



“I seek the Grail....”

...but it's very, very confusing...

A very time-specific legend

- Almost all the stories of the Grail date from the period 1180-1240
- After 13th century, little of significance is added to the legend
- Versions in French (most), English, German, Norwegian, Portuguese, Italian



What is a grail?

- The word 'grail' comes from Old French *graal*, a form of the Latin word 'gradale,' meaning "in stages"—thus a grail is a dish that is used to serve a meal in various courses.
- At its simplest it means an expensive plate or dish, possibly with curved sides to keep the sauce from running over, with no religious connotations.
- This etymology is confirmed by the Cistercian chronicler Helinandus of Froidmont (d. c. 1230 C.E.)



When does 'graal' acquire religious significance?

- Chrétien appears to be responsible when he interprets the allegorical appearance of the dish as part of a banquet to be the dish that holds a Communion wafer—and therefore (in Christian interpretation) the body and blood of Christ
- May be based on ancient Celtic myths about cauldrons that produced magically-sustaining food or that were basins for magical healing; 20th c scholars point to fertility myths
- The legend of Joseph of Arimathea bringing the Grail to England is a conversion narrative: how Christianity came to the island
- Connects to apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*
- Timing of popularity may be coincident with Third Crusade and its after-effects

Church's attitude is mixed



- Other than Helinandus, no clerical writers of the period mention it
- Contains elements Church might not approve—came from apocryphal, not Scriptural, sources; gave magical powers to objects; gives humans supernatural powers
- At same time is an allegory of search for salvation, the need to avoid sin and do penance, the importance of seeking holiness in a secular world
- Gives a moral center to the concerns of the *fin amor* world

Chrétien's version (before 1191)

- Incomplete (Chrétien apparently died before it was completed)
- Matière assigned by Philip of Flanders
- Involves two knights: the accomplished Gauvain (Gawain) and the naïve Perceval
- Perceval goes through a series of tests—fails the earlier ones by not asking the right questions, forgetting his faith. At the point where Chrétien's part of the story ends, he appears to be starting to figure things out
- “Grail” only appears twice—first as serving dish, then as Communion dish



Robert de Boron (1190-1212?)

- Wrote *Le Roman de l'Estoire dou Graal*)
- Another unfinished version; only the parts about Joseph of Arimathea and Merlin are extant
- Perceval is still the Grail Knight
- Robert is more specific in describing the properties of the Grail:
 - Used at Last Supper, then used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch the blood of Christ on the cross
 - Joseph's descendents took it to Britain (Logres); later versions say it went to Glastonbury Abbey

In Robert...

- Grail is already a meaningful Christian symbol, no longer just an expensive serving platter
- Already has a cult who knows its meaning
- Seen as a chalice (cup) to nourish the soul



After Chrétien and Robert

- Massive multiplication of stories in next three decades
- Legends have two main emphases: either the history of the Grail itself or the development of the personality of the Grail Knight
- Biggest is the prose *Vulgate Cycle* (now usually called the *Lancelot-Grail* or the prose *Lancelot*), series of 5 romances that develops both the Grail quest and the relationship of Lancelot and Guinevere.
- Brings in material as far back as Nennius.
- Gives Merlin a more prominent role as baptized son of demon who becomes a prophet through the stories.

The History of the Grail stories

- After Robert de Boron,
- *The Estoire del Saint Graal*, part of the prose Vulgate cycle (written after *Lancelot* and the *Queste*), which tells of how Joseph acquired the Grail and how it eventually came to Logres
- 13th c. Provençal troubador poems make passing reference to Perceval, the cup, and the lance

The bigger thread— the Grail Knight adventures

- Four continuations of Chrétien's poem
- Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*
- The Didot *Perceval*
- The Welsh romance *Peredur* (in the *Mabinogion*)
- The weird *Perlesvaus* or the *High History of the Grail*
- The German *Diu Crône*, in which Gawain achieves the Grail
- The *Lancelot* section of the Vulgate Cycle, which introduces a new Grail Knight, Galahad
- The Vulgate *Quest del Saint Graal*, about the adventures of Galahad and his companions



Vulgate Cycle

- Was not written in order; the last three parts were written between 1210-1220; the first two parts were written around 1230
 - *The Estoire del Saint Grail* about Joseph of Arimathea and his son Josephus
 - *The Estoire de Merlin* (a/k/a the Vulgate *Merlin* or the prose *Merlin*), about Merlin & the early history of Arthur (much later supplemented by the *Suite du Merlin*, which adds more of Arthur's youthful adventures)
 - *The Lancelot* (more than half the length of the whole): Lancelot's origins, deeds, and romance with Guinevere
 - *The Quest del Saint Graal* about the Grail quest, its impact on Arthur's court, and its achievement by Galahad—"The Grail Liturgy" is from this work
 - *The Mort Artu*, about Arthur's death and the collapse of his empire
- More than 150 partial and complete manuscripts in French, from 1220 onward; many beautifully illustrated
- Because it is so huge, it's rare to have manuscripts of ALL of the Vulgate cycle—usually you get parts. One complete ms is BL Additional MS 10292-4 (which is bound as three volumes in the modern binding)

Pretty pictures:



Other Vulgate-cycle manuscripts with images online are:

British Library [Royal MS 14 E III](#)

British Library [Royal MS 20 D IV](#)

[BNF MS Français 117](#)

[BNF MS Français 118](#)

[BNF MS Français 119](#)

[BNF MS Français 120](#)

[BNF MS Français 749](#)

[BNF MS Français 1430](#)

[BNF MS Arsenal 3347](#)

[BNF MS Arsenal 3479](#)

[BNF MS Arsenal 3480](#)

[BNF MS Arsenal 3481](#)

[BNF MS Arsenal 3482](#)

If your French is good, check out

<http://expositions.bnf.fr/arthur/>

Chrétien de Troyes and 4 continuations	Robert de Boron	Lancelot-Grail (Vulgate cycle)	German romances	Other French romances
Perceval 1180-90 (Le Conte du Graal)				
First Continuation 1190-1200				Didot <i>Perceval</i> , 1190-1215?
Second Continuation Elucidation Prologue Bliocadran Prologue All 1200-1210	Romance of the History of the Grail (L'Estoire du Graal) (<i>verse</i>)..... <i>before</i> ... Joseph of Arimathea (Joseph d'Arimathie) (<i>prose</i>) Merlin (<i>prose</i>) Perceval(Didot-Perceval) (<i>prose</i>) All 1200-1210			High History of the Grail (Perlesvaus) before 1210
Third Continuation (Manessier) possibly 1210-1220		Lancelot (Grail episodes) 1210-1220	Wolfram von Eschenbach , Parzival, 1210-1220	
Fourth Continuation (Gerbert de Montreuil) 1226-1230		Quest of the Holy Grail (Queste del Saint Graal) 1220-1230		
		History of the Holy Grail (L'Estoire del Saint Graal) 1230-1240	Heinrich von dem Türlin, The Crown 1230-1240	
		Romance of the Grail (Post-Vulgate Cycle) 1240-1250		