

The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail

How Fiction Became Fact

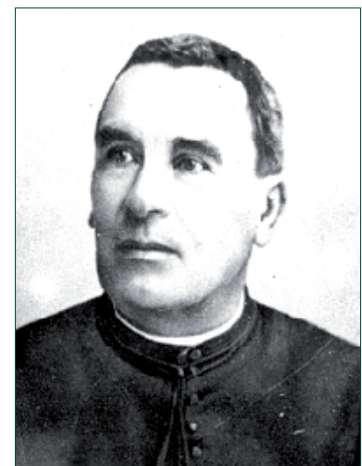
Henry Lincoln, an actor and science-fiction scriptwriter, came across a book while on holiday in France. It was called *L'Or de Rennes*, written by Gérard de Sède in 1967, assisted by a gentleman called Pierre Plantard. De Sède told of a mystery involving the village of Rennes le Chateau and its priest, Fr Saunière, who was said to have become fabulously wealthy.

Where did he find the money to renovate his church? Did he find treasure left by the Knights Templar? Were there secret documents hidden since Medieval times? Lincoln worked on two documentaries about the mystery, shown on BBC2. As these proved very popular Lincoln later joined up with Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, to carry out further research.

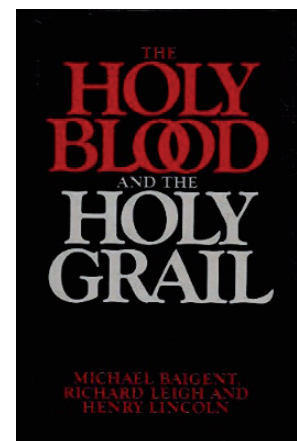
In fact, the wealth of Saunière was easily explained, as he had been selling religious Masses on an almost industrial scale, and using the funds to renovate his church. He was convicted of trafficking in Masses in 1910. While there was speculation about just how much money he made from selling Masses, and whether it was enough to fund the extensive renovations he had commissioned, there were no suggestions at the time that Saunière had uncovered any mysterious secrets!

The hidden treasures story actually emerged in the 1950s, when a new restaurant owner in the village began to circulate a story that Saunière had found Medieval parchments that directed him to a buried treasure, and that this was the source of the priest's wealth. It was essentially a way of attracting tourists to the village, to boost his restaurant's profits. Plantard and de Sède had used the stories to inspire the book *L'Or de Rennes*, which had so captivated Henry Lincoln. Soon, these fictions and frauds would find an outlet in another best-selling book.

Unknown to the trio of researchers, Pierre Plantard and a fellow conspirator, Philippe de Cherisey, had been responsible for the 'mystery'. Realising that Henry Lincoln had taken the story seriously, Plantard claimed to be a 'mole' from within a secret organisation called The Priory of Sion. He directed them to a fake document that he and Cherisey had planted in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, with the full intention that Lincoln and his friends would find it. The 'Dossiers Secrets' as they were called, were taken as factual by the three writers and formed the basis of their book, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* published in 1982.



Fr Saunière was convicted in 1910 but rumours circulated that he had found Medieval parchments which led to buried treasure.



The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail caused a sensation when it was published in 1982.

The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail

The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail proposed that Jesus and Mary Magdalene married and had children. Their descendants appeared in Southern France and married into the Merovingian dynasty. *The Templar Revelation*, by Clive Prince, had already put forward the theory that the Merovingian Kings were descended from the bloodline of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. The secret of this bloodline, they claimed, was kept by a secret society known as the Priory of Sion. The book concluded that the Holy Grail is not a cup, but a mistranslation of the words 'Sang Real', or Royal Blood. It represents the womb of Mary Magdalene and the holy bloodline that came from it.



The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail claimed that the Merovingian Kings were descended from Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

Central to *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* is the belief that the mysterious Priory of Sion is real. They claimed it was founded in 1099, and had illustrious Grand Masters, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Sir Isaac Newton. They also stated that the Priory was responsible for setting up the Knights Templar.

The truth is that Pierre Plantard had established the Priory as a fraternal organisation back in 1956, as part of a previous hoax. Its original object was as a charity to support the building of low income housing, and a retreat. It was set up and dissolved in the same year, after being accused of operating outside its written charitable objectives. In reality, Plantard had invented a fictitious history of the organisation, basing his text on genuine monastic orders of the period. The fake documents were then planted in various locations around France. The forgery was cleverly done – lifting text from genuine historical documents, and changing the names to attribute the content to their fake organisation. From a housing charity, the Priory of Sion was now being advertised as an ancient fraternal order and Plantard himself claimed to be a descendant of Jesus! It was a short step for the fraudster to link his Priory fraud with the stories around Rennes le Chateau, and another conspiracy theory was established.

The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail became an international best-seller, although it was quickly discredited by historians, who could see that the so-called dossier and other documents were forgeries. As the furore around *Holy Blood* increased, both Plantard and Cherisay admitted their hoax.

Prominent British historian Richard Barber, wrote:

*'The Templar-Grail myth . . . is at the heart of the most notorious of all the Grail pseudo-histories, The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail, which is a classic example of the conspiracy theory of history . . . It is essentially a text which proceeds by innuendo, not by refutable scholarly debate . . . Essentially, the whole argument is an ingeniously constructed series of suppositions combined with forced readings of such tangible facts as are offered. However, the Priory became a cause célèbre, and to this day there are people who are convinced of the existence of the organisation.'*ⁱ

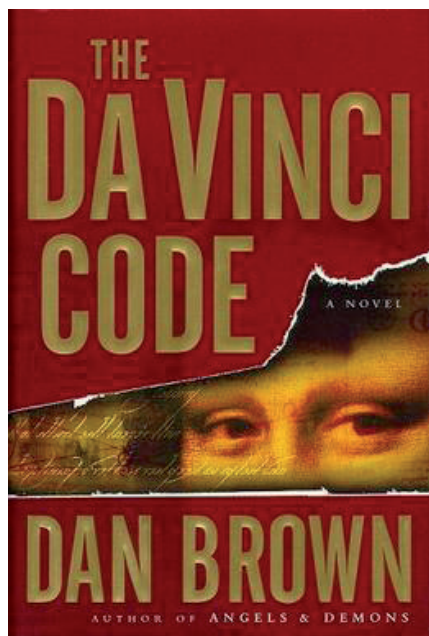
ⁱ Richard Barber: *The Holy Grail – The History of a Legend*. Penguin Books 2004

The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail

Robert McCrum, literary editor of *The Observer* newspaper, said this about *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*:

'There is something called historical evidence – there is something called the historical method – and if you look around the shelves of bookshops there is a lot of history being published, and people mistake this type of history for the real thing. These kinds of books do appeal to an enormous audience who believe them to be "history", but actually they aren't history, they are a kind of parody of history. Alas, though, I think that one has to say that this is the direction that history is going today.'

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, many people today still believe in the theories put forward by the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. Dan Brown had all the inspiration and public fascination he needed to create an international best-selling work of fiction, *The Da Vinci Code*.



The Da Vinci Code became a best-selling work for author Dan Brown.

At the time of writing this article, *The Da Vinci Code* is recorded as the biggest selling novel of all time. Dan Brown denied that *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* was the main inspiration, after its authors accused him of plagiarism. The creators of the fake documents, Plantard and Chersay, have also accused Dan Brown of stealing their ideas!

Rosslyn Chapel has benefited greatly from the increase in tourists brought here because of the successful film, *The Da Vinci Code*. Many people come here convinced that the stories are true. The Chapel has become associated with these ideas, and they are now part of our 'intangible cultural heritage'. We respect everyone who comes here, whatever their motivation, but at the same time we try gently to educate them in what is known, what is unknown, and what is pure fabrication. More importantly, we try to encourage our visitors to admire and enjoy the building in its own right, not for the myths and legends that surround it. We feel that Rosslyn Chapel is a treasure in its own right, and needs no fabrication to make it a fantastic visitor experience!

Written by Fiona Rogan, Education Manager
2009-2019

Further Reading

L'Or de Rennes, by Gérard de Sede, Paris: René Julliard, 1967

Richard Barber: The Holy Grail – Imagination and Belief
Harvard University Press, 2004

Richard Barber: The Holy Grail the History of a Legend,
Penguin books, 2004

Video: *The Real Da Vinci Code*, with Tony Robinson

ii Richard McCrum: *The History of a Mystery. Timewatch*.
BBC Two. 17 September 1996

www.rosslynchapel.com