

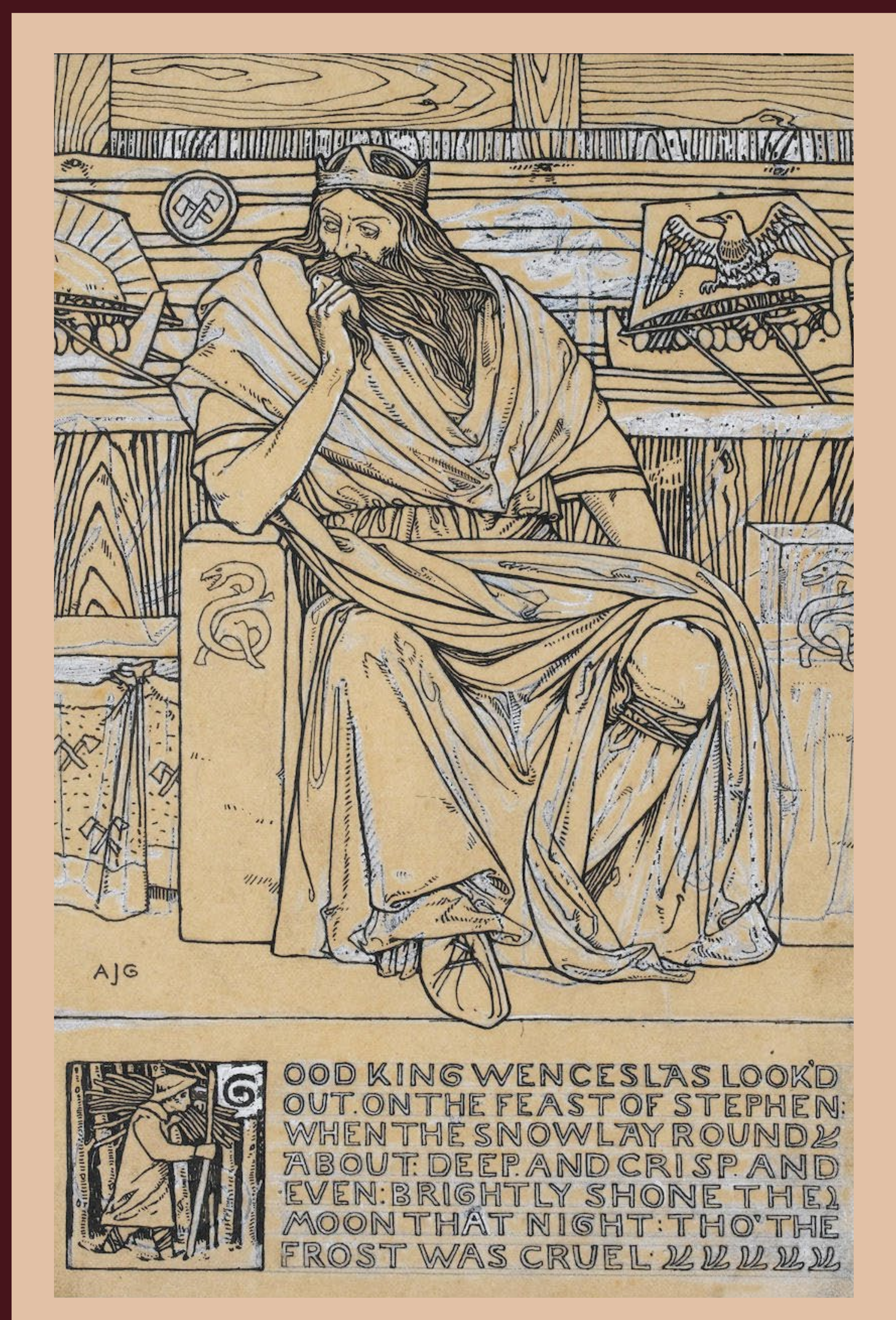


Equestrian statue of Saint Wenceslas I, Duke of Bohemia, Prague

GOOD KING WENCESLAS

The lyrics to the traditional carol “Good King Wenceslas,” were written in 1853, by the English hymnist John Mason Neale. The tune, however, dates to the thirteenth century and was written originally as an Easter song, “Tempus adest floridum” (“Eastertime has come”). The story told in Neale’s version of the song, is that of Wenceslas I, Duke of Bohemia, who lived from 907 until 935, when he was murdered by his younger brother. Wenceslas traditionally received the title of “good” in contrast to his wicked brother Boleslaus the Cruel. In his lifetime, Wenceslas was never actually a king. Holy Roman Emperor, Otto I, conferred the title of “king” several decades after Wenceslas’s death.

The legend of Wenceslas, as told in the traditional carol, takes place on the Feast of Saint Stephen, the Second Day of Christmas. Upon looking out the window of his castle, Wenceslas sees a poor peasant walking in the snow, gathering sticks for a fire. Wenceslas summons his page and asks the boy if he knows the man and where he lives. The page replies that the man lives quite a distance away near the fountain of Saint Agnes. Wenceslas tells his page to gather food, drink, and fuel, and the pair set off to find the man in order to share a Christmas feast with him.



Following his death in 935, Wenceslas was revered as a martyr and, eventually, a saint. In the carol, Wenceslas performs a miracle when he tells his page to follow in his footsteps through the blinding snow and cold. His footprints are imbued with Holy light and warmth and keep his page from freezing to death.

Wenceslas is the patron saint of the Czech Republic. In the center of the capital city of Prague stands a statue of the saint on horseback, clad in medieval armor. Legend says, that when the Czech homeland is threatened by destruction, the statue will come to life, and Wenceslas will raise an army of sleeping knights and slay the enemies of the Czech people.

Arthur Joseph Gaskin, Good King Wenceslas
Pen and ink, ca. 1893

