



The Secrets of Rennes-le-Château

What if the Holy Grail, the San Greal, was not the legendary and elusive cup that held the blood of Christ dying on the cross but was itself a blood, or a bloodline, a “*sang real*,” a “royal blood?” The idea, suggested for the first time in *Holy Blood and Holy Grail*, a 1982 book by British journalists Henry Lincoln, Richard Leigh, and Michael Baigent, is at the core of Dan Brown’s bestseller *The Da Vinci Code*.

Lincoln and his colleagues suggested that the “royal blood” is that of Jesus Christ, who did not die on the cross but survived the ordeal, married Mary Magdalene, had a child, Sarah, and the bloodline secretly survived and continued for 400 years, up to the Merovingian dynasty of the Franks of dark-age Europe. Jesus died an old man in France, where he fled with his family to escape prosecution from Peter and the Apostles, and was buried near a little town on the Pyrenees, Rennes-le-Château.

This amazing story was supposedly kept secret for two millennia by the Priory of Sion, a mysterious sect that is said to have also founded the Order of the Templars. Notwithstanding the secrecy, clues to this concealed story were scattered throughout the centuries by some initiates belonging to the Priory, such as Leonardo da Vinci,¹ Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo, and Claude Debussy. This is how Lincoln and friends have been able to reassemble the



story, uncoding hidden names, enigmas, wordplays, and hints hidden in various paintings.

But is this all true?

In order to better understand the story, I visited the remote town of Rennes-le-Château (RLC) on the Pyrenees last July.

The Legendary Treasure

The story of the RLC myth starts in 1969, when Henry Lincoln read a thriller by French author Gérard de Sède, titled *Le trésor maudit* (*The Cursed Treasure*). In the fictional story, the treasure of the title had been found around 1891 by the priest of RLC after he deciphered some old documents hidden in the local church.

The priest was Bérenger Saunière, who had been the priest of RLC since

1885. RLC sits on top of a hill, about 40 kilometers from Carcassonne, in France.

The church, dedicated to Mary Magdalene, was almost in ruins when Saunière arrived in RLC. Having raised some money, the priest started restoration around 1887. From here on, facts are few and fantasy creeps in. According to legend, by moving a heavy stone that served as the altar, Saunière found that one stone pillar supporting the slab was hollow and contained four parchments. Two of them detailed a genealogy, while the other two presented enigmatic writings that, once deciphered by experts in Paris, allowed Saunière to obtain some very strange messages.

One of the most important ones was the following: *A Dagobert II Roi et a Sion est ce tresor et il est la mort* (“To King Dagobert II and to Sion belongs this treasure, and he is dead there”).

While in Paris, the priest bought reproductions of a few paintings, including Nicholas Poussin’s *The Shepherds of Arcadia*. The painting, dated 1640, shows some people standing close to a sarcophagus holding the inscription: *Et in Arcadia Ego* (“And in Arcadia, I”). It was said that the sarcophagus really existed near Rennes-le-Château

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and was identified by matching the mountain profile on the painting with the real one.

Meanwhile, work at the church continued, and another stone slab was found under the floor, but only Saunière had access to it and could see what was behind it. From that moment on, the priest began long and secretive searches of the surrounding area, and after that, the restorations started once again. This time, however, funds seemed limitless, and Saunière used them to buy land and to build a number of constructions around his parish church, including a bizarre "Tower of Magdala" honoring Mary Magdalene. He also filled the church with mysterious statues and had various Latin inscriptions written all around the place, including one at the entrance of the church which reads: *Terribilis est locus iste* ("This place is terrifying").

Where did Saunière's riches come from? According to Lincoln and colleagues, Saunière found a treasure that included much more than valuable antiquities. Buried in Rennes-le-Château were documents confirming that Jesus Christ had come to live in France with his family and that his child initiated a dynasty which eventually became known as the Merovingian Kings of France.

One of the secret messages stated that the "treasure," (meaning the secret of the bloodline) belonged to King Dagobert II, a Merovingian, and to the Priory of Sion. "And he is dead there," then, may indicate the presence of a sepulchre containing the body of Christ. Such a tomb, it was reasoned, was the one painted by Poussin, since the phrase *Et in Arcadia ego* could be anagrammatized: *Il Tego arcana dei*, meaning: "Go away! I hold the secrets of God."

With such notions in hand, Saunière could have turned Christianity on its head and inspired a whole new interpretation of world history. So why not use it to blackmail the Vatican and obtain wealth by these means?

Decoding the Enigma

But this, as I said, is the legendary version of the story. The facts are quite different, and I had the opportunity to verify this

during my trip to RLC. The hollow pillar that contained the parchments, for example, is still preserved in the museum of the village, and you can see that it is not hollow at all but has only a very small hole (the size of a CD box), where no parchments could be hidden. Saunière's trip to Paris may be another invention, since no proof of it exists.

Buried in Rennes-le-Château [so the legend goes] were documents confirming that Jesus Christ had come to live in France with his family and that his child initiated a dynasty.



The pillar at Rennes-le-Château.

As to the sepulchre painted by Poussin, thanks to my colleague Mariano Tomatis I was able to locate the exact spot where it was said to exist. However, such a tomb did not exist when Poussin created his painting in 1640, because the tomb was built in 1933. It is true that it resembled the one in the painting, but it also resembled the dozens of similar tombs scattered around the area. After continuous invasions by treasure hunters, the tomb was destroyed in

1988. Furthermore, the profile of the mountains in the painting bears only a slight resemblance to similar mountains around the area.

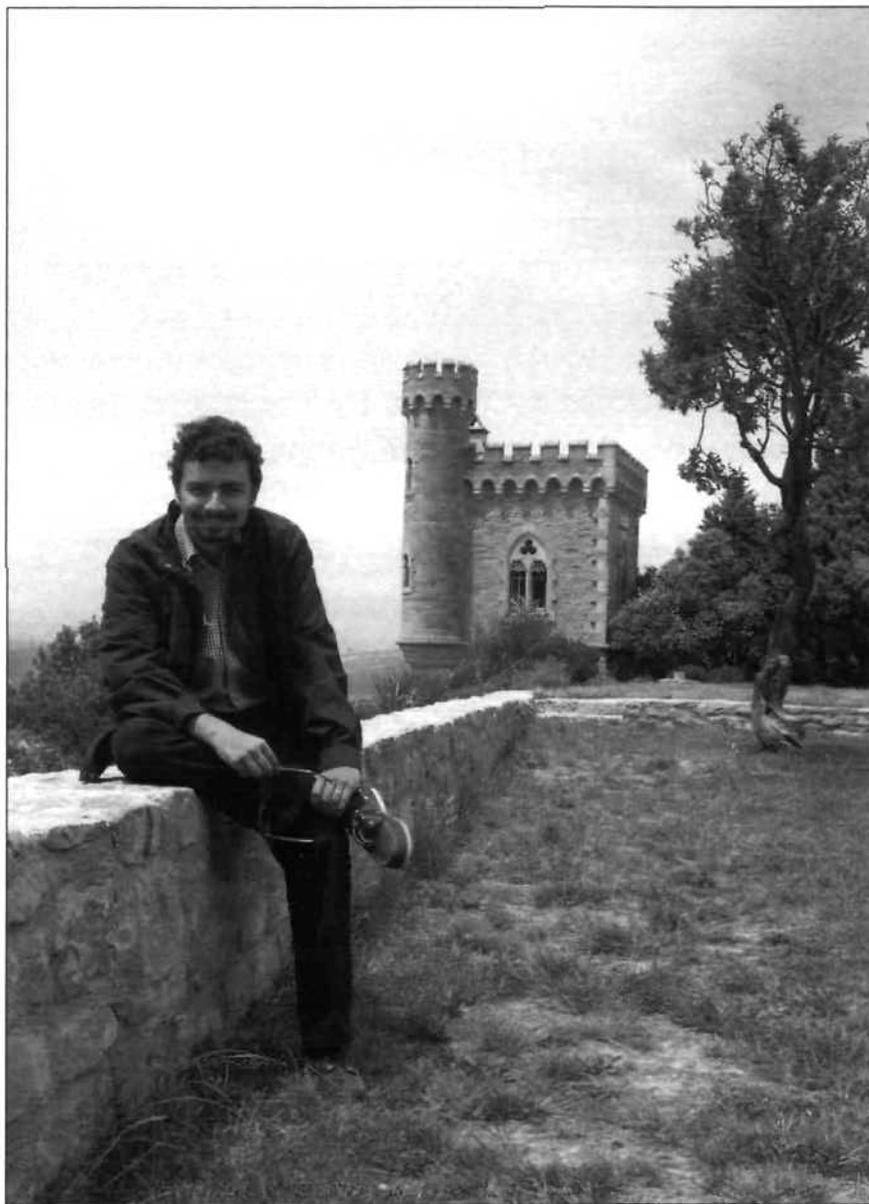
Other enigmas have simpler solutions. The inscription that reads, "This place is terrifying" actually is a biblical quotation (Genesis 28:17) meaning "This place is wonderful." (The com-

plete phrase is: "How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the House of God, and this is the gate of Heaven.")

Another inscription that appears at the base of a crucifix, "*Christus A.O.M.P.S. Defendit*," had been translated by some as *Christus Antiquus Ordo Mysticusque Prioratus Sionis Defendit* ("Christ defends the ancient mystical order of the Priory of Sion"). In reality, that is a common phrase used in some Catholic inscriptions, like the one in Rome on Pope Sixto V's obelisk: *Christus Ab Omni Malo Plebem Suam Defendat* ("Christ defends his people against every evil").

While no documents and no secrets were discovered, however, it is true that the priest found some valuable artifacts during restorations of the church. He noted such a discovery in his notebooks and tried to keep it secret in order to sell the objects and raise money. He also started to excavate the church's surroundings, hoping to find more.

Is this, then, the true and only source of Saunière's wealth? Actually, there was something else. Rumors had spread around of Saunière's spending attitudes, and the local Catholic bishop investigated the matter, concluding that the priest had made his money from "trafficking in Masses," a quite common wrongdoing among nineteenth and early-twentieth-century priests. In the Catholic Church, Masses can be celebrated for the benefit of a specific soul,



ible story? As usually happens in every thriller, the culprit is almost always the one who stands to gain from the crime. Though there is no crime here, there could have been, and the perpetrator would have been one Pierre Plantard.

Plantard was an anti-Semite and the leader of a minor occult, right-wing organization known as Alpha Galates. His scheme was quite ingenious and complex. He had the parchments made by an artist friend, Philippe de Cherisey; then, he passed them on as real to Gérard de Sède, to whom he also told the invented story of Saunière's findings.

Plantard also invented the Priory of Sion in 1956 and created fake manuscripts and documents that linked the Priory to RLC and deposited them at the National Library in Paris, where he suggested Lincoln and friends go to look for important discoveries.

But why go to all this trouble? All this and more was necessary in order to demonstrate not only that Plantard was the current Grand Master of the elusive Priory but also that he was the last descendant of the Merovingians. This meant that he was the current vessel of Christ's holy blood and, above all, the heir to the throne of France as its legitimate king.

The scheme did not work out, however; there were no descendants after Dagobert II, and there were no living Merovingians pretenders to the throne that fell with Louis XVI. Plantard's fake genealogy quickly dissolved under close scrutiny.

As Umberto Eco wrote in his novel *Foucault's Pendulum*, "Believe that there is a secret and you will feel an initiate. It doesn't cost a thing. Create an enormous hope that can never be eradicated because there is no root. Ancestors that never were will never tell you that you betrayed them. Create a truth with fuzzy edges: when someone tries to define it, you repudiate him. Why go on writing novels? Rewrite history." And this is exactly what Pierre Plantard and his followers tried to do.

Note

1. His name was Leonardo; "da Vinci" is not his surname but a reference to the place where he was born, meaning "from Vinci." So does the title of Dan Brown's book mean that the code relates to the little town of Vinci? □

in the hope of helping a deceased loved one to ascend from Purgatory into Heaven. Masses can also be said for a specific aim for the benefit of living persons (for instance, for healing purposes). Prior to Vatican II, priests received a stipend for each Mass they said. "Trafficking in Masses" meant, in practice, that priests advertised their willingness to celebrate a great number of Masses for both the dead and the living. Advertising in this way was regarded as a kind of unfair competition with other priests and was condemned by the Church. The matter became even worse, of course, when priests failed to celebrate the Masses requested, despite having received the appropriate payment.

The bishop traced advertisements placed by Saunière in Catholic magazines throughout France, and even abroad, and quickly determined that he could not possibly have celebrated all the Masses he had received payments for, thus in fact defrauding his "clients."

In 1909, the Bishop asked Saunière to leave RLC; the priest refused and was suspended from his priestly duties and privileges, thus ending his ecclesiastical career. He died in 1917 and left all his belongings to his housekeeper, Marie Denarnaud.

The Would-be King

Now another question remains to be answered: Who invented such an incred-