

ST CHRISTOPHER

From: Historical and Antiquarian Notes, Gawsorth Church, Nr Macclesfield, Cheshire. Ancient Mural Paintings. By Joseph F A Lynch dated 1879.

Several versions are given of this subject; but I believe I shall be correct in saying that the most authentic source is that from the "Legenda Aurea", as to the general treatment of it in Europe. I should have to extend to a considerable length were I to enter upon the numerous features of this history in the East, it will, however, be enough for my purpose to give the popular version as known in this country. The authority I have named says, "He is represented as a heathen giant determined to seek the strongest king he can find, he discovers one, but whenever the devil is mentioned he crosses himself. Christopher sees this, and fears the Devil; consequently he seeks him and goes into his service, but soon discovers that he is afraid in the presence of a cross.



Christopher now leaves the service of Satan, and goes off in quest of Christ. In his journey he finds a hermit, who gives him instruction and tells him to pray. Christopher then carries travellers across a river as an act of charity and reparation. One night a voice calls him, and on going out he finds a little child, whom he takes on his shoulders to carry over, but he found the weight enormous, and when he had placed the child on the other side he said, "You seemed to weigh as heavy as the whole world," and the child replied, "Well said, Christopher, I created the world, I redeemed the world, I bear the sins of the world," and disappeared.

Such is the beautiful legend on which this painting is based, and the narrative is fully carried out. It will be noticed that the hermit holds a lantern in his hand to guide Christopher across the river – an effort to convey to the spectator the time of the occurrence. Lower down is the figure of a man fishing introduced, so as to impress the observer with the enormous proportions of St Christopher,

who is wading through the river. The upper part of the picture is occupied by a windmill and a ship, near which, on the right shore, is a part of a city, with a tower surmounted by a cross. The hermit would appear to have just come from his cell, the gable end of which is shown. On the top is a small spiral belfry containing a bell, to which is attached a rope, the end being apparently held by him, as if tolling it, so as to still further assist the journey of Christopher across. Behind the man fishing will be noticed a bird enjoying a stolen feast on the bait in the form of a worm. Between him and the shore will be seen two fishes he has already caught, but of very small proportions. Near this side is a small boat with three figures. Several fishes are depicted in the water near the feet of Christopher. On the right shore area there were a few trees of absurd proportions. A winged animal appears to follow in the track of the saint, illustrating Satan, who is enraged at Christopher's conversion.

This painting was in moderate preservation, but owing to the want of perspective, can only be compared to a Chinese effect. The gilding was very bright; the colour was laid in large washes, the green used for the shore, on both sides, being evidently mixed at one time, the trees and other objects being painted after. To obtain the irregular effect of the earth at the side of the water, recourse was had to "hatching", which also appears in parts of the drapery, dark lines were used to assist in giving effect to the water. The saint is in the act of looking up at Our Lord with astonishment, leaning on a huge staff, taken from a tree, and from which the branches had been cut. He wears a turban and kind of tunic, the costume being Eastern; an ermine collar is secured by a circular ornament containing a cross in gold. The figure of Our Lord, as a child, is kneeling on Christopher's shoulder. He is in the act of giving his blessing, with the right hand raised in the Latin manner. The head is surrounded by a somewhat oval-formed nimbus, containing a cross. The garment is red. The colour had decayed at the top part of the painting, leaving a few lines indicating the objects I have described, and was very indistinct in the space occupied by the river, the red, green, brown, black, and warm sienna tones being well preserved. With this last was painted the banks of the shore, and a broad line enclosed with black round the whole painting, which on the left, near the base, had to follow the form of the head of the north door.

St. Christopher was regarded in the middle Ages as the symbol of the triumph of the grace of God over Satan. This subject also holds an interesting place in the history of the typographic art in this country, on account of it being the first known wood engraving in the year 1432. This engraving, in the general arrangement, is like the Gawsorth painting, the difference being that the saint is crossing in the opposite direction – from the left to the right.