date the mosaics were being created the martyrdom of an insignificant legionary at the other end of the empire had only recently taken place. There is no reason to think that in such a short space of time it could have gained such prominence and in such complex symbolic form to earn a place in a prestigious villa so far removed from the event.

Of the real St George we know very little, other than the tradition that he was a Cappadocian soldier martyred in the early fourth century (303) during the reign of the emperor Diocletian (284-305). As with other martyrs of the time he probably died for refusing to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor or participate in the pagan cult. I mention these details mainly for their dates. The fact is that whatever you may think about the image on the floor of Lullingstone or on Putin's flag, it predates the hagiography of St George. What we may think we are looking at is perhaps not what we are looking at. Indeed, the later image may even subvert the original reality.

The martyrs in the early Jesus movement offered, above all, a re-imagination of power; 'The representation of violence and the purpose of violence in the *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*… repurpose these stories so that dominant forms of social power might be disrupted and potentially displaced.' In other words the death of the martyrs represented a subversion of the normal social reality of imperial power and the violence that accompanied it. In their sufferings the martyrs showed they despised death in favour of another reimagined end beyond death and a radically new way of life associated with this belief. They sought to live by different values that contrasted significantly with the social mores of the empire. But these were not militant zealots or frenzied jihadists. The early martyrs were not embarked on a campaign of military confrontation. They were ordinary men and woman living peaceful lives seeking a kinder world. One might even say it was their very pacifism that was the greatest contrast and challenge to a violent empire.

This perspective changes our understanding of St. George. The aura of militancy that came to be associated with his name disappears. Gone is the blood lust and addiction to violence typified in that most Roman of institutions, the gladiatorial contests of the amphitheatre. Gone is the discriminatory division of society into social groups and the patriarchal domination of the *paterfamilias* and deified emperor. Gone is the exclusion of women, slaves and aliens from positions of status. Instead there came a new but modest affirmation of different values: of individual worth, of a disregard for social or sexual status, of communal sharing and service, of the renunciation of violence, of a life that transcended the confines of empire and even this world. If such values subverted the empire then so be it, but it was not a militant confrontation: St. George was a victim who disdained victimisation.

A subverted saint

One cannot avoid the conclusion that this representation emerged in the later context of an imperial Christianity, intent on imposing its beliefs with the same ruthlessness as that of pre-Christian emperors imposing their own cult on hapless populations. In 303 CE the pagan emperor Diocletian declared war on the Christian Church. In 391 CE the vehemently orthodox Christian Theodosius declared war on pagans. This could, according to some accounts, be represented as a virtuous thing, the triumph of good over evil, and if so the mythological story and image of Bellerophon could indeed be seen as appropriate. In the gospels we see Jesus presenting a view that there is a way of living that counters the barbarism of the occupiers. Within this view St. George overcomes the dragon (the occupying forces) in much the same way as the Kingdom of God overcomes worldly kingdoms.

But if this is to be the case, it represents a further subversion. The 'violence' of the Kingdom of God that routs the proud of heart and casts princes from their thrones is a metaphor for the radicality of a new way of life that includes love for one's enemies and doing good to those who

persecute you. This is a programme beyond the power of any empire to implement or even to comprehend. In time, the witness of the martyrs as a subversion of imperial power through personal affirmation, rather than militant confrontation, itself became subverted to justify a further expression of imperial power. The story of St. George becomes a chiasm that takes us back to the violent point of origin, rather than forward to a new reality of a life transformed.

And that brings us back to Putin's imperial flag. This is indeed an imperial icon and one expressive of an imperial power. But it is a pagan mythological representation that has nothing to do with the gospel teaching of love and service, peace and reconciliation. It is the expression of a militant nationalism and a church that claims descent from the warrior princes of Kiev, and of Vladimir the Great, who in 988 threw the Kievan idols into the Dnieper and then compelled its people to be baptised. As with so many other rulers of the time this was part of a strategy of enhancement and consolidation of power.

And so it is to our modern day Vladimir, who seeks to be great and is blessed by the patriarch in his holy crusade. Yet it is not a military thrust from the West that is the real threat but the different values that are contrary to everything his regime stands for. It is a confrontation that replicates that of the Roman martyrs, such as St George, in their stand against imperial power. What confronts us now is his chimera. To promote the image of St George to become an emblem of empire, as does Vladimir Putin, is to subvert the martyr with his chimera.

Dominic Kirkham is a writer and local activist.

So much owed by so many

They're comparing the virus pandemic
to the last war – one ex-sufferer says
the Spitfire pilots of today are the NHS heroes.
Quite right too. *Never was so much owed*
by so many to so few. And you can parse Winny's
words any way you like – so few doctors,
so few nurses, too few coronavirus tests.
We weren't prepared for the pandemic
nor in 1939 were we really prepared for war.

But it's the 1945 comparison that will
be crucial – when we British turned
our backs on Winny and voted for a different
Britain – for the welfare state, nationalisation
of ramshackle railways and private coal,
most tellingly for Nye Bevan's NHS.
It was a master stroke for so many,
like my Mum and Dad who relied on
savings clubs pre-war, though the benefit
for the many was resisted by Harley Street.

Will something similar happen this time?
There's no shortage of desirables –
fewer polluting air miles, no diesels
near schools, no cruise ship megaliths,
no tax breaks, no fake news, no spin.
Can 'community' be a priority for policy-makers
again, can the values unearthed by the lockdown
be perpetuated nationwide at least?
Can we be prepared for the next crisis,
for living on the edge rather than down the middle?
All things are possible but – beware! –
some remember not 1945, but the depressions
of 1929, 2008 and the corresponding bounce-back.

David Perman

This poem is reprinted with permission from David Perman's *Collected and New Poems,* reviewed on page 26.