

Obscure Objects of Desire: Is this the Real Holy Grail?

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The first literary appearance of the grail occurs in an unfinished romance by Chrétien de Troyes, dated to about 1190 in which a young knight attends a feast at the castle of a mysterious king. During the meal, he sees an object (identified as a 'grail.' Chretien's work, *Perceval ou Le conte du Graal*, breaks off before the end, but other romances completed the story or offered versions of their own. The grail provides sustenance, both real and spiritual. Its owner (either a lame or sick king) lives in a mysterious castle (sometimes surrounded by magically barren land) and can only regain his health if a knight asks a certain question. Initially the knight fails, but, after many adventures, finally asks the question which cures the grail king. No consensus exists as to the fate of the grail or its exact nature and appearance, although, for the most part, medieval romances identified the object with the cup used by Christ during the Last Supper when he instituted the sacrament of the Mass. These romances are compelling fictions, but for some readers fiction is not sufficient, and various theories have been suggested which offer alternative explanations or which seek to establish the claims for some physical object as the actual cup used at that event.

Chrétien calls it simply *un graal*. (Kibler, 1991), but as the tale developed, the grail gradually acquired a more 'sacramental' character. For example, as the 'rich grail', it hovered above a feast and provided food (The *First Continuation*, Bryant 1982). The romance poet, Robert de Boron, introduced the story of Joseph of Arimathea from the biblical Apocrypha and added a number of details that are not found in his source (Nitze, 1927). The object became the Holy Grail, part of the central Christian myth, the story of Christ's passion, and the grail story gained a new dimension when Joseph was linked with Glastonbury (Treharne 1967; Lewis 1955). As the man who buried Christ, he may have become associated with the grail by extension. Possibly de Boron may have known a legend which connected Joseph of Arimathea, or perhaps another Joseph, to Glastonbury. The romance introduced important additional characters, namely Joseph's sister and her husband, Hebron (Bron), and their children. The Apocrypha account tells us that Joseph was imprisoned, but the romance adds the details that he was miraculously sustained by the grail during this time and learned its secrets from Christ himself. Afterwards, Joseph established a second 'table of the grail' in memory of the first Christian Mass. Bron caught a special fish for this event, (thereby providing an explanation of the Fisher-King). Joseph returned to Arimathea, but Bron and his son Alain took the grail to Glastonbury to await the permanent guardian. Robert de Boron created a new format for the grail story, one which traced its history from the biblical/Apocrypha story of Christ's passion to its achievement by one of Arthur's knights. More importantly, he introduced an air of mystery and expectation by suggesting

that the object held a secret meaning and had been brought to Britain to await its mysterious guardian.

Other romances produced further elaborations. For example, Perceval became a descendent of Joseph of Arimathea (*Didot-Perceval* c.1220, Roach 1941), and the grail itself became more unusual and the explanations more elaborate. In one romance, (*Third Continuation* c. 1230, Bryant 1982), the Fisher King explained the items in the grail procession as a series of relics. The spear was used by Longinus to pierce Christ's side at the Crucifixion, the cup belonged to Joseph of Arimathea, the trencher covered the cup to protect the Holy Blood, and the sword wounded both the Fisher King and his brother. When Perceval died, the grail, lance and dish went with him. Even the form of the grail changed. In one context, it is a reliquary (*Diu Crone*, Thomas 1989); in another a head floating in blood (*Peredur*, Jones and Jones 1989). The German poet, Wolfram von Eschenbach composed a romance, *Parzifal* (c. 1200-1210) which, though based on Chrétien, includes much else and has a mystical tone. Wolfram's grail is a stone, and he prefaces his tale with the story of Kyot, the mythical Provençal poet who is his supposed source (Weston 1894). In the *Vulgate Cycle* the grail is the dish from which Jesus ate the Passover lamb. This romance cycle further allegorised the story and introduced the figure of Galahad who achieved the vision of Holy Grail, while Perceval became king of Sarras (the grail castle on earth) (Matarrasso 1969). Henry Lovelich's *The History of the Holy Grail* c. 1450 (Furnivall 1874-78) added the burial of Joseph at Glastonbury, while, in the best known of these treatments, Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (Vinaver 1954), the Grail is returned to the Holy Land.

Patterns and themes in the Holy Grail Romances

These new elements were destined to play a part in many of the current grail theories. If there is one overall criticism of this material, it is that the authors interpret the romances with a naïve literalness without taking account of medieval conventions of romance writing. References to strange sources and hidden books were used to give intensity to the act of composition, and writers did not necessarily intend for audiences to take these literally. Although a grail and a procession lie at the centre of the stories, these are not consistent within the romances. Chrétien de Troyes mentions 'un graal' only as a jewelled dish with no aura of holiness. This implies that '*un graal*' was a kind of *gradulus*, a large flat dish used to bring food to the table, and the word *grail* is often derived from the Latin term. Whatever the derivation, the object varies within romance tradition. Once the Last Supper material was introduced, the contrast between worldly chivalry and chivalry of a higher kind became sharper. The grail quest began to supersede other quests in Arthurian literature and a new character, Galahad, was introduced as the perfect grail knight. Chrétien hints that the Fisher King is sustained by sacred food, Robert de Boron makes it clear that this food is the Eucharist which links the grail, through Joseph of Arimathea, to the Last Supper story. Thus it is associated with sustenance in general, with a wounded king in particular, and with the Christian Mass.

The mysterious nature of the Fisher King's food may have prompted Robert de Boron to introduce the idea that the grail was the cup used at the Last Supper and the

lance, the Lance of Longinus, which drew the last of Christ's blood. As a result of the Crusades, interest in relics with biblical associations increased. (Gillett, 1935, 95-110). Relics (many of them of questionable authenticity) such as the True Cross, the Lance, Veronica's Veil and the Holy Shroud, appeared in Europe at this period and were linked with the events of Christ's Passion. Perhaps surprisingly, there are no contemporary references to the grail outside the romances. There is no equivalent of the popular relic legends such as those attached to the Holy Cross, or the Holy Blood, or the spear of Longinus (Peebles 1911), and no objects among the extensive medieval relic collections claimed to be the Holy Grail. Such 'grails' as exist are post-medieval, and other factors may have influenced this increasingly religious interpretation, such as the alleged discovery of Arthurian antiquities at Glastonbury in 1191.

A number of theories are based on, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (Cavendish 1978, 125-183, Godwin 1994, 184-240). Perceval has a pagan (i.e. saracen) half-brother, although Wolfram's Saracens are not the evil pagans of Crusade literature, nor does the romance mention the Crusades directly. Nevertheless, the emphasis falls not on the Arthurian court, but on the grail guardians as a divinely ordained instrument in world affairs. As with many romance writers, Wolfram was disingenuous about his role in creating the story. Instead he used an origin tale to explain his sources. A fictional Provençal poet, Kyot, learned Arabic in order to read the grail story from a manuscript at Toledo which had been recorded by a Jewish astronomer. Poet, manuscript and astronomer are all fictions which add lustre to Wolfram's grail, a marvellous stone called *lapis exillus* guarded by a family for whom it provides sustenance and prevents death. In this context, there are a few references to 'templars', both men and women which makes it unlikely that he had a real knightly order in mind. Such references, however, have become a staple of secret message theories and applied to other romances where there is no mention of templars or secret grail societies. Some historians, notably Sir Steven Runciman, have suggested a link between gnosticism, Albigensian beliefs and the Templars. Since so many Templar records were destroyed, it is relatively easy to suggest that the Templars had absorbed ancient 'heretical' beliefs, and inevitably perhaps a link was made between Albigensians and Templars (Seward 1974, 204, 277-289).

Romance writing delighted in complexity and there is no need for secret theories involving complex conspiracies to hide heretical secrets. The general consensus now is that the Templar persecution was opportunistic, an attempt to undermine an economically powerful faction who, in the aftermath of the crusades, were beginning to make their presence felt in Europe Seward 1974, 197-213. Several of the patrons of these romance writers were themselves crusaders, and this might have increased interest in this kind of material during this period. The Albigensian Crusade took place at the beginning of the thirteenth century (Sumption 1999, 77-88), but the Templars were not suppressed until 1307 by which time the grail narratives were already well established. Popular legends may claim that mysterious objects were brought back to Europe by Crusaders, but labyrinthine arguments about Templars and eastern mysteries are part of the modern grail interpretation (Wood 1998:15-24, 1999:3-12).

Early Grail Scholarship:

At the end of the nineteenth century, Alfred Nutt published a seminal work, *The Holy Grail with Especial Reference to its Celtic Origin* which compared medieval romance material with analogous motifs in modern Irish, Welsh and Scots Gaelic folk narrative. Nutt suggested that the ultimate source for the grail story was a mythic search for an otherworld object (Nutt 1888) which supported the notion that pagan Celtic tradition survived and that Christianity both preserved and adapted that tradition. For Nutt the real meaning of the grail lay in the original myths, while the romances preserved this to a lesser degree. (Nutt 1902). His analysis was enormously influential, and a number of interesting studies followed his lead, for example Dorothy Kempe *The Legend of the Grail* (1905), A.C. Brown *The Origin of the Grail legend* (1943), Helaine Newstead *Bran the Blessed* (1939) and several others by R. S. Loomis (1935,1963). Their contribution to the matter under discussion was to suggest real geographical locations which matched, more or less, descriptions in romance texts and to 'unscramble' references to pagan deities or historical figures among the romance characters.

Another strand of analysis focused on spiritual and psychological meaning, rather than ancient sources or geographical realities. Rudolf Steiner suggested that the grail quest was a personal initiation coded into a narrative (Steiner 1963). Alchemical and hermetic lore (Kahane 1965) have been suggested as the source of the grail episode. Jungian analysts often combine this with the idea of initiation (or integration in Jungian terms) (Jung/Franz 1998). Another archetypal analysis, *Visio Pacis* considered the grail theme in medieval romances and in relation to contemporary events such as the Crusades. Here the Crusades act as a background for the grail romances (rather than a source for mysterious themes) and the Templars as a model for the grail knight and his devotion to a higher chivalry (Adolf 1960).

Occult-based research undertaken by A.E. Waite, G.R.S Mead and Jessie Weston (Weston 1897, 1905, 1906-9,1920) presented the grail quest as initiation into an ancient mystery religion. Weston's eccentric work saw the romances in terms of sexual initiation, a survival of ancient mystery religions disguised as narrative to escape the notice of Christianity. In the 1930's W.J. Stein combined the initiation quest with secret history in *The Ninth Century and the Holy Grail*. He suggested that the grail material in Wolfram's romance referred to real, although disguised, historical events (Stein 1989) and he identified the grail guardians with Charlemagne's 'heirs' who would re-establish the grail.

Popular Theory and the Meaning of the Grail

Such assumptions still inform many popular works which produce various combinations of secret history, search for geographical realities, and spiritual code and the sexistence of esoteric knightly orders (Wood 1998:15-24).Rudolf Steiner himself has been suggested as the embodiment of the grail, as part of an elaborate conspiracy theory linking the theft of the lance of Longinus from the Habsburg treasury in Vienna to alleged occult interests at the heart of the Nazi hierarchy (Ravenscroft 1973). Initiation

and Jungian archetypes remain rooted in popular research (Matthews 1997), and often combine with Templar fantasies in such works as *The Shroud and the Grail* (Curren-Briggs 1987) and *The Sword and the Grail*. (Sinclair 1992.) The point of contact between the grail romance scholarship and popular speculation is the idea that medieval romances tried to make sense of an ancient tradition which was no longer understood. Popular works often assume that medieval authors were members of an élite which was privy to some cosmic insight and, consequently, used the romance genre to conceal secret information from an establishment which was seeking to suppress it. Coded as a romance story, the secret escaped the notice of this antagonistic establishment. A common theme of many popular grail authors is that they have broken the secret code where everyone else has failed.

Perhaps the most influential of the Templars/mysterious geography/hidden secret theories centres on the town of Rennes-le-Chateau in southern France. The ideas, which derive ultimately from Stein's assumptions that the grail guardians can be linked to a real aristocratic family, have spawned an entire industry (Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln 1984). The 'grail' here is a person. Alleged links between medieval legends, Templars and Cathars, neo-classical paintings and a host of rather doubtful documents lead back to a lost royal heir and the burial place of God himself. The assumptions underlying this study have been questioned in a recent BBC documentary (cassiopeia.org), but they illustrate two essential features of much of this writing. This is detective story analysis in which surface similarities are taken as proof of influence and connection. Other popular works on the subject are given the same status as original source material.. Claims about occult geometrical patterns in certain classical paintings have been applied to the landscape around Rennes-le-Chateau (Fanthorpe 1991) in an attempt to 'locate' the tomb of Christ, or to link the Roslyn Chapel 'grail' in Scotland with buildings supposedly constructed by 'Templars' in Nova Scotia (Sinclair 1992). The pattern of an explicit or an implicit group of guardians, now links Isaac Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy*, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, and perhaps most intriguingly (or bizarrely) Umberto Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum* which was written as a satire on this very theory (Fanthorpe 1991).

In contrast to these complex conspiracies with their secrets and hidden treasures which are never actually found of course, there are actual objects with a claim to be the holy grail. One such is an 'emerald' vessel, the *sacro catino*, now identified as Islamic glass dating from 11th century, associated with San Lorenzo Cathedral in Genoa. According to tradition, it was 'discovered' in Caesarea during the time of the Crusades, and brought to Genoa by an heroic crusader. A sixteenth-century chronicle calls it 'Saint Grail' and associates it with Christ or with King Arthur. This suggests that the traditions about this object were not independent, but rather influenced by the romances themselves. (Jung/Franz 1998, 164). The dish, *sacro catino* was taken back to France, allegedly by Napoleon, and found to be green glass. Eventually it was returned to Genoa and restored. Napoleon functions as a generic villain in many legends (he is often behind the theft of Templar records for example) and provides a good excuse for loss or damage to 'relics'. As it happens, the traditions associated with the *sacro catino* encapsulate the kind of legendary 'envelope' which surrounds so many of these objects. First there is a mysterious heritage involving a crusader, and the suggestion that the object dates from

the time of Christ. Much the same set of traditions surround the Valencia a stone chalice in Valencia cathedral. It is first mentioned in the 14th century, but the legends attached to it recount a much older history. The object is a small agate bowl set in a gilt structure, enabling it to be used as a chalice for celebrating mass and dating ranges from 4th century bc. to 1st century ad., although such chalices incorporating eastern dishes of semi-precious stones were made much later as well. Here the custodian of the Chalice is St Peter himself which takes it with him to Rome. Fear of persecution during the reign of Valerian account for its presence in Spain (in order to protect it). The cup moves again with a protector to escape the Moslem invasion and eventually appears in Valencia. Both these objects are still the focus of veneration more for the symbolic links to the central mystery of Christian religion than any concern with historical authenticity.

Two objects called confusingly the 'Cup of Antioch' and the 'Antioch Chalice' have been suggested as candidates for the grail in the 1930's. The former is a glass *krater*, probably near-eastern glass, brought back perhaps by a crusader and fitted with a leather case to protect it some time during the Middle Ages (Gentle-Cackett, 1935, 7, 23-27). The other is a magnificent silver-gilt Eucharist cup discovered during excavations at Antioch and now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Kondoleon, 2000). The chalice dates from the period after Christianity became an official religion in the Roman Empire, but it was the subject of a novel by journalist and popular historian Thomas Costain. In Costain's story a young pagan silver smith is commissioned by Joseph of Arimathea to provide a silver chalice to contain the palin wooden cup used at the Last Supper. In the course of his work the young man encounters various people who actually knew Christ and of course finds romance and enlightenment. (Costain 1952)

The beginning of this century was a peak period for grail objects. The mystic Tudor Pole who was much involved in transforming Glastonbury into a centre for Arthurian/Grail/Christian activity had an experience which led him to 'discover' a blue glass bowl which he believed to be the grail. His correspondence with a friend and fellow believe details his expectations that the appearance of a 'third chosen one', the final grail guardian, is at hand. The object is still at the Chalice Gardens in Glastonbury (Villiers 1968, 26-29; Lehmann 1979, 13-24), although there is an alternative theory that the grail is in one of the secret tunnels under Glastonbury Tor. The Powells of Nanteos, outside Aberystwyth possessed a healing cup, recently identified as a fourteenth-century *mazer* bowl. The Powell family owned the site of Strata Florida Abbey, and in 1905 this cup, which had been used locally since the 1880s as a healing object, suddenly acquired the title 'Holy Grail' (Evans 1937: 29-30, 58). This legend also features escaping monks, secrets, tunnels and even a crusader. A modern candidate is a Roman alabaster cup in the possession of the owners of Hawkstone manor. The alleged trail leads back through a medieval Welsh poem included in the story of Fulk le fitz Warin, a romance entitled 'La Folie Perceval' in B.N. Ms. 12577 and a reference in the fifth-century Greek historian to the grail being taken to Britain for safety (Phillips 1995). There is no Welsh poem in the Anglo-Norman romance which tells the story of the outlaw knight, Fulk. No such romance as 'La Folie de Perceval' is found in this particular French manuscript which is a compendium of French grail romance material. Nor is there a reference to the grail in the writings of fifth-century Greek historian, Olympiodorus.

These works are full of mysteries, codes and exciting ‘discoveries’ overlooked by establishment historians and academics. In part they are modern romances with book-based adventures and challenges taking the place of knightly deeds. All these positions have adherents and detractors fierce enough to start another crusade, but they share common ground in their assumption that the grail had a mysterious source whose meaning has been obscured as the result of a deliberate conspiracy and only a chosen few guard its real meaning.

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