

Holy Grail

First some background

There are two views of what the holy grail actually was or is.

The chalice used at the last supper or an ointment container used to collect Jesus' blood after his crucifixion

Early Christian tradition holds that Jesus' follower Mary Magdalene collected Christ's blood in a sacred vessel after the Crucifixion. In this version of the story, the vessel is not the cup of the Last Supper, but an oil or ointment container. The Gospels describe how Mary Magdalene, prepared Jesus for his martyrdom by anointing him with spikenard, an aromatic oil or balm, and the vessel she is said to have used to collect Christ's blood was the jar that had contained this oil. From the early Middle Ages, Mary's sacred vessel has been depicted by artists as a variety of receptacles, such as spice pots, perfume jars, and ointment cups. The word used in the English translation of the Bible for Mary's vessel is the word *alabastrum*, the Roman name for a container for perfumes or scented oils, so called because they were usually made from alabaster. NEXT SLIDE

For example: in 1317 the medieval Italian painter Simone Martini depicted it as a spice pot (above left); in 1525 the Italian Renaissance artist Bernardino Luini depicted it as a perfume jar (center); and in 1859 the English Pre-Raphaelite painter Frederick Sandys depicted it as an ointment cup (right).

Originally called the Marian Chalice, meaning the Chalice of Mary Magdalene, Mary's sacred vessel was believed to have been sealed up in Jesus' empty tomb where it remained for almost four hundred years. After the Roman emperor Constantine the Great converted to Christianity in the early fourth century, his mother the Empress Helena ordered the excavation of the Holy Sepulchre, the purported site of Christ's tomb in Jerusalem. During the excavation a cup was found which many believed to be the Marian Chalice. It was taken to Rome where it was believed to possess miraculous healing powers.

The Chalice remained in Rome until the city was sacked by the barbarians in AD 410. Along with other treasures, it was taken from the city in an armed convoy of carts and brought to the safety of Britain, the last outpost of Roman civilization in Western Europe.
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What then happened to the sacred relic went unrecorded, but well into the Middle Ages the legend persisted that it was still hidden somewhere in the British Isles

Like the Holy Grail, the Marian Chalice was a vessel that was said to have held the blood of Christ and was believed to have been hidden in Britain. These similarities between the two stories suggest that they both had the same origin. However, there is also another relationship between the two vessels. Like the Grail, the Marian Chalice was linked with the story of King Arthur and his knights. In the Arthurian story, the Grail is kept in a secret chapel in a fortress called the White Castle, in a place known as the White Town. In the thirteenth century an English knight called Fulk Fitz Warine claimed to possess the Chalice. Although he did not specifically refer to it as the Holy Grail, his historical claim to have owned it may have inspired the Arthurian Grail romances of the Middle Ages. Fulk's castle, built from light-colored stone, was known as the White Castle, and the

town where the castle stands is called Whittington – the old English for "White Town." NEXT SLIDE

In the early 1200s Fulk Fitz Warine died; shortly after, his family was forced to leave the castle, and over many centuries it fell into disrepair. What became of the Marian Chalice remained one of England's unsolved historical mysteries.

Until the mid-nineteenth century when one of Fulk's descendents, a Shropshire writer and Antiquarian named Thomas Wright, claimed that the cup had been handed down to him by his ancestors. NEXT SLIDE

It was described as a small stone cup made from green alabaster, also known as onyx. Only one depiction of it still survives, in an illustration made by Wright's friend and contemporary artist Arthur Mede. NEXTSLIDE

In a biblical scene showing Mary Magdalene washing the feet of Jesus, beside her on the floor is the scent jar which she is said to have used to collect the blood of Christ. It seems to be about three inches tall, shaped like an eggcup with a lid. Rightly or wrongly, Thomas Wright was in no doubt that this cup was the original Holy Grail.

In 1855, with no children to hand it on to, Thomas Wright decided to hide the cup for posterity., Wright claimed to have left an elaborate trail of clues that he said led to its hiding place. These were contained in a poem he published in 1855. Called Sir Gawain and the Red Knight, it tells the story of Arthur's knight Gawain's quest to discover the Holy Grail, which he identifies with the Marian Chalice. The story is set in Wright's native Shropshire, beginning at the White Castle at Whittington and ending with Gawain finding the Grail at the Red Knight's castle called the Red Castle. This was another historical medieval building, some ten miles east of Whittington in the grounds of the country estate of Hawkstone Park. NEXT SLIDE

At the end of the poem, once he has drunk from the Grail, Gawain decides to hide it again in a new location. It is not revealed where he hides the cup, and the story ends cryptically with Gawain standing on the battlements of the Red Castle, looking out over the landscape and contemplating its hiding place.

In the 1990s - almost a century and a half after the poem was published – a historical investigator, Graham Phillips, decided to well.....investigate.

On the opening page of the book in which the poem was originally published, there is an illustration showing the White Castle at Whittington and a cryptic quotation by an anonymous British essayist:

“If my readers should at any time remark that I am particularly dull, they may be assured there is a design under it.”

The design "under" the quotation was two lines of Roman numerals at the bottom of the page NEXT SLIDE

As they appeared to have no purpose or obvious relevance to the poem, Graham Phillips decided that these numbers may have formed some kind of code. On the last page of Thomas Wright's book there was an illustration of the Red Castle, and under it the last enigmatic verse that read:

The Shepherd's Songs to guide the way,
The horn was blown,
The treasure lay.

Graham Phillips hit upon the idea that the Shepherd's Songs could refer to the Psalms of the Bible. The Old Testament Psalms are ancient religious songs that were said to have been written by the Israelite king David who was, according to the Bible, a simple shepherd before becoming the Israelite hero by slaying the Philistine giant Goliath. The Psalms were indeed "shepherd's songs" and they were preserved in a book that was the most widely available book in the world – The holy bible. The first line might indicate the number of the Psalm (each of the 150 Psalms are ascribed a number in the Bible) and the second line could refer to the verse in the relevant Psalm.

Psalm 132, verse 17 reads: There will I make the horn of David to bud: I have ordained a lamp for mine anointed.

The second number on the top line was 31, and the first number of the second line was 3. So the second clue was the 3rd verse of Psalm 31 – and so on. When Graham consulted the Bible and read the first possible clue, he was sure he was on to something.:

For thou art my rock and my fortress: therefore for my name's sake lead me, and guide me. NEXTSLIDE

The Red Castle is so named because of the red brick from which it is built. It is a strange circular tower built into the side of a cliff during the Middle Ages. Graham was certain that he was right about the mysterious numbers in Thomas Wright's book being references to Psalm verses in the Bible. On a sunny February morning, Graham first stood on top of this almost forgotten, overgrown building and consulted what appeared to be the next clue. If his reasoning was correct, it was Psalm 61, verse 2, the final line of which read: Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

Again the reference seemed to correlate with a search – "lead me, and guide me" - but where? From the Red Castle there is only one higher location in the immediate vicinity: a towering rock called the White

Cliff which directly overlooks the castle about a quarter of a mile to the west. On top of the White Cliff is the arch of a ruined chapel, built in the eighteenth century by the owner of the Hawkstone Park estate, one Rowland Hill. Like the Red Castle, it would have been there in Thomas Wright's time a century later. Surely, this had to be the place the verse had been chosen to allude to. NEXT 2 SLIDES Making his way to the top of the White Cliff, Graham stood beneath the arch of the ruined chapel and read the next Bible passage: Psalm 102, verse 19 which begins: For he hath looked down from the height of his sanctuary.

By now, there could no longer be any doubt that Graham had cracked Thomas Wright's code. Each verse fitted perfectly with each new location. "The height of his sanctuary" – what better way to describe a chapel on the top of a cliff? The verse implied that Graham should look down, and below the arch was a path leading to an entrance cut into the cliff beneath the chapel. NEXT SLIDE

The entrance led into a maze of tunnels and chambers cut deep inside the cliff. They were clearly artificially constructed passageways, leading to a series of dark chambers where there were decorated pillars and arches, all cut from the living rock. No one knows how old they are, who made them, or why. One theory suggests that they were originally copper mines built by the Romans almost two thousand years ago. If they were, someone at a later time went to a great deal of trouble to turn them into elaborate, possibly ceremonial caves. NEXT SLIDE

One of the tunnels led into a central chamber at the very heart of the White Cliff. The centerpiece of the cavern was a decorated arch cut into the rock. At one time, four stone statues adorned the chamber – a bull, a lion, an eagle, and an angel. Only two still remain: the lion and the eagle. NEXT SLIDE

A long, dark tunnel led downwards from the other side of the chamber, descending deeper and deeper into the blackness of the cold, dank rock. The passageway became narrower and narrower until, as it seemed that it would never end, daylight could finally be seen filtering in again from the world outside. Graham emerged from the tunnel on completely the other side of the hill, where a narrow gorge cut its way downwards through a sandstone cliff.

Reading the next Bible passage, he decided that he should follow the gorge into the valley below. Psalm 104, verse 8 read: They go up by the mountains; they go down by the valleys unto the place which thou hast founded for them.

He had already gone "up by the mountains", so he followed the gorge and the valley at the bottom until it reached the village of Hodnet, some two miles away.

The next reference seemed to answer the question. Psalm 135, verse 2, began: Ye that stand in the house of the Lord. The house of the Lord surely referred to a church, so Graham made his way to the Hodnet parish church. NEXT SLIDE

Remarkably, the next four verses seemed to be telling Graham exactly what to do. Psalm 118, verse 19: Open to me the gates of righteousness: I will go into them. He entered the church.

Once inside, Graham consulted the next reference. Psalm 142, verse 4: I looked on my right hand and beheld. So he turned to face his right.

The following verse again seemed to be a specific instruction. Psalm 123, verse 1: Unto thee lift I up mine eyes. Graham looked up to find himself staring up at a stained-glass window depicting the four gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. NEXT SLIDE

Three verses remained. Psalm 118, verse 22: The stone which the builders refused is become the headstone of the corner. The head cornerstone was directly above the extreme right of the figures in the stained-glass window: the image said to depict the gospel writer St. John. The penultimate verse seemed to confirm that this was exactly where Graham should look.

Psalm 119, verse 114: Thou art my hiding place and my shield. Had the Marian Chalice, an ancient holy relic believed to have been the Holy Grail, really been hidden in Hodnet parish church? The last reference in the list seemed to suggest so.

Psalm 116, verse 13: I will take the cup of salvation.

Graham spent a great deal of time having the corner of the church around the window thoroughly examined with scientific equipment to see if anything was hidden there. Nevertheless, the results proved negative. It seemed that if anything had been secreted in the south-east corner of Hodnet Church it had long ago been found. Ultimately, however, Graham hit upon a new line of investigation. He discovered that the window had been designed, donated and installed in the church by none other than Thomas Wright – the very man who had set the clues – in 1855, the same year that he had published his enigmatic poem. Perhaps it was the window itself that was important. Maybe this was a final clue that the code had been leading to, rather than the hiding place itself. If so, what did it mean?

Suddenly, Graham saw something that struck a familiar chord. Above the heads of the men depicted in the window were images of the Christian symbols for the four gospels they are accredited with writing – an angel, a lion, a bull, and an eagle. NEXT SLIDE

These were exactly the same figures represented by the statues that had stood in the labyrinth of caves at Hawkstone Park. Following Wright's trail of clues, the seeker had to pass through the cavern where the statues were. Surely this was no coincidence. Was this Thomas Wright's final clue? That the Marian Chalice had been hidden in one of these four statues? But which one? Each of the gospel writers was depicted holding the book they had written but one of them – St. John - also held a chalice. It was a chalice – the Chalice of Mary Magdalene – that the clues were apparently leading to.

It was then that Graham realized that there was something strange about the St. John figure. It seemed to be a woman. NEXT SLIDE

The other gospel writers are all depicted with beards, whereas the John figure is both clean shaven and has decidedly feminine features. What's more, the figure seems to be wearing a woman's gown which looks to be covering breasts. Could this figure holding the chalice, the

final clue to the cup's whereabouts, actually be a thinly disguised Mary Magdalene?

Either way, this was the figure in the very corner of the church, and above it was the cornerstone seemingly alluded to in one of the Psalm verses. Directly beneath the cornerstone and above the figure's head was the image of the eagle. Was the Marian Chalice hidden in the eagle statue in the White Cliff caves?

Graham returned to the caves to examine the eagle statue. It was completely solid and carved from stone, so there was no way anything could have been hidden inside. However, it had once stood on a pedestal so something may have been placed inside that. The problem was that this had been destroyed in 1920 when a local businessman named Walter Langham decided to buy the statues from the landowner to have them erected in his garden. NEXT SLIDE

When he tried to remove them from the caves, they proved too heavy and the ropes broke. The eagle statue was badly damaged and the base was completely smashed. However, Graham discovered something in a contemporary guide book that was both exciting and disheartening. When the base broke apart, it was found to be partly hollow and inside something was discovered which was described as "an interesting curio" – "a small green cup made from stone."

This had to have been the artefact thought to be the Marian Chalice that Thomas Wright had hidden. This seemed to prove that Graham had successfully solved Wright's cryptic trail of clues. However, completely by accident, someone had already found the artefact decades before. As far as Graham could discover, Walter Langham had no idea what the object was. Had he sold it or thrown it away? Was it lost forever?

After further research, Graham discovered that Langham had considered the cup to be an interesting oddity because of the unusual

circumstances in which it had been found. He gave up trying to move the statues but luckily he had kept the cup. When Graham traced and contacted Langham's descendants, he was delighted to discover that it was still in their possession. In fact, they had it stored away with junk in the attic of their home in Rugby in the county of Warwickshire. Nevertheless, like their ancestor, they had absolutely no idea what it was.

The artefact turned out to be a small stone vessel made from green alabaster, about the size and shape of an eggcup. Although there is no way of knowing whether it was the original chalice found by the Empress Helena in Jerusalem in 323 BC, it seems almost certainly to be the one possessed by Fulk Fitz Warine and kept at the White Castle in Whittington during the Middle Ages and passed on down to Thomas Wright who hid it in the 1850s. It closely matches the only known depiction of it in Arthur Mede's illustration, except that it now has no lid. NEXT SLIDE

It has been analysed by the British Museum who identified it as a Roman ointment or scent jar dating from the first century AD. Although it does not match the traditional representations of the Holy Grail, it does date from the actual time of Jesus. Furthermore, it is an alabaster scent vessel, which is exactly what the Chalice of Magdalene is said to have been. It is just possible, therefore, that the fascinating trail of clues had led to the cup which once held the blood of Christ - a cup that in legend became known as the Holy Grail.

From The London Evening Standard 24/08/2006

The Reverend Charmian Beech, Hodnet's parish priest blamed a pair of 'Da Vinci Code-style' treasure hunters for causing thousands of pounds worth of damage as they searched for clues to help them find the Holy Grail.

Stonework was chipped off in four areas inside her church as the offenders tried to remove blocks from the walls to see what is behind them, she said.

The chief suspects are two shadowy Italian men who visited the church that day.

Mrs Beech said: "They have taken a hammer and chisel and gouged great big bits of the stone wall.

"Any deliberate damage to a holy place is a serious offence so we are really upset.

"Normally we are delighted to receive so many interested visitors but we are now having to review our security measures and install a surveillance camera."

St Luke's does not feature in Dan Brown's book the Da Vinci Code, which explores theories that Jesus married Mary Magdalene, that the couple had a child, that their bloodline still exists and that the bloodline is the 'Grail'.

The thriller focuses on the idea that the figure of St John in Leonardo Da Vinci's painting The Last Supper is really Mary Magdalene. In the wake of the hype surrounding the worldwide bestseller and the recently released film version, St Luke's has become a magnet for

Grail hunters because of its 150-year-old stained glass window which features a feminine looking St John.

Some theorists claim the clean-shaven figure is really a depiction of Mary Magdalene.

The offenders who struck at St Luke's on August 11 climbed onto a window sill below the stained glass window, causing £800 damage to a nearby organ pipe in the process, before chipping away at the wall.

They then chiselled away at three other sections of wall in other parts of the church. It is estimated the total damage to the stonework will cost 'thousands' to repair.

She is keen to trace the two Italian men, a father and son, but believes they have now returned to Italy.

"They were in the church at the right time and I would like to ask them some questions,' she said.

"It is very mysterious because it happened in the middle of the day last Friday. We had a lady in the church working on a flower arrangement and the bell ringers were in the church as well."

Of the two Italians, she added tongue-in-cheek: "Who knows, maybe they came over from the Vatican."

A Police spokesman said: "We were informed that some stone blocks had been tampered with in the church and we are appealing for any witnesses,"

SLIDE and SLIDE

#1 Bartholomew: Some historians believe Bartholomew was skinned alive and that's why the knife (in figure #5's hand) is pointing towards him.

#2 James the Lesser: Da Vinci didn't give any hints to identify poor James.

#3 Andrew: With both hands raised, Andrew appears to be shocked by the news.

#4 Judas Iscariot: Judas might be the easiest to identify based on what we know about him after this event. Unlike any of the other figures, Judas is in shadow. He's also clutching a small bag, presumably filled with thirty pieces of silver foreshadowing his betrayal of Christ. Judas is also shown tipping over the salt cellar. There's several expressions relating to this gesture; "betray the salt" meaning to betray one's master, "salt money" meaning salt was such a valued commodity that it sometimes served as salary to the Roman soldiers, and the list goes on. Lastly, Judas is the only one with his elbows on the table, and we all know what that means!

#5 Peter: Peter is shown holding a knife in his right hand. This is most likely foreshadowing his cutting off the ear of the high priest's slave in the garden at Gethsemane the night Christ is taken into captivity. (See also #1 Bartholomew)

#6 John: This is JOHN...not Mary Magdalene! The book/movie "The Da Vinci Code" (author Dan Brown) gives an elaborate and FALSE detail about the painting and how that figure is Mary Magdalene. However, John is widely considered to be the youngest of the Apostles and put simply, it wasn't uncommon for Da Vinci to give a more androgynous appearance to young men.

#7 Thomas: Thomas is holding up his index finger which is foreshadowing to the action that renamed him Doubting Thomas. After the Resurrection, Christ asks Thomas to put his finger in his side as proof that He is who He says He is.

#8 James the Greater: With his arms outstretched, James appears to be shocked by the news.

#9 Philip: With a more concerned look, either in wanting more information or wondering if he is the betrayer, Philip has both hands drawn into the center of his chest.

#10 Matthew: Both Matthew and Jude appear to be looking at Simon for some type of explanation.

#11 Jude: Again, looking towards Simon for clarification to what Jesus had just said.

#12 Simon: Simon's expression. He looks like he's saying; "I don't know, why are you asking me?"

Did You Know

Here are a few other fun facts about the painting that you may or may not know.

- Christ has both hands out stretched. One reaching for a glass of wine and the other a piece of bread in accordance with Christ offering His body and blood to them.
- Illustrating things in triplicate (or grouping of three) was Da Vinci's way of acknowledging the Trinity, the representation of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Check out the 3 windows in the background or that the Apostles are all grouped in 3's.
- All the vantage points of the single point perspective seem to lead to the head of Christ.
- The only meat at the table in Da Vinci's painting is believed to be eel. Yup, you read that right...eel! Apparently it was a very common food during the Renaissance era.
- This isn't a traditional painting hanging in a museum somewhere. It's a 15-foot wide by 28-foot long mural painting in the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan Italy.
- Within only a few years after completion, the painting started to deteriorate. It has endured several restorations projects. In 1796,

French revolutionary anti-clerical troops used the refectory as an armoury; they threw stones at the painting and climbed ladders to scratch out the Apostles' eyes. Doors were cut into the wall that held the painting and the building itself was even bombed in 1943.