

The Virgin and the Grail

The Virgin and the Grail

Origins of a Legend

Joseph Goering

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For Seth and Johanna, who made me do it,
and for Paula, who made them

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Preface

A few years ago I asked a class of undergraduates to read Chrétien de Troyes' story of Perceval and the Holy Grail. I expected to talk with them about how the young Perceval learned, through painful experience, to be a good knight and a true lover. The students, however, were not to be led down that road. They wanted to know about the Holy Grail, and they refused to be put off.

When pressed, I told them that Chrétien's *Perceval* or the *Story of the Grail* (ca. 1180–1190) was apparently the first story ever written about the Grail. Eventually I might have been able to trace for them, as I do in this book, the rapid steps by which Chrétien's simple "grail" became associated by later poets with a magical stone, with the chalice of the Last Supper, and with the vessel used by Joseph of Arimathea to capture Christ's blood after the crucifixion. If they had asked about the origins and the meaning of the Grail, whether in Celtic myth, in Indo-European fertility cults, in Christian, Jewish, or Cathar rituals, or in the secret wisdom of the ancients, I would have had to reply that none of these theories, as interesting as they may be, has found much support in the historical record.

Instead, I asked them what the Holy Grail looks like. The answer seemed obvious to many—"a chalice" was the most popular reply—

but upon reflection they all agreed that it was very difficult to tell from Chrétien's bare story what sort of thing a Grail was or how one should imagine it. We concluded, perhaps surprisingly, that Chrétien had no clear idea of just what a Grail was, where it came from, or what it represented, although he was sure that it was important. My question about the Grail hearkened back, I am sure, to a pair of half-remembered pictures that I had chanced upon as a graduate student some twenty-five years earlier. I had been browsing through Otto Demus and Max Hirmer's magnificent book of Romanesque wall paintings, and in the chapter labeled "Spain" I had found two pictures, one described as "the Virgin holding a fiery Grail (early twelfth century)" and the other simply as "Virgin with the Grail (c. 1123)." These paintings had stayed in my mind over the years, I think, largely because of their strange beauty. But I had also been intrigued that the Holy Grail should be depicted so early—more than fifty years before Chrétien's tale—and in Spain rather than in France or Britain. Most surprising of all, of course, was that the Holy Grail should be found in the hands of the Virgin Mary. I put all of this before the students to see what they might make of it. They asked all the right questions: Is it really the "Grail" that the Virgin is holding? Are the dates of the paintings (early twelfth century) accurate? What are the artistic antecedents and models for such pictures? If these paintings really depict the Holy Grail, how could Chrétien come to know about them?

This book emerged in response to their questions. It is divided into three parts. Part I, "From Romance to History," treats the stories of the Holy Grail as they were invented and developed by the poets of northern France and Germany at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century. Theirs are well-known romances, but in retelling them here I hope to add a little to our understanding of just how the stories originated, and how the Grail grew from an indistinct but holy thing in Chrétien, into a holy and

mystical stone in Wolfram von Eschenbach, and into the cup of the Last Supper preserved by Joseph of Arimathea in the story told by Robert de Boron. Part One concludes with a presentation of the first historian to discuss the Grail—a Cistercian monk of the early thirteenth century who made what seems to be the earliest attempt to study the Grail as something other than an object of romantic fiction.

Part II looks back to a period some fifty years earlier, before the first grail romances had been written. It asks where the idea of a Holy Grail came from in the first place, and what might have inspired the poets and storytellers to invent such a far-fetched and far-reaching tale. Here I propose, as an hypothesis, that the object and the image that would become the Holy Grail in the hands of Chrétien de Troyes and his successors originated in the high Pyrenees, in the late eleventh or early twelfth century, as an otherwise unattested attribute of the Virgin Mary. Chapter 5 introduces the evidence by following in the footsteps of the famous bishop, St. Raymund of Roda, as he traveled, in 1123, to the edge of his diocese to consecrate a church in a tiny mountain village. Chapter 6 examines the magnificent frescoes painted on the walls of that church, and especially the painting of the Virgin, at the head of the college of Apostles, holding a radiant dish or platter—a “gradal” in the local dialect—in her covered hand. Such an image of the Virgin holding a sacred vessel is to be found only here, in these mountain villages, and nowhere else in Christian art before this time. Chapter 7 concludes with a survey of the eight other churches in this region with similar paintings of the Virgin and a sacred vessel or grail, all of them painted or sculpted in the years before Chrétien composed his famous story.

Part III attempts to bridge the gulf between these paintings in the South and the poets in the North. It asks how the northern poets, and Chrétien de Troyes in particular, could have come to know about these unusual images of a holy vessel or grail, and then have transformed this vessel into the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend. The

tentative answer reached in Chapter 8, and the evidence on which it is based, came as a surprise to this writer; it is hoped that it might surprise the reader too.

In writing a book such as this I have necessarily taken a few risks and incurred many debts. The risks are of an academic sort. My own training and my professional experience is as an historian, but the argument of this book has lead me into territory that is usually taught and written about by specialists in university departments of art history and of literature. I run the risk that professionals in these disciplines will take exception to my poaching on their grounds. In response to such an imagined charge, I plead *nolo contendere*.

Many of my debts are related to these risks. I am deeply indebted, first, to my teachers in the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto—and among them especially to the late Leonard E. Boyle—for imagining that one could and should study the Middle Ages as a synthetic whole, and be conversant with all of its many parts. It was the institute's founder, Etienne Gilson, who insisted that one could not adequately explore or understand one aspect of medieval society (its philosophy, for example) without also exploring and understanding its history, theology, law, literature, and art. This book attempts, however inadequately, to pay homage to that ideal.

I will forgo naming a long and necessarily incomplete list of colleagues at the University of Toronto and elsewhere who have helped me in my research. I trust they know already how grateful I am for much that is good and accurate in this book. I am also indebted to another class of readers. This book, although intended to persuade my academic colleagues, was inspired not by them, but by friends and family outside of the academy. I have written it in the hope that they, too, might find it interesting and enjoyable. I am grateful for all of those who generously read and commented on chapters along the way, and especially for their unfailing enthusiasm.

Part I

From Romance to History

The one hope is that the things “which never were on sea or land” will be more weird and marvellous than any you have yet heard of . . . it is no accurate information about historical things that you seek, it is the thrill which mere reality would never satisfy.

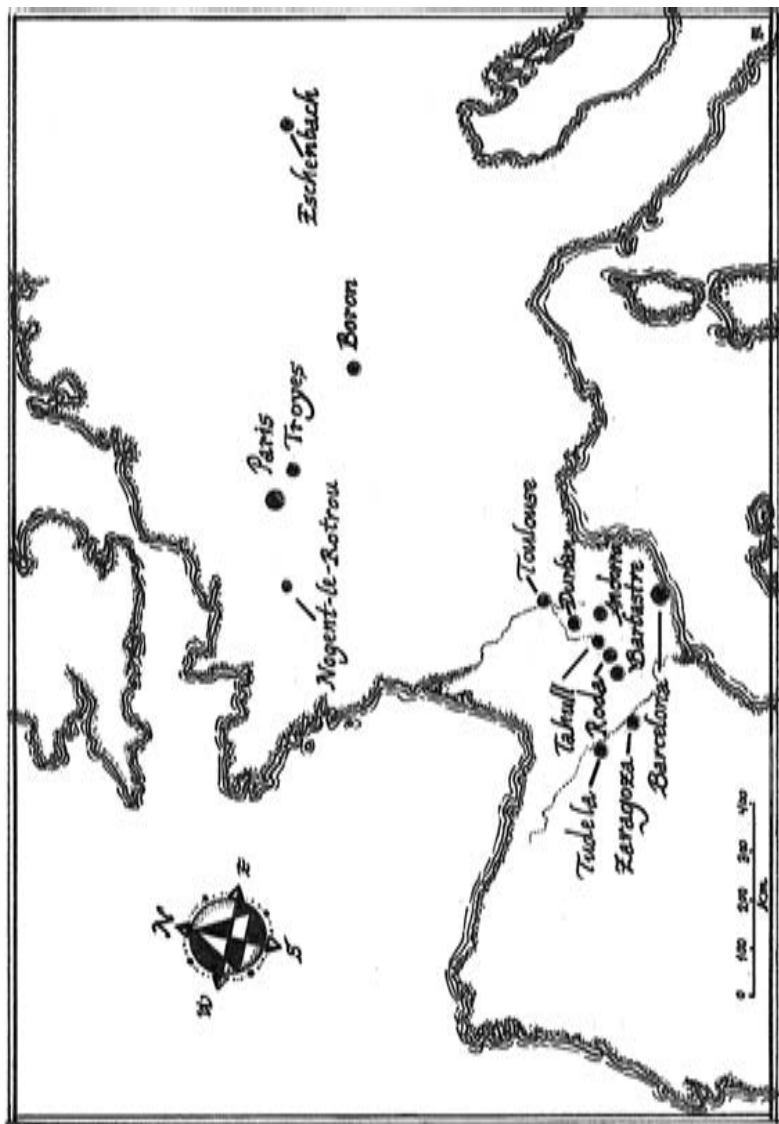
—EZRA POUND, *The Spirit of Romance*

The story is a romance, a fairy-tale for adults.

—J. R. R. TOLKEIN, *Gawain and the Green Knight*

The story of the Holy Grail is not an ancient myth whose roots are lost in the depths of time. The Grail legend was invented by medieval poets and storytellers in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The earliest surviving account of a sacred vessel called a “Grail” is found in a medieval romance entitled *The Story of the Grail* (*Conte du Graal*) written by Chrétien de Troyes in the north of France at the end of the twelfth century. Chrétien called his long verse-narrative “the finest tale that may be told at royal court,” and contemporaries seem to have agreed. This story of how the young Perceval comes of age, and of his encounter with the mysterious vessel or serving dish that Chrétien calls simply a “grail,” gained immediate renown. Within little more than a decade, in Germany, Wolfram von Eschenbach composed his *Parzival*, an even longer version of the story, in which he embellished and elaborated the story of Parzival (Perceval) and of his adventures, while taking issue

with and “correcting” Chrétien’s depiction of the Grail itself. Wolfram also attempted to provide the Grail with a history in the form of a brief account of how the Grail was brought to earth by angels and preserved in a Grail-castle through many generations. At about the same time as Wolfram was writing his *Parzival*, another poet, Robert de Boron, from the region of Burgundy in east-central France, provided a different account of the origins of the Grail and thus transformed the story in even more radical ways. He set out to invent a cycle of poems that would not only tell the story of Perceval and his quest, but also provide a detailed account of the Grail’s past, from its origins at Christ’s crucifixion (the *Joseph d’Arimathie*), through its entry into the affairs of Britain and the story of King Arthur (the *Merlin*), and then, it seems, to the denouement of the story in the quests for the Grail by Perceval and the Knights of the Round Table, and the death of King Arthur. Robert completed only part of this ambitious project, but his association of the Grail with the biblical figure of Joseph of Arimathea and the events surrounding the crucifixion of Christ would have lasting effects on all subsequent tellings of the story. The threads of these various traditions concerning the Grail and its history were drawn together and elaborated in the so-called Vulgate cycle of Arthurian prose romances, composed probably between 1215 and 1230 by unknown authors, and especially in the first book of that cycle, the *Estoire del Saint Graal*, written around 1225. Shortly after the appearance of this work, the former troubadour and Cistercian abbot, Hélinand of Froidmont (d. 1229), wrote the first historical description of the Grail. His brief discussion, included in his “Chronicle of the World,” is the first sign that the enigmatic and elusive *graal*, introduced into the world of romantic fiction by Chrétien de Troyes, was on the verge of becoming an object of historical, and not just poetic, investigation.



Map 1. Europe (showing places mentioned in text) (Randall Rosenfeld).

CHAPTER 1

Chrétien de Troyes

Perceval or the *Conte du Graal*

For all practical purposes Chrétien de Troyes must be considered the originator of the Grail legend as we know it today.¹ His *Conte du Graal* (Story of the Grail) was widely popular, and it inspired a host of imitators and competitors immediately after its publication. But it was Chrétien, himself, who seems first to have imagined that a common piece of tableware (for that is the original meaning of the word *graal*) could serve as the centerpiece of a great Romance. If we wish to discover what this Grail is, where it comes from, and why it was thought to be so important, we should begin with Chrétien, and with the few clues that he gives us in his simple and moving story.

Chrétien was probably a native of the city of Troyes, some 140 kilometers east of Paris, in the rich and powerful county of Champagne.² One of the great names in French literature and the foremost poet of twelfth-century France, he chose as his special theme the “Matter of Britain,” that is, the stories of King Arthur and his court. All that we know of Chrétien’s life we learn from his writings. He left three complete romances, *Erec et Enide*, *Cliges*, and *Le Chevalier au Lion* (The Knight with the Lion), and two others he left unfinished, *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* (The Knight of the Cart) and *Le Conte du Graal*. These two unfinished works both contain dedications that allow us to date them at least in a general way. The *Chevalier de la*

Charrette is dedicated to Marie of Champagne (1145–1198), the eldest daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine and her first husband, King Louis VII of France. Marie married the count of Champagne probably in 1164, so Chrétien's story must have been written after that date. His *Conte du Graal* is dedicated to Philip of Alsace, Count of Flanders. Since Philip became count of Flanders in 1168, and left on crusade in September 1190, dying overseas in 1191, the *Conte du Graal* must have been written sometime between 1168 and 1191. Most scholars would narrow these dates, and place the composition of the story to the last decade of Chrétien's known literary activity, between 1180 and 1190.³

The *Conte du Graal* is almost twice as long as Chrétien's other romances. Yet only about twenty-five lines of this 9,000-line poem mention the Grail. It is no difficult task to set out here the entirety of that material. The first mention of the Grail is in Chrétien's dedication to Count Philip of Flanders: "Is he [Philip] not worthier than Alexander . . . ? Yes, never doubt this. Therefore [Chrétien's] labor will not be wasted when, at the count's command, he endeavors and strives to put into rhyme the finest tale that may be told at a royal court. This is the story of the *graal*, from the book the count gave him. Hear how he performs his task" (ll. 57–68; p. 340).⁴

The next 3,000 lines of the poem introduce us to the young Perceval as he leaves his mother and his home and learns about knighthood and honorable behavior. In the midst of his adventures, Perceval finds himself in unknown territory. He rides all day without seeing anyone, and prays to God, "the King of Glory, his true Father," that he might see his mother again. He comes to a swift river and, following the bank looking for a place to cross, he encounters two men in a boat, one of whom is fishing. The fisherman invites Perceval to lodge with him for the night, and gives him directions to his castle. Perceval finds the castle without problem. He is invited in, and the lord of the castle sits with him in the central hall, lit by a large fire and with "light as bright as candles may furnish in a hall":

While they talked of this and that, a young attendant entered the room, holding a shining lance by the middle of the shaft. He passed between the fire and those seated on the bed, and all present saw the shining lance with its shining head. A drop of blood fell from the tip of the lance, and that crimson drop ran all the way down to the attendant's hand. The youth who had come there that night beheld this marvel and refrained from asking how this could be. He remembered the warning of the man who had made him a knight, he who had instructed and taught him to guard against speaking too much. The youth feared that if he asked a question, he would be taken for a peasant. He therefore asked nothing.

Two more attendants then entered, bearing in their hands candelabra of fine gold inlaid with niello. Handsome indeed were the attendants carrying the candelabra. On each candelabrum ten candles, at the very least, were burning. Accompanying the attendants was a beautiful, gracious, and elegantly attired young lady holding between her two hands a *graal*. When she entered holding this *graal*, such brilliant illumination appeared that the candles lost their brightness just as the stars and the moon do with the appearance of the sun. Following her was another young lady holding a silver carving platter. The *graal*, which came first, was of fine pure gold, adorned with many kinds of precious jewels, the richest and most costly found on sea or land, those on the *graal* undoubtedly more valuable than any others. Exactly as the lance had done, the *graal* and the platter passed in front of the bed and went from one room into another.

The youth watched them pass and dared not ask who was served from the *graal*, for always he took to heart the words of the wise and worthy man. (ll. 3190–3247; p. 379)

Next a table is set for Perceval (the “youth”) and his host.

The first course was a haunch of venison peppered and cooked in fat. There was no scarcity of clear wines of varied quality to drink from gold cups. An attendant who had brought out the peppered haunch of venison carved it before them on the silver platter, and placed the slices on a large piece of flat bread for the two men.

Meanwhile the *graal* passed before them again, and the youth did not ask who was served from the *graal*. He was afraid because of the worthy man, who had gently warned him against speaking too much, and, remembering this, had his heart always set on it. But he kept silent longer than was necessary. As each course was served, he saw the *graal* pass before them completely uncovered, but did not know who was served from it, and he would have liked to know. Yet he would definitely inquire of one of the court attendants, he said to himself, before his departure, although he would wait until morning, when he took leave of the lord and his entire household. The matter was thus postponed, and he set about drinking and eating. (ll. 3280–3311; p. 380)

The next morning, when Perceval awakes, he finds the castle entirely deserted: “Because he saw the drawbridge lowered, he thought that the attendants had gone into the forest to examine traps and snares. Having no wish to stay longer, he decided to follow them to learn if any of them would tell him, this not being indiscreet, why the lance was bleeding and where the *graal* was being carried” (ll. 3392–3401; p. 381).

He sets off to follow their tracks, and comes upon a young woman under an oak tree lamenting and moaning the death of her lover, whose headless body she holds in her lap. Perceval stops to comfort and aid her, and as they speak she informs him that his host the previous night was the rich Fisher King:

“He certainly showed you great honor by seating you next to him. And tell me now if, when you sat down beside him, you saw the lance with its bleeding tip, though no flesh or vein be there.”

“If I saw it? Yes, on my word.”

“And did you ask why it bled?”

“I never spoke of it.”

“So help me God, know then that you behaved very badly. And did you see the *graal*?”

“Yes.”

“And who held it?”

"A young lady."

"Whence did she come?"

"From a room. And she went into another, passing in front of me."

"Did anyone walk ahead of the *graal*?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Two attendants, no one else."

"And what did they hold in their hands?"

"Candelabra filled with candles."

"And who came after the *graal*?"

"A young lady."

"And what did she hold?"

"A silver platter."

"Did you ask the people where they were going thus?"

"Not a word left my mouth."

"So help me God, that is worse. What is your name, friend?"

And the youth, ignorant of his name, had a sudden inspiration and replied that his name was Perceval the Welshman. He did not know whether or not he spoke the truth. And though he did not know, he spoke the truth. When the maiden heard him, she stood up opposite him and told him angrily: "Your name is changed, friend."

"How?"

"Perceval the wretched! Oh, unfortunate Perceval, what a hapless man you were not to have asked these questions. . . . I am your first cousin, and you are my first cousin. I grieve no less for your misfortune in not learning what is done with the *graal* and to whom it is carried, than for your mother who is dead, or for this knight, whom I loved and cherished." (ll. 3545–3610; pp. 383–384)

Some 1,500 lines later in the poem Perceval finds himself at King Arthur's court at Caerleon. In the midst of the rejoicing over his return, a woman arrives riding a mule and holding a whip. Chrétien tells us: "If the book is accurate, there never was a creature so totally foul, even in hell." This woman proclaims in the midst of the court: "O, Perceval! . . . Damn him who greets you or wishes you well. Why