

The Holy Grail By Chris

Written by Administrator

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And where is it now?

The earliest legends

According to most scholars, the original source of the Grail legends is the Celtic myth of a horn (or cauldron or other vessel) of plenty. This was the source of all things good - unquenchable food, health, success in battle, etc.

Obviously, we do not have a clear idea of what the Celts taught, or the symbolism they used, or what was Christian and what was pagan. But if we assume that the horn of plenty had religious symbolism, what is the source of all things good in religion? What represented God's favour? What allowed leaders to expect loyalty and commitment (and thus success)? What if not divine authority?

More literally, what in the Bible allowed Elijah to provide a widow with a barrel that never emptied, or allowed Jesus to feed five thousand, or Joshua to command the sun to stand still so a battle could be won, or allowed the apostles to heal the sick? The answer is divine authority, the basis of ancient kingship, priesthood, success, and salvation.

The origins of Arthur

The Arthurian legends, taken together, are too big, too contradictory, and cover too much time, to refer to one historical figure. Historians agree that there probably was a Celtic chieftain called Arthur in the fifth or sixth century, but that other beliefs and desires have been attached to the story. Similarly, the story of the Grail is generally believed to have its origins in actual Celtic beliefs, and to only have developed into the story of a mystical cup in later centuries.

Originally, Arthur and the Grail may have been separate (if related) issues. The background for Arthur's exploits is clear from Gildas' history - Celtic peoples resisting the advance of the Saxons. Arthur is a story of fighting against the approaching doom. But the Grail stories come from later (the best developed stories are from the twelfth century and later), when the battle had long been lost.

The grail romances

The earliest fully developed Grail story is Parzival, in which the Grail is held by the Fisher King in his castle. But, being unworthy, the Fisher King has been struck dumb and is unworthy to use the Grail. The emphasis is on purity and righteousness - these are the only ways that the Grail can be used.

In later stories, the Grail has been lost. While Joseph of Arimathea brought it to Britain and it stayed here for generations, now it had gone. The noble and pure in heart search for it, but cannot bring it back.

The grail legends were most popular in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the darkest of the Dark Ages. Godwin (in "The Holy Grail") makes much of this. Europe was in a spiritual wasteland, and looked longingly at the grail legends, stories of a lost golden age, and the efforts to regain it.

The grail legends: a summary

The Grail, according to legend, was the source of divine favour. It was had by the Celtic

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chieftains for generations. By the time of Arthur (fifth or sixth century), the Grail was still in Britain, but its guardians could not use it because of unrighteousness. Later it disappeared completely. The pure in heart tried to get it back - it was their most important goal - but they could not.

The abuse of and loss of the Grail was the most keenly felt, tragic loss, that marked the start of the Dark Ages

What exactly did the Grail represent?

The "Holy Grail" is traditionally the cup that Jesus used at the Last Supper, or a cup that caught Jesus' blood as he hung on the cross. By the time of the crusades it was considered to be just another relic (albeit an important one). But the earliest Grail romances, and the people's response to it, suggest something else.

In the early Grail stories, the Grail is sometimes a cup, sometimes a plate, sometimes a cauldron, sometimes a stone. Its real significance is not in what it is, but what it represents. The Grail was first held by Joseph of Arimathea, and then by his descendants down to Percival (a central character in the most important Grail stories). Possessing it was a major concern of King Arthur's knights. To cut a long story short, I will quote Phillips (p.47-48):

"Here lies the Grail's importance - it is a visible, tangible symbol of an alternative apostolic succession".

Did the Celtic church have genuine apostolic authority?

The Medieval Catholic church claimed the priesthood authority through the apostle Peter. It was important to them that they be the only church that could claim such authority. But the Celtic church claimed equal authority, also by a direct line direct from the Lord. They claimed their authority through Joseph of Arimathea and through the apostle John. At the famous synod of Whitby, 't was never questioned that the Celtic beliefs came from John. The issue was just whether the weight of the Roman church implied their claims were more important.

Whether or not the Celts in Britain really had such authority, or if that authority was kept intact until 570, may never be proven. But there is plenty of evidence that they did at some point - see the page on Celtic Christianity.

Joseph of Arimathea

Joseph of Arimathea, according to the apocryphal Evangelium Nicodemi (Gospel of Nicodemus), was an early leader in the church. According to the apocryphal Vindicta Salvatoris, after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, Joseph set out to establish a church in the "far north". According to the Celts, Joseph came to England and lived at Glastonbury, where he ordained his successors. The Celtic Church claimed this was an apostolic succession, just like that claimed by the church of Rome. The church of Rome naturally saw the Celtic church as a threat.

According to William of Malmesbury, writing around 1125, the apostle Philip sent Joseph to Britain in AD 63. Glastonbury was traditionally the first church in the British Isles. Augustine went so far as to say (on his mission here in 600) that Glastonbury church was first constructed "by no human art, but by the hands of Christ himself". For this and other quotations, see "Saint Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury" by Lionel Smithett (London: Mowbray & Co., 1922) and

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"The Early History of Glastonbury" by John Scott, a translation of Malmesbury's medieval history (Bury St Edmunds: Boydell Press, 1981).

For more details, even greater claims, see the page on Joseph of Arimathea

How much authority did Joseph of Arimathea have?

In some versions of the Grail romances, Joseph is taught "the secret words of Jesus" by the Lord himself. Joseph was the one chosen to dress and prepare Jesus' body for burial (See John 19:38-40). The significance will not be lost on Latter-Day Saints.

Just how much authority did Joseph of Arimathea have? His alleged successors "claimed to have secret knowledge, unknown to the established church". According to the Grail romances, the holder of the Grail (the priesthood?) was called the "rich fisher" or "fisher king", apparently referring to Peter, the fisherman.

The belief in the English Celtic church was that they traced their authority back directly to Christ, without going through Rome. Indeed, Malmesbury (in about 1125) refers to Glastonbury as a "second Rome". Some go even further, and believe that the evidence shows that the British church was far older than that of Rome, and built on stronger foundations.

The Grail and the Medieval Roman Church

The Holy Grail, according to many, is nothing else than the priesthood authority, as preserved in a far flung corner of the Lord's vineyard, away from the corruption of Rome. When it was lost it was sorely missed.

"The legends of Arthur and the Grail were to enshrine the resistance of many peoples to the authority of the Holy See" (Sinclair p.19).

So it was all the more important for these traditions, once absorbed by the medieval church, to be changed into a simple story of a cup, just another relic. It was essential to the medieval church that Christians should not be reminded of what they had lost.

The Grail and Gregory the Great

When the Celtic claims dies, the Catholic claims were born (through the unique contributions of Gregory the Great). When the Roman church defeated the Celtic church, it inherited the grail legends. There is a fifteenth century Flemish painting called "The Mass of St Gregory". If I had copyright permission, I would reproduce it here. You can see a full page copy in "The Holy Grail" (Godwin) page 90.

St Gregory - Gregory the Great - made great claims to pre-eminent authority, and effectively invented the Medieval church, including revising the Mass and Eucharist. The painting shows him at a table on which is a sacramental cup or grail. Resting on the cup is apparently the sacramental bread. Above the cup is a vision of a naked Christ. It seems to recall the climax of the grail legends, where the pure knight Sir Galahad eventually finds the Holy Grail:

"A naked Christ then appears from out of the holy vessel and feeds them with the bread. He tells them that they have won a place at his table, which has not happened since the last supper when twelve disciples were there."

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Galahad is told that "Britain is no longer worthy to harbour such a glory". Galahad and his companions take the grail to a holy city, and after two years Galahad dies and the Grail is taken to heaven. (See Godwin, p.134-35 for details and references.)

The timeframe is especially interesting. Godwin, after reading all the grail legends in depth, concludes that Perceval was a contemporary of St Brendan. Perceval is a key figure in the grail legends, and companion of Galahad in the legend just cited. In that legend, he died just a year after Galahad. Brendan may even have been the original source for some of the tales written about Perceval (Godwin p.115). Brendan is discussed on the page on the Celtic church.

Perceval / Brendan's career ended just as Gregory's began. It was around the year 570.

An alternative theory

A popular theory put forward in recent years (in the book "The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail") is that the grail was in fact the blood lineage of Christ. The early evidence the authors uncover could equally be used to support that claim that the grail was priesthood authority. It would be easy for the two concepts to be confused - if only one or two priesthood holders survived in hiding, it would make sense to pass the authority from father to son, and it would inevitably come to be seen as some kind of secret knowledge. And if the authority had indeed been lost, it is understandable if future generations tried to claim it based purely on lineage.

The importance of the Franks

According to the bloodline theory, the grail was preserved in late antiquity by the Merovingian blood line in what is now France. The most famous Merovingian was Clovis, who effectively began the Frankish empire and the history of France as we know it. Did he have some fragment of the "true" religion? Clovis' apparent conversion to Catholicism may have had more to do with the political advantages it gave him, allowing him to expand his empire in northern Europe.

The disaster called Chilperic

Clovis' son Lothair continued his work. But according to the bloodline theory, the next rightful heir was Clovis' grandson Chilperic, who reigned 539-584. Chilperic can be described in one word - evil. His murders and betrayals became infamous. Gregory of Tours (540-594) wrote the definitive history of the Merovingians. He described Chilperic as "The Nero and Herod of his Age". If heaven had not withdrawn its authority before that time, it would certainly have been lost under Chilperic.

The aftermath: the Carolingians take over

Chilperic's most infamous crime was having his wife, the queen, murdered, circa 570. According to the Britannica, "The consequences of this crime [having his queen murdered] constitute virtually the only clearly discernible thread in the tangled skein of Frankish history over the next four decades". Chilperic's grandson, Dagobert I, became king of all the Franks from 629 to 639, but was the last king of any consequence (according to Grolier). There was a steady decline and eventually the Carolingians took over. The Carolingians, good Roman believers, produced Charlemagne and the "Holy Roman Empire". And the rest is history.

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What year was the grail lost?

All the physical evidence points to the sixth century in general, and 570 in particular.

The first Arthurian legends (the Gododdin and Llongborth poems and those attributed to Taliesin) are based on material from the late sixth century.

"What appears to be one of the earliest images of the grail" is on a sixth century tomb in Ravenna, Italy (Godwin, p.95).

One of the "thirteen treasures of Britain", allegedly guarded by Merlin, is "a clear counterpart to Chretien's grail" (Chretien is the author of the first and most important grail romance). The treasure in question is "the Dysgl of Rhydderch, sixth century king of Strathclyde" (Godwin p.52). Strathclyde, in Scotland, was in the northernmost parts of Celtic Britain, and would therefore have been one of the last outposts to fall to an enemy.

The name "Arthur" first became well known around the year 570: "Arthur map Petr of Dyfed is one of a number of princes Christened with this name in Britain around 570. Before this time, it is recorded only for Arthur, the battle-leader of the Britons. This suggests that the name was already revered around this time, a generation or so after the death of the original Arthur, when the Angles and Saxons were again on the move, threatening to undo all of Arthur's achievements. This, along with the reference by Taliesin in The Gododdin (598) to Arthur, apparently as a warrior to be emulated, constitutes the earliest references to Arthur's name and fame." - from "The Ruin and Conquest of Britain 400 A.D. - 600 A.D. As told by the Primary Sources" at <http://www.physics.uq.edu.au:8001/people/wiseman/DECBps.html#Arthur>

If the Grail is the authority of the Celtic church, then along with the health of the church in England, it must have been lost some time around or before 570, the death of Gildas, and the time when archaeologists see a visible shift in religious practice (discussed on the Celtic church page).

If the grail was held by the Merovingians, it is likely to have been lost during the reign of Chilperic I, who murdered his wife circa 570.

If the grail just symbolises an alternative to the Roman church, it was lost when Gregory came to power. Gregory's power dates from his campaigns against the Lombards from 570 (which is why the church wanted him to be pope some years later). It was Gregory, with his concern for the Britons, Franks, Lombards, etc. (see the quotations on the Europe page), who sent Augustine to "convert" the Celtic Christians to the Roman church.

Many scholars believe that the grail seeker, Perceval, was based on Peredyr, King of Ebrauc. Peredyr's famous and last great victory was in 573. But he was unable to take advantage of this victory, and seven years later was killed.

If Perceval is based on Brendan, as suggested above, this would confirm a date for the loss of the grail at around 570.

Conclusion

The quest for the Grail is a story of failure, of attempt after attempt to regain it, attempts that come to nothing. The priesthood was lost. The loss, like the loss of the Celtic church, dates from the late sixth century - in other words, the period around 570. But once it had been lost in AD 570, God had decreed that it would stay lost for 1260 years - until God Himself decided to return it.

The promised restoration would not be of the Celtic priesthood, which may or may not have been an authentic memory of the original. It would be a full restoration of what had been had in

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the days of Jesus' ministry, in all its original glory and purity. No wonder the saints in 1830 got so excited!

[The holy Grail part 2](#)

[Ark of the covenant](#)

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/5234/grail2.htm>