

# Not Monty's Grail: Myth and History in the Pursuit of the Holy Grail

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## Abstract:

The iconic and mythic legend of the Holy Grail has for more than a thousand years captured the imagination of and inspired the intellectual curiosity of people across the globe, those from diverse cultures, and many throughout history. Vast arrays of novels, poems, oral traditions, documentaries, and popular movies have been dedicated to the perpetuation of Grail mythology. The Grail Myth has given life to a body of literature, at times a fictional literary device, which has resulted in ever changing historical interpretations of the meaning of the Grail. The history of a physical pursuit of the Holy Grail has been blurred by the evolution of the mythical meaning of the Grail. To write useful histories of the Holy Grail and its mythical power, a close investigation of the fictional literature that created the myth and the modern literature that has perpetuated such is necessary. Essentially the Holy Grail ceases to be a physical cup which Knights pursued; instead it is an icon of mythology that has for centuries informed history and historical meaning.

## Introduction:

For some 800 years stories of the Holy Grail have captivated people of assorted religious persuasions, of various cultures, and of geographic diversity. Many consider it the lost cup of Christ—the vessel from which he drank at the last supper. Others consider it a powerful relic. Recent interpretations argue that the grail is essentially the bloodline and heritage of Jesus Christ. From whence do such beliefs originate? And, how have such myths grown and expanded to become contemporarily powerful? Today such myths often go unquestioned and are at times accepted as “the truth.”

## Early Mythology

The first reference to the Holy Grail is found in Chretien de Troyes's *Ou Le Conte Du Graal*, a 12<sup>th</sup> century work. He portrayed the Grail as “fine pure gold . . . adorned with many kinds of precious jewels,” from which a light emanated that was so bright that it eclipsed all other light. Chretien did not, however, describe what form or shape of the Grail took; whether it was that of a chalice or bowl. The Grail, he said, contained the Holy Host but he did not argue for a direct connection to Jesus Christ. The Grail, as Chretien's story goes, was not in and of itself powerful—the power was within the vessel.

The dawn of a new century witnessed the introduction of another Holy Grail story, one that endeavored to expose the Grail's origins. Robert de Boron, author of *Joseph d'Armathie*, suggests that the Grail was the cup from which Jesus Christ drank at the last supper and the same goblet was later used to collect Christ's blood at the crucifix. Yet the Grail is never specifically referenced in biblical interpretations and reference to any chalice quickly disappears from the record. De Boron suggests that Arimathie and his descendants, in order to secure the cup, absconded with the Grail to the far reaches of the Roman Empire. Britain was the final resting place for de Boron's grail.

## The Knights Templar

The myth of the Grail is inextricably tied to the Knights of Templar, an order that rose to international power in the late Middle Ages. It is surmised in legend and lore that the Templar's ascension to power began following their discover of and possession of the Holy Grail. Ostensibly the Grail was used to blackmail the Church and return wealth, land, and power to the Templars. Following the destruction of the order of the Knights Templar, their wealth and the alleged Grail was lost myth and history. Grail mythology suggests that the Templar's absconded once again with the Grail, taking it this time to the Americas to secure its safety.

## Modern Interpretations

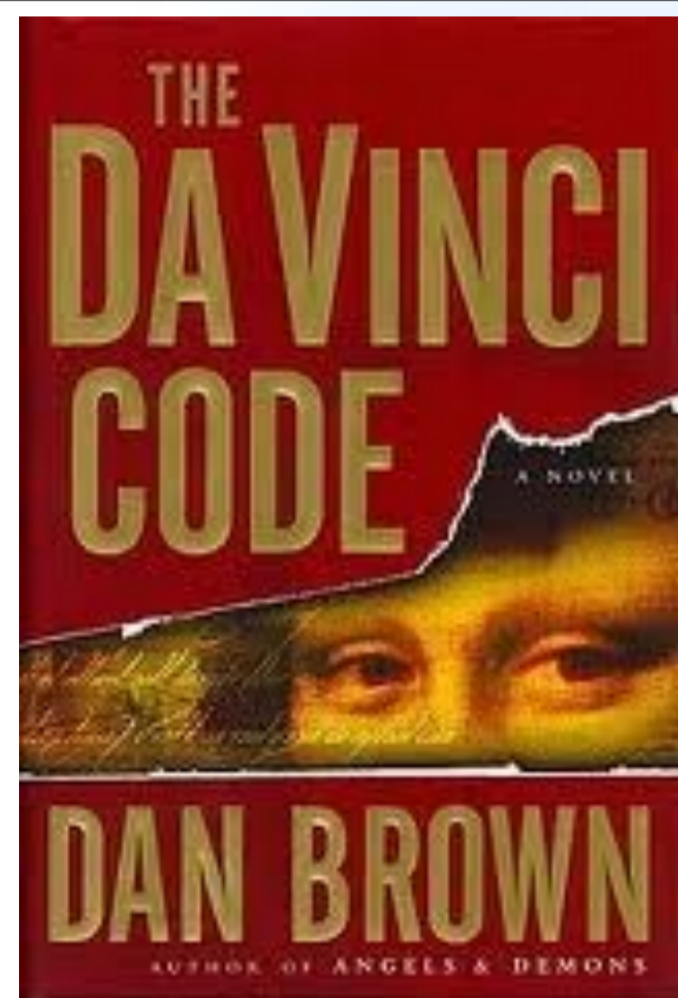
Modern works such as *The Da Vinci Code* and *Holy Blood and Holy Grail* have completely transformed mythological and historical interpretations of the Holy Grail. The premise of the various arguments is that the Holy Grail references the bloodline evident in the descendants of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. The presumably secret bloodline is said to be traceable back to ancient kings of France and the Knights Templar.

## Conclusion:

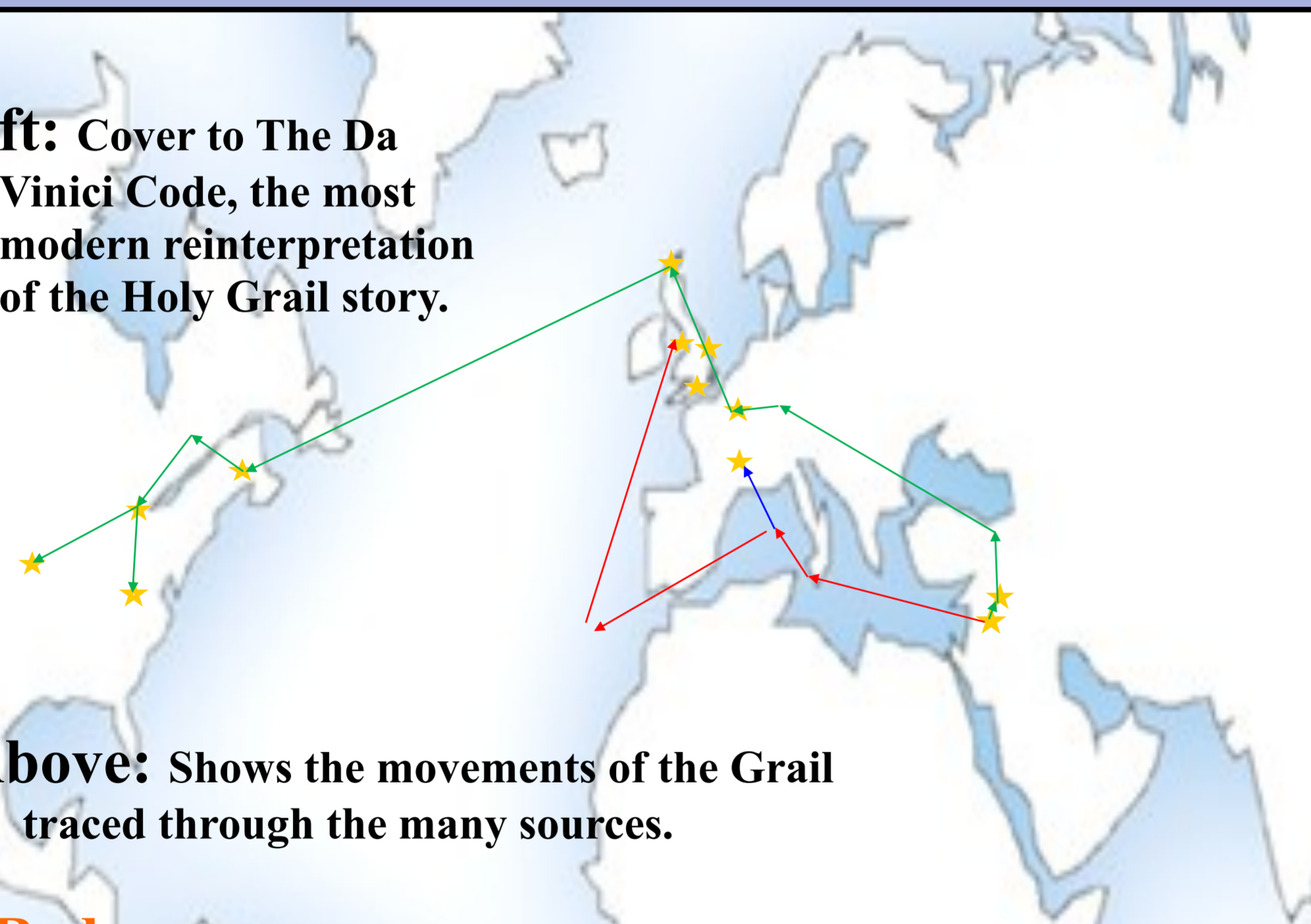
With so many diverse and competing stories surrounding the Holy Grail it is understandable why there are such a variety of origins and beliefs surrounding it. However, the only truth about the Grail is that mythology abounds and interpretations of such have evolved over the centuries. Which writer captured the truth surrounding the Holy Grail? Maybe in some way they all did. Perhaps the real quest for the Grail is the search for knowledge.

## Sources:

Chretien de Troyes, Burton Raffel, and Joseph J. Duggan. *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999.  
Robert de Boron and William Roach. *Joseph d'Armathie*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956.  
Goering, Joseph Ward. *The Virgin and the Grail: Origins of a Legend*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005.  
*Holy Grail in America*. Directed by Andy Awes. Performed by History Channel. 2009.  
Dan Brown. *Da Vinci Code*. New York City: Doubleday Group, 2003.



Left: Cover to *The Da Vinci Code*, the most modern reinterpretation of the Holy Grail story.

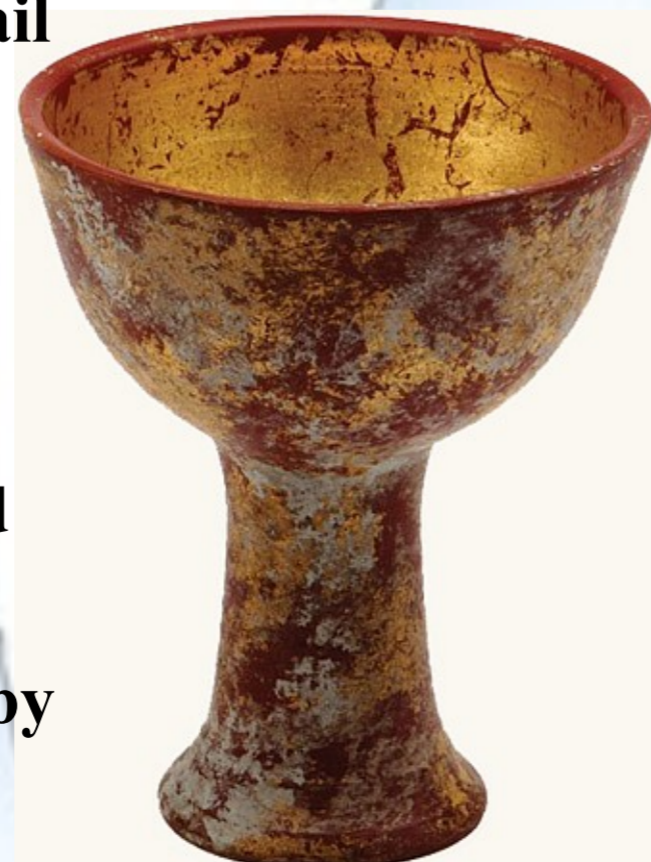


Above: Shows the movements of the Grail traced through the many sources.

- Red:** Joseph d'Armathie's path with grail
- Blue:** Path described by Dan Brown.
- Green:** Route allegedly followed by the Knights Templar



Left: Depiction of the elaborately decorated Grail of Chretien de Troyes



Right: Depiction of the simple Grail used by Robert de Boron, later used in the famous Indiana Jones movie.

Below: The seal and symbol of the Knights Templar. Perhaps they alone knew the truth.

