

Lesson 7 – What Happened to the Holy Grail?

Background

Matthew 26:27–28 (ESV)

²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Why is this unsolved?

It is unsolved because the concept of a “Holy Grail” is but a mythology that has been popularized by Arthurian Legend as well as more recent works such as *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and *The DaVinci Code*.

What is the Legend?

- The Holy Grail is traditionally thought to be the cup that Jesus drank from at the Last Supper and that Joseph of Arimathea used to collect Jesus’s blood at his crucifixion.
- Some Arthurian (i.e. King Arthur) tales claimed that Joseph of Arimathea brought the Grail to Glastonbury in England. One legend has it that on the spot where he buried the Grail, the water runs red because it travels through Christ’s blood.
- Others believed the Knights Templar, a medieval order that protected pilgrims traveling to the Holy Land, seized the Holy Grail from the Temple Mount during the Crusades and secreted it away.



- The mythical literary figure, King Arthur, was said to coordinate great spiritual expeditions to search for the enigmatic relic. Legends hold that the Grail had the power to heal all wounds, deliver eternal youth and grant everlasting happiness.
- In one popular Arthurian story, a character known as the “Fisher King” had a serious wound that kept him from moving. He needed the Grail to be healed and could only sit and fish near his castle until someone found the magical cup.

Where Did the Legend Come From?

Perceval, le Conte du Graal - The Grail is first featured in *Perceval, le Conte du Graal* (*The Story of the Grail*) by Chrétien de Troyes. In this work, dated sometime between 1180 and 1191, the object has not yet acquired the implications of holiness. While dining in the magical abode of the Fisher King, Perceval witnesses a wondrous procession in which youths carry magnificent objects, passing before him at each course of the meal. For the final item, a beautiful young girl emerges bearing an elaborately decorated *graal*, or "grail." *Perceval* is the earliest recorded account of what was to become the Quest for the Holy Grail by the knights of King Arthur.

Joseph d'Armathie - It was in the work of Robert de Boron that the Grail truly became the "Holy Grail" and assumed the form most familiar to modern readers in its Christian context. In his verse romance *Joseph d'Armathie*, composed between 1191 and 1202, Robert tells the story of Joseph of Arimathea acquiring the chalice of the Last Supper to collect Christ's blood upon his removal from the cross. Joseph is thrown in prison, where Christ visits him and explains the mysteries of the blessed cup. Upon his release Joseph gathers his in-laws and other followers and travels to the west and founds a dynasty of Grail keepers that eventually includes Perceval.

Lancelot Section of the **Vulgate Cycle** - The authors of the *Vulgate Cycle* used the Grail as a symbol of divine grace; Galahad, illegitimate son of Lancelot and Elaine, the world's greatest knight and the Grail Bearer at the castle of Corbenic, is destined to achieve the Grail, his spiritual purity making him a greater warrior than even his illustrious father. Galahad and the interpretation of the Grail involving him were picked up in the 15th century by Thomas Malory in *Le Morte d'Arthur* and remain popular today.



Has it Been Found?

In March 2014, two Spanish historians claimed they discovered the Holy Grail at a church in León in northern Spain. They said the chalice had been there since the 11th century. Scientific dating confirmed that the cup was made between 200 B.C. and 100 A.D. The historians also presented data that included three years of research on the whereabouts of the Grail.

What Really Matters

1 Corinthians 11:23–26 (ESV)

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

<https://theconversation.com/what-exactly-is-the-holy-grail-and-why-has-its-meaning-eluded-us-for-centuries-87558>
(Accessed April 30, 2019)

What exactly is the Holy Grail – and why has its meaning eluded us for centuries?

November 22, 2017 5.27am EST

Type “Holy Grail” into Google and ... well, you probably don’t need me to finish that sentence. The sheer multiplicity of what any search engine throws up demonstrates that there is no clear consensus as to what the Grail is or was. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t plenty of people out there claiming to know its history, true meaning and even where to find it.

Modern authors, perhaps most (in)famously [Dan Brown](#), offer new interpretations and, even when these are clearly and explicitly rooted in little more than imaginative fiction, they get picked up and bandied about as if a new scientific and irrefutable truth has been discovered. The Grail, though, will perhaps always eschew definition. But why?

The first known mention of a Grail (“un graal”) is made in a narrative spun by a 12th century writer of French romance, Chrétien de Troyes, who might reasonably be referred to as the Dan Brown of his day – though some scholars would argue that the quality of Chrétien’s writing far exceeds anything Brown has so far produced.

Chrétien’s Grail is mystical indeed – it is a dish, big and wide enough to take a salmon, that seems capable of delivering food and sustenance. To obtain the Grail requires asking a particular question at the Grail Castle. Unfortunately, the exact question (“Whom does the Grail serve?”) is only revealed after the Grail quester, the hapless Perceval, has missed the opportunity to ask it. It seems he is not quite ready, not quite mature enough, for the Grail.



The Holy Grail depicted as a dish in which Christ’s blood is collected. [British Library](#)

But if this dish is the “first” Grail, then why do we now have so many possible Grails? Indeed, it is, at turns, depicted as the [chalice of the Last Supper](#) or of [the Crucifixion](#) or [both](#), or as a stone containing the [elixir of life](#), or even as the [bloodline of Christ](#). And this list is hardly exhaustive.

The reason most likely has to do with the fact that Chrétien appears to have died before completing his story, leaving the crucial questions as to what the Grail is and means tantalisingly unanswered. And it did not take long for others to try to answer them for him.

Robert de Boron, a poet writing within 20 or so years of Chrétien (circa 1190-1200), seems to have been the first to have associated the Grail with the cup of the Last Supper. In Robert's prehistory of the object, Joseph of Arimathea took the Grail to the Crucifixion and used it to catch Christ's blood. In the years that followed (1200-1230), anonymous writers of prose romances fixated upon the Last Supper's Holy Chalice and made the Grail the subject of a quest by various knights of King Arthur's court. In Germany, by contrast, the knight and poet Wolfram von Eschenbach reimagined the Grail as "Lapsit exillis" – an item more commonly referred to these days as the "Philosopher's Stone".



The Holy Grail depicted as a ciborium. British Library

None of these is anything like Chrétien's Grail, of course, so we can fairly ask: did medieval audiences have any more of a clue about the nature of the Holy Grail than we do today?

Publishing the Grail

My [recent book](#) delves into the medieval publishing history of the French romances that contain references to the Grail legend, asking questions about the narratives' compilation into manuscript books. Sometimes, a given text will be bound alongside other types of texts, some of which seemingly have nothing to do with the Grail whatsoever. So, what sorts of texts do we find accompanying Grail narratives in medieval books? Can this tell us anything about what medieval audiences knew or understood of the Grail?



Sangreal. [Arthur Rackham](#)

The picture is varied, but a broad chronological trend is possible to spot. Some of the few earliest manuscript books we still have see Grail narratives compiled alone, but a pattern quickly appears for including them into collected volumes. In these cases, Grail narratives can be found alongside historical, religious or other narrative (or fictional) texts. A picture emerges, therefore, of a Grail just as lacking in clear definition as that of today.

Perhaps the Grail served as a useful tool that could be deployed in all manner of contexts to help communicate the required message, whatever that message may have been. We still see this today, of course, such as when we use the phrase “The Holy Grail of...” to describe the practically unobtainable, but highly desirable prize in just about any area you can think of. There is even a [guitar effect-pedal](#) named “holy grail”.

Once the prose romances of the 13th century started to appear, though, the Grail took on a proper life of its own. Like a modern soap opera, these romances comprised vast reams of narrative threads, riddled with independent episodes and inconsistencies. They occupied entire books, often enormous and lavishly illustrated, and today these offer evidence that literature about the Grail evaded straightforward understanding and needed to be set apart – physically and figuratively. In other words, Grail literature had a distinctive quality – it was, as we might call it today, a genre in its own right.

In the absence of clear definition, it is human nature to impose meaning. This is what happens with the Grail today and, according to the evidence of medieval book compilation, it is almost certainly what happened in the Middle Ages, too. Just as modern guitarists use their “holy grail” to experiment with all kinds of sounds, so medieval writers and publishers of romance used the Grail as an adaptable and creative instrument for conveying a particular message to their audience, the nature of which could be very different from one book to the next.

Whether the audience always understood that message, of course, is another matter entirely.

<https://nypost.com/2014/03/31/historians-claim-to-have-recovered-fabled-holy-grail/>
(Accessed April 30, 2019)

Historians claim to have recovered Holy Grail

By [Bob Fredericks](#)

March 31, 2014 | 12:36pm



Spanish researchers Margarita Torres and Jose Ortega del Rio believe they have found the goblet from which Jesus supposedly sipped during the Last Supper. AFP/Getty Images

Spanish historians say they have discovered what Monty Python could not — the Holy Grail, the legendary cup Jesus supposedly drank from at the Last Supper.

The Spaniards — Margarita Torres and José Ortega del Río — believe the 2,000-year-old vessel is in a church in León in northern Spain.

The pair spent three years studying the history of the chalice and last week published a book, “The Kings of the Grail,” making their case.

The onyx chalice, they explained, was concealed within another antique vessel known as the Chalice of Doña Urruca, which is located in León’s basilica of Saint Isidore.

The historians said it has been there since the 11th century.

The 2,000-year-old vessel is on display in a church in León, Spain. AFP/Getty Images

“This is a very important discovery because it helps solve a big puzzle,” Torres [told The Irish Times](#). “We believe this could be the start of a wonderful stage of research.”

She said the duo had been researching the history of some Islamic remains in the Saint Isidore basilica. But their discovery of two medieval Egyptian documents that mentioned the chalice of Christ caused them to change direction, the paper reported.

Those parchments told a tale of how Muslims took the sacred cup from the Christian community in Jerusalem to Cairo.

It was then given to an emir on Spain's Mediterranean coast in return for help he gave to Egyptians who were suffering a famine.

The historians' research has been backed up by scientific dating, which estimates that the cup in question was made between 200 BC and 100 AD.

The scientists admit the first 400 years of the cup's history remain a mystery, and they can't prove the chalice ever actually touched Christ's lips.

But they insist there is no doubt that this is the cup that early Christians revered as the chalice used at the Last Supper.

"The only chalice that could be considered the chalice of Christ is that which made the journey to Cairo and then from Cairo to León — and that is this chalice," said Torres, who teaches medieval history at the University of León.

Countless scientists and historians have pursued the Holy Grail, an effort chronicled in Arthurian legend, made into pulp adventure with "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade," and satirized by the British comedy troupe Monty Python in 1975's "Monty Python and the Holy Grail."

<http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20180528-is-this-the-home-of-the-holy-grail>
(Accessed April 30, 2019)

Is this the home of the Holy Grail?

By Quinn Hargitai
29 May 2018

It is difficult to enter the Valencia Cathedral without feeling a sense of awe. Upon crossing the threshold, I was greeted with the echoes of a Gregorian chant that reverberated across the vaulted ceiling. Stretched before me was a long procession of archways leading to a single dais on the far side of the cathedral. A small set of steps climbed up to the altar, which was encased by a half dome immaculately adorned with sculptures and paintings depicting scenes of angels and the apostles.

But I hadn't come to Spain's third-largest city for the views of its cathedral. Instead, I made my way to a small room just off to the side, one so nondescript that I'd nearly missed it on first glance. Within this humble chapel, encased in glass just beyond the altar, was the object I was searching for: a single cup, resting upon an illuminated golden pedestal. As legend has it, this is the very cup used by Jesus Christ during the Last Supper – or, as the cup is more commonly known, the Holy Grail.

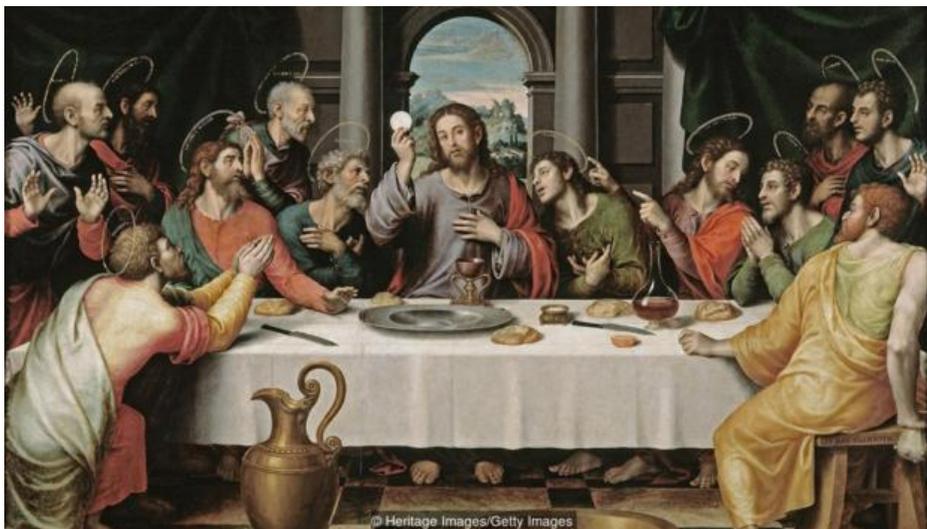


The Valencia Cathedral houses what is said to be the Holy Grail (Credit: Angel Villalba/Getty Images)

Appearing in stories from the medieval epics of King Arthur and his knights to the silver-screen exploits of Indiana Jones, the Holy Grail has remained one of humanity's most sought-after treasures, a mysterious relic that straddles the line between fantasy and reality. Though the idea that a chalice used by Christ would be revered and therefore preserved by early worshippers is a plausible one, a magical vessel capable of granting eternal life is never

mentioned in the Bible; it's convention of Arthurian legend, penned by the likes of Chrétien de Troyes and Robert de Boron, two French poets who heavily shaped the development of Arthurian lore in the 12th and 13th Centuries. The first written mention of the grail as we've come to know it is in de Troyes' *Perceval*, in which it is described not as a chalice but as a serving dish, likely harkening to the magical cauldrons of Celtic myth.

Growing up on the mythical tales of King Arthur, I've always been a sceptic; for me, the grail is a literary treasure. Even so, I couldn't help but feel intrigued by Valencia's Santo Cáliz (Holy Chalice). There are currently more than 200 claimants in Europe alone, all vying for the illustrious title of Holy Grail, with theories of the relic's final resting place found everywhere [from Scotland to Accokeek, Maryland](#). Yet out of all the lists of claimants I researched, Valencia's chalice almost invariably held the top spot. It still manages to attract pilgrims from all over the world, and has even been used ceremonially by both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. Eager for the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Sir Galahad on my own quest for the grail, I'd come here to discover what makes this cup so special among so many others.

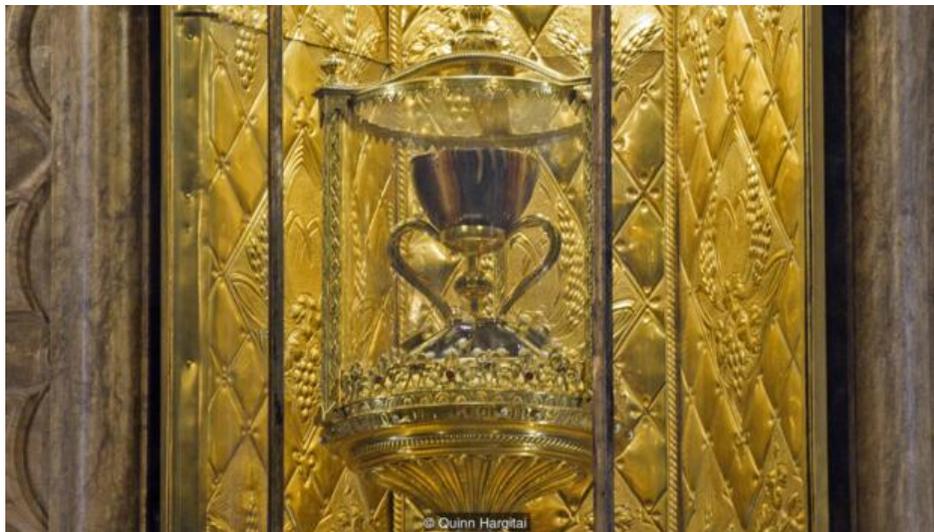


The Holy Grail was the cup used by Jesus Christ during the Last Supper (Credit: Heritage Images/Getty Images)

I walked into La Capilla del Santo Cáliz (Chapel of the Chalice) to find it empty. Although my timing was unintentional, I'd arrived at the cathedral in the middle of a mass for Holy Saturday, the day before Easter Sunday, which meant that all the visitors were preoccupied with the ceremony in the adjacent room. A single beam of light streamed down from a stained-glass window far above the altar; the gentle hum of the distant choir was the only sound within the chapel. Though I had come to the place more as a researcher than a pilgrim, it was hard not to be taken by the quiet solemnity of the moment.

As I approached the altar to inspect the chalice more closely, I found it far more elaborate than I'd anticipated. With two massive gold handles and a base inlaid with pearls, emeralds and rubies, the chalice immediately filled me with a sense of incredulity. Indeed, as anyone who has seen Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade is aware, the Holy Grail should be a simple thing – the cup of a carpenter.

I was later informed by one of the attendants just outside the room that the actual relic is merely the piece at the top, a cup hewn from agate and polished with myrrh. The handles and base, which bear the hallmarks of medieval craftsmanship, weren't added until much later. My scepticism temporarily assuaged, I turned to the task of discovering how this cup supposedly made the journey from Jerusalem, where the Last Supper is believed to have taken place, to the east coast of Spain.



The chalice is carved from agate and features large gold handles and a base inlaid with precious gems (Credit: Quinn Hargitai)

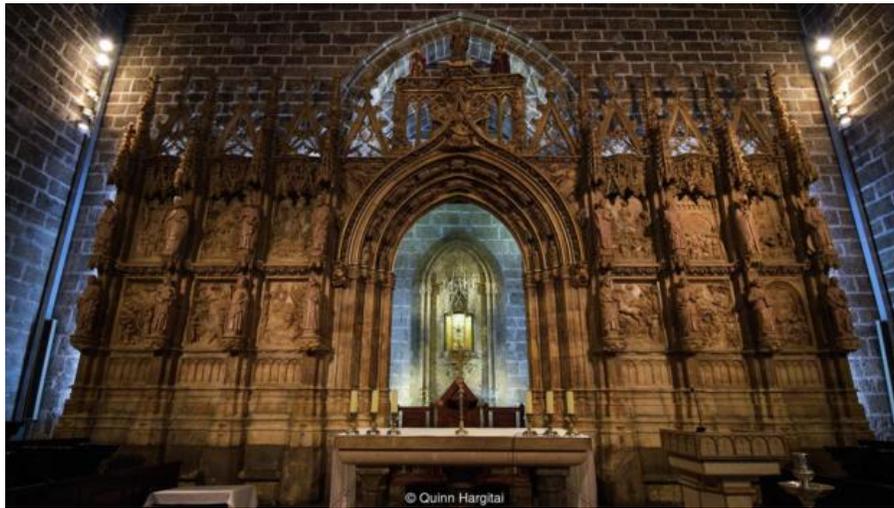
As with all stories of grail claimants, the tale is convoluted. An attendant of the cathedral was able to provide a basic explanation of how the chalice first made its way out of Jerusalem, some 2,000 years ago.

“St Peter, the first pope, took the cup to Rome,” she explained. “The popes were the only people who could give mass, so St Peter and the rest of popes used the grail for the Eucharist, considering it the one Christ used. Then, when the Emperor Valerian began to persecute the Christians [from 257 AD], it was sent to Huesca, Spain, because it was no longer safe in Rome.”

It is a mysterious relic that straddles the line between fantasy and reality

She went on to explain that the chalice supposedly rested in Huesca for a few hundred years, before being moved again during the Umayyad conquests of the 8th Century, nestled in the cliff-side monastery of San Juan de la Peña in northern Spain for fear of plundering.

Granted, accounts of these first thousand years of the grail's journeys are beyond anyone's ability to verify. The more reliable records of this chalice appear in 1399, when it became part King Martin of Aragon's royal reliquary. According to the cathedral's records, after Alfonso the Magnanimous took the throne in 1416, the reliquary was moved to Valencia and later given to the cathedral as a payment for a debt. Though the chalice was spirited away a few more times on the occasion of war, it inevitably returned to the Valencia Cathedral in 1939 – this time for good.



According to legend, the cup was brought to Spain from Rome during Emperor Valerian's persecution of Christians in the 3rd Century AD (Credit: Quinn Hargitai)

Though an elaborate account, the story alone was not enough to make me believe this was the one true grail. After all, nearly all the grail claimants boast complex tales of how the relic was carried across seas and over mountains. Since none of the accounts can be verified, what has made so many believe that this is the one?

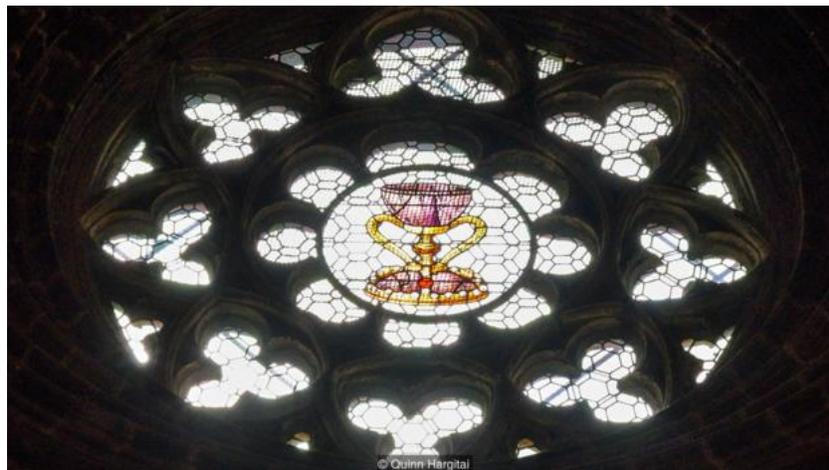
The main detail that sets the Valencia chalice apart is the style and craft of the agate cup, which Spanish archaeologist Antonio Beltrán, who studied the chalice in 1960, claims indicates an origin somewhere between the 2nd Century BC to the 1st Century AD, likely from a workshop in the Middle East. The archaeological assessment suggests that this cup fits the bill, at least geographically and chronologically. Though far from definitive proof, the findings certainly bolster the chalice's claim.

The true wonder of the Holy Grail was never in the finding, but in the searching

As I stared at the agate cup resting in its glass case, there was one thought that continued to occupy my mind. If this was in fact the Holy Grail, one of the most legendary artefacts of all time, could it really be this easy? This was supposed to be the cup sought after time and time again by the heroes of old, only ever attained by those of purest heart – and yet here it was, not buried within the deep recesses of some distant cave but resting in a city centre surrounded by cafes filled with people casually sipping espressos.

As I made my way to leave, I asked one of the attendants her opinion. After all, weren't the stories of noble quests in pursuit of the Holy Grail not somewhat tarnished by the fact that it was here simply for all the world to see?

"I think the mystery remains," she said with a smile that made me feel it was not the first time she'd heard the question, "After all, this isn't even the only Holy Grail in Spain. You have to choose which is the real one for yourself."



Quinn Hargitai: "The treasure isn't the cup, but the stories we have crafted around it throughout time" (Credit: Quinn Hargitai)

Later on, when doing some more research, I learned what she meant. In 2014, two historians published [Kings of the Grail](#), a book in which they claim to have found the true grail in the Basilica of San Isidoro of León in northern Spain. The pair cited two recently discovered ancient Egyptian manuscripts as the source of their discovery. Just as with Valencia's chalice, the new claimant had a detailed history behind it, and was also scientifically dated to the appropriate timeframe.

Though the new discovery throws the Valencia chalice's claim into contention, I couldn't help but feel an odd sense of reassurance. For me, the true wonder of the Holy Grail was never in the finding, but in the searching. The treasure isn't the cup, but the stories we have crafted around it throughout time. I felt content knowing that so long as new contenders continue to appear, the mystery will endure, the legend will survive and the quest for the Holy Grail will go on.