

The Da Vinci Code and the Search for the Holy Grail

Like many medieval castles and churches, Rosslyn Chapel is associated with numerous fantasies, ghost stories, and legends. Tens of thousands of people visit the Chapel every year often holding published books which put forward their own theories about the Chapel.

It is difficult to verify these theories, as no primary sources on Rosslyn Chapel exist; yet these myths are now so well established that we can regard them to be part of the “intangible cultural heritage” of this special place.

The idea that a secret treasure lies beneath the floor in Rosslyn Chapel has been perpetuated for centuries.



The interest in the Holy Grail was fuelled by tales of King Arthur and the Round Table. In this illustration from 1470, the Grail appears as a gold vessel held by two angels.

This belief may be traced back to a letter written by Mary of Guise, wife of James V and mother of Mary Queen of Scots, to Sir William St. Clair, grandson of the Chapel's founder, around 1546. The letter said:

Likewise that we shall be Leal and trew Maistres to him, his Counsell and Secret shewn to us we sall keep secret.

What was the secret that Mary alludes to in her letter?

Some have said that it refers to the Holy Rude, or piece of the true cross. Others relate it to the treasures brought back to Scotland by Templar Knights. Could it be that the Holy Grail lies here?

The legend of the Holy Grail has existed for centuries, and has both religious and secular origins. Some of the earliest Grail legends are closely tied to Joseph of Arimathea, as it is believed that Jesus appeared to him while in prison to present him with the Grail. The Holy Grail made one of its first secular appearances in the 12th century romance, *The Story of the Grail*, by Chrétien de Troyes.

The idea of a Holy Grail and the subsequent quest to find it has also been closely associated with Arthurian legends. These were popular stories, which have been heard all over Europe. It is interesting that Rosslyn Chapel has a number of carvings which suggest a knowledge of Arthurian legend. Although earlier in origin, the stories of King Arthur are usually depicted in art as being set in the Middle Ages.

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In the early 19th century, there was a revival of interest in medieval life, art, and buildings. Writers and artists such as Sir Walter Scott and William Wordsworth were drawn to Rosslyn Chapel for its medieval beauty and mystery. This fed into the arts and crafts movements which influenced fashion and design from the 1860s onwards. The inclusion of Rosslyn Chapel in the writings of Scott and Wordsworth helped to make the Chapel a popular tourist destination all those years ago.

In the early 1970s, following Woodstock, there was another Medieval revival, with fashion designers such as Bill Gibb showing influences from the Renaissance and the 19th century pre-Raphaelite movement. This post-hippie era interest included a fashion for wearable art, which was often inspired by Celtic and European folk tales myths and legends. In 1975, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* was released, further spurring interest, albeit humorously, in Arthurian legend and the quest for the grail.

The punk and post punk eras saw folk art reduce in popularity, and popular culture tended to be about exploding romantic and religious myths, possibly as society became much more secular. But by this time Rosslyn Chapel had fallen into serious decline, and very few people visited its damp and water-damaged interior.

The physical reality of the Holy Grail has been a topic of some debate. Some believe the Holy Grail is a chalice, others a dish, and others still a rock. All of these possibilities have been depicted in art and legends through the centuries.



The Damsel of the Sanct Grael or Holy Grail by Dante Gabriel Rossetti from 1874 shows the appeal of the mystery of the Holy Grail through the ages.

In 1982, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, was published. These authors claimed that the Holy Grail was not an object at all, and that the phrase was a mistranslation of "Sang Real", or "Holy Blood." The theory was that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a child, and that the Holy Blood represented a royal blood line from Jesus, which was secretly protected by a Holy conspiracy. The theory shocked devout Christians, but fascinated many of all faiths. It brought renewed interest in the idea of a Holy Grail. This book in turn influenced other writers, in particular Dan Brown, who used the book as a basis for his fictional adventure story, *The Da Vinci Code*.

The Da Vinci Code brought together several strands from the earlier myths and legends, culminating in a scene that suggested that the Holy Blood line was hidden and protected by a secret society based at Rosslyn Chapel. The final scenes of the film show the tomb of Mary Magdalene hidden beneath a "Rose Line", no longer at the Chapel, but part of a line of energy which crossed Europe, its secrets protected by a loyal band of followers.



This still from *The Da Vinci Code* film shows the characters discovering a secret door in the floor of the vestry which leads into an underground chamber.

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The renewed interest in Rosslyn Chapel led to an explosion in visitor numbers, which reached 176,000 the year following the première of *The Da Vinci Code* Film. By this time the Rosslyn Chapel Trust had been formed to try and save the Chapel from almost certain collapse. A fundraising drive had begun to undertake a significant conservation programme, and, for the first time in centuries, the building had a complement of staff looking after it. This allowed them to respond to a request from a Hollywood Film Company which had the rights to film *The Da Vinci Code*.

Despite the fact that the Chapel features for less than two minutes, the potential link to all the myths and legends associated with the Grail led to a huge interest in this unique little building. More books, more theories, and more stories emerged, and the Chapel became a place of spiritual journey or pilgrimage for many.

Today's visitors often wonder why we do not simply explore the Chapel vaults and learn once and for all what lies beneath. The vaults under Rosslyn Chapel are the final resting place of a number of Barons of Rosslyn. It is not surprising that the Earl of Rosslyn does not wish to disturb the resting place of his ancestors. In addition, the vaults were filled with earth hundreds of years ago. It would take extensive work to remove the infill, and this could potentially jeopardize the structural integrity of the Chapel.

Because no primary source material or original documents on Rosslyn Chapel exist, it is difficult to say anything for certain about the Chapel's origins. Different people find their own meanings in the carvings and architecture at the Chapel, and it is possible to interpret the carvings so that they fit into any number of theories. Proving or disproving the many myths at Rosslyn Chapel is difficult, but perhaps that is the true treasure: a building that keeps its secrets!

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Useful Reading

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