The Grail Project

The legends of the Holy Grail are intimately attached to King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. According to legend the Holy Grail was the cup used by Christ during the Last Supper and was brought to Britain by St. Joseph of Arimethea. Later on, after the Romans had left Britain, King Arthur and his knights fought against and beat the Saxons. Once the battles were over, the knights were searching for something to do, so they went off in search of the Holy Grail. Thus was born the Grail Quest stories. These stories were passed down from word of mouth until finally written down by troubadours, in poems, songs and stories.

Part 1
To know more about the story of the Grail and the Grail Quest read the first text and answer the questions.

Part 2
There are four candidates for the Grail. In groups of four read and discuss which of the four candidates you feel is the true Grail. At the end of the period you must give your conclusions to the class giving reasons and explanations of why you chose this particular Grail.

Part 3
Now you know all about the Grail and its quest. You will be one of the medieval troubadours and you will write a Grail Quest story to entertain your noble Lord.

You must write a story about the adventures of one of the knights of the Round Table using 4 elements from the texts you have just read. Use the "schema narratif" that you learned in French class.

What happens to him?
Does he find the Grail?
Only you can say. Since we are still in the Middle Ages and manuscripts are always illuminated your story must be illustrated and written using an old style font. (no Times New Roman or Arial)

- Sir Bedivere
- Sir Bors,
- Sir Dagonet
- Sir Ector
- Sir Galahad
- Sir Gareth,
- Sir Gawain
- Sir Kay
- Sir Lancelot
- Sir Lamorak
- Sir Mordred, Arthur’s illegitimate son and destroyer of the kingdom
- Sir Percival
- Sir Tristram
The Holy Grail

The Tradition: The Holy Grail was a vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper. Given to his granduncle, St. Joseph of Arimathea, it was used by him to collect Christ's blood and sweat while Joseph tended him on the Cross. After Christ's death, Joseph was apparently imprisoned in a rock tomb similar to the one he had given for the body of his grand-nephew. Left to starve, he was sustained for several years by the power of the Grail which provided him with fresh food and drink every morning. Later, St. Joseph travelled to Britain with his family and several followers. He settled at Ynys Witrin (Glastonbury), but the Grail was taken to Corbenic where it was housed in a spectacular castle, guarded always by the Grail Kings, descendants of Joseph's daughter, Anna (Enygeus) and her husband, Brons.

Centuries later, the location of the Great Castle of Corbenic became forgotten. At the Court of King Arthur, however, it was prophesied that the Grail would one day be rediscovered by a descendant of St. Joseph: the best knight in the land, the only man capable of sitting in the mysterious Siege Perilous. When such a man arrived in the form of Galahad, the son of Lancelot, along with a miraculous, though brief, vision of the Grail itself, a quest to find this holiest of relics began. Through many adventures and many years, the Knights of the Round Table crossed Britain from one end to another in their search. Perceval (Peredyr) discovered the castle in a land that was sickly like its spearwounded King. When entertained by this "Fisher" or "Grail King", however, he failed to ask of the grail and left empty handed. Lancelot next reached Corbenic, but was prevented from entering because of his adulterer. Finally Galahad arrived. He was permitted entry to the Grail Chapel and allowed to gaze upon the great cup. His life became complete and together grail and man were lifted up to heaven.

The Names: The Holy Grail first appears as simply "a grail" in the works of Chrétien de Troyes. The word is probably derived from the Old French word graal meaning a "broad and capacious dish or salver". Though usually thought of as being a cup or chalice, the Grail has indeed been variously described as a platter, dish, a cornucopia, horn of plenty or even a book or a stone.

The name of the Castle of Corbenic has competing explanations. Old Welsh Cors, meaning "Horn," the Horn of Plenty as the Grail is sometimes described may have become confused with the Old French Corps, producing CorpsBenoit meaning "Holy Body," ie. the Body of Christ. More likely, however, is the suggestion that Corbenic stems from CorbinVicus. The ending is almost certainly derived from the Latin for "Settlement," while Corben is a French translation of the word Crow or Raven: Bran in Welsh. This was also a man's name and, as Brons, he appears as St. Joseph's son-in-law, one of the first Grail Kings. Hence Corbenic was "Bran's Settlement". It may be identical to the home of Lancelot's father, CaerBenwick.
Ancient Origins: The quest for a divine vessel was a popular theme in Arthurian legend long before medieval writers introduced the Holy Grail to British mythology. It appears in the Mabinogion tale of Culhwch and Olwen, but particularly wellknown is the story of the Preiddeu Annwfn or "Spoils of the Otherworld" as recounted by Taliesin. Arthur and his warriors sail off to the Celtic Otherworld to capture the pearlrimmed Cauldron of Annwfn: like the grail it was a giver of plenty, but also of prophecy. It was at last discovered at CaerSiddi (or Wydyr), an island bound castle of glass, where it was guarded by nine divine maidens; but the ensuing perils were too much for even Arthur’s men. The mission was abandoned and only seven of their number returned home.

Celtic Cauldrons were used in ceremonial feasting as early as the Late Bronze Age. Ritual deposits in Llyn Fawr (Glamorgan) included such vessels, though the best known example is the Gundestrup Cauldron found in the peat bogs of Jutland (Denmark). Highly decorated with portraits of many Celtic deities, this vessel would once have held up to twentyeight and a half gallons of liquid. These finds clearly point to the religious importance of cauldrons, as found in the Arthurian stories and even older Celtic mythological parallels.

The magic Otherworld vessel was the Cauldron of Ceridwen, the Celtic Goddess of Inspiration. She is remembered today in the hideous cauldron stirring witch. She once set about brewing a drink of knowledge and wisdom for her hideous son, but her kitchenboy, Gwion, accidentally tasted the concoction, preventing anyone else from benefitting from its affects. A great battle of wills ensued, for Gwion now held all the knowledge to escape the Goddess’ wrath. The two changed themselves into various animals in an attempt to outwit each other before Gwion was swallowed whole as a grain of wheat. He was eventually reborn as the great bard, Taliesin!

The cauldron then reappears in the story of Bran Fendigaid (the Blessed), not only as a vessel of knowledge and plenty, but also of rebirth. The great Celtic warrior God, Bran, obtained his lifegiving vessel from a giantess (or thinly veiled Ceridwen) who had been expelled from a Lake in Ireland. The Emerald Isle here personifies the Celtic Otherworld. The magic vessel would restore to life the body of any dead warrior placed within it: a scene apparently depicted on the Gundestrup Cauldron. Bran’s sister marries the King of Ireland and they are given the cauldron as a wedding gift. However, when hostilities between the two countries break out, Bran travels across the ocean to regain this dangerous prize. He is eventually successful, but is wounded by a poisoned spear and, like Arthur, only seven of his men return home. The name, the castle (already discussed), the wound, the mystic vessel, the journey: Bran Fendigaid is clearly Brons, the Grail King, son in law of Joseph of Arimathea.

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1. What is the Holy Grail?
2. Who was Joseph of Arimathea?
3. Did Joseph of Arimathea love his grand-nephew? How do you know?
4. What did Joseph give to Jesus?
5. Where did Joseph settle? Did the Grail end up in the same place? If not where did it go?
6. In King Arthur's time, what was special about the man who would find the Grail?
7. Who was the first to discover the Grail?
8. Why didn’t he take it with him?
9. Why couldn’t Lancelot get the Grail when he found it?
10. Who finally finds the Grail?
11. Does he bring it back to Arthur? Why?
12. Where does the name Grail come from?
13. How do scholars know that the Grail was not necessarily a cup?
14. Was the Grail always a part of the Arthurian legend? How do you know?
15. How is the Cauldron of Annwn like the Grail?
16. Who is guarding the Cauldron?
17. Does Arthur succeed in his quest? What happens?
18. What did the Celts use cauldrons for?
19. Would there be enough mead for everyone in the ceremony? How do you know?
20. How do we still remember Ceridwen, the Celtic Goddess of Inspiration today?
The Tradition: Having settled in Ynys Witrin (Glastonbury) and founded the first religious community in Britain, St. Joseph of Arimathea buried the Holy Grail deep in the hillside of Glastonbury Tor to safeguard it from thieves and robbers. A miraculous spring welled up at this very spot. The water runs through the grail before reaching the surface stained red with the blood of Christ.

Possible interpretations: Though St. Joseph is said to have brought the Grail to Britain, it is rarely connected with his monastery of Glastonbury except in purely local legend. The water in the Chalice Well Gardens, below the Tor, certainly runs red, but this is mundanely explained by the red Iron Oxide minerals in the Glastonbury soil.

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The Tradition: In the Chapel of Roslin in Lothian stands a remarkable carved pillar, known as the "Prentice Pillar". It is said that the design for the chapel pillars was created by the local master mason, but the scheme was so intricate that he did not have the skills to carve them. So he travelled abroad in an attempt to learn the necessary expertise. On his return, however, he found that his apprentice had completed the first pillar and, on their Lord's instructions, had hidden the secret Grail within it. In a fit of jealous rage, the mason killed the poor boy! The murderer had, however, failed to learn the continental skills he had hoped for and, with the talented apprentice dead, the "Prentice Pillar" remained unique.

The Theory: According to Wolfram Von Eschenbach's "Parzival," the Grail was kept in a Holy Temple where it was guarded by formidable force of fighting men known as the Templars. It is believed that this was the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, where the treasures of the Jewish people were buried before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 68. The Templars are the Monastic Order of the Knights Templar, supposedly heirs to this hidden treasures which they recovered while on Crusade a thousand years later. The most precious object salvaged was the Holy Grail, which the Templar's Grand Master, Hugues de Payen, brought to Scotland to entrust to his wife's uncle, Henry Sinclair, Earl of Orkney. It remained with the family until the 3rd Earl built the present chapel at Roslin Castle in 1446. It was constructed as a replica of the original Temple of Solomon, and the Grail was encased in the beautiful Prentice Pillar there.

Possible interpretations & Criticism: The Knights Templar were a mysterious order of monks-soldiers under the protection of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. During the Crusades of the 13th century, they undertook a quest to recover a piece of the True Cross from the Saracens in the Holy Land. They consciously promoted this as a parallel to the Grail Quest, and may have even had the Grail legends rewritten to suit their own bizarre rituals. The Sinclairs were indeed a well connected family with close links to both the Order of the Knights Templar and the later Freemasons. The Chapel at their Castle of Roslin is certainly unique, not only housing the "Prentice Pillar" but a singular collection of fascinating imagery and symbolism which may well have been inspired by their Templar beliefs. Perhaps the pillar itself was so very complicated to complete that masons never made another, but the Grail connection appears to be mere speculation of local tradition.

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King Arthur in Legend: The Nanteos Cup

The Nanteos Cup: The Holy Grail?

The Tradition: During the Dissolution of the Monasteries, a group of monks left Glastonbury for Strata Florida Abbey, in South Wales, where they hoped to escape from the ravages of Henry VIII's commissioners. However, the Royal officials soon reached Strata Florida too and the monks were forced to flee over the hills to nearby Nanteos House.

Here, the old Prior of Glastonbury became chaplain to the local lord, Mr. Powell, and the other monks became servants around the estate. So things carried on until the monks eventually started to die off. On his deathbed, the last monk revealed to Mr. Powell that his little group had brought with them, from Glastonbury, the Holy Grail which had been brought to Britain by their Abbey's founder, St. Joseph of Arimathea. This was subsequently entrusted to the Powell family "until the church shall claim her own".

Subsequent History: The "Nanteos Cup" as the supposed Grail became known remained at the Manor, attracting many pilgrims and performing many apparent miracles until 1952. All this is well documented. At this date, the last of the Powells died. The house (and the cup) were then sold to a Major Merrilees, who later moved to Herefordshire, taking the Nanteos Cup with him. It is understood that it currently resides in a bank vault somewhere. It is a small wooden vessel (5" diameter, 3" deep) in a very poor state today, due to pilgrims' biting large chunks out of it, over the years, in order to aid recovery from their ills.

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The Tradition: At the crucifixion, it was not St. Joseph of Arimathea, but St. Mary Magdalene who tended to Christ and collected his blood in a small cup which thence became known as the “Marian Chalice”. It was supposedly found by St. Helen when she excavated Christ’s tomb in the early 4th century. It was taken to Rome, but was later removed to Britain when the city was sacked by the Visigoths in AD 410.

The Theory: Graham Phillips theorizes that, through the belief that the Grail was a cup, it was confused with the legendary Marian Chalice. His hypothesis supposes that the chalice would have been brought to the chief 5th century City of Britain, Caer-Guricon (Wroxeter), which he identifies as the capital of their King Arthur. The great King and his descendants are therefore seen as the Grail guardians: a lineage which he traces to Payne Peveril, the original of Percival, and on to his great grandson Sir Fulk FitzWaryn. Sir Fulk is the subject of a long rambling 13th century ballad which claims that the Grail was housed in his private chapel at Whittington Castle in Shropshire. It was removed to Alberbury Priory on his death, from where a further descendant, Robert Vernon, recovered it in the late 16th century. It was eventually hidden in a statue of St. John erected in Hawkstone Park, near the family estate, in the 1850s. Here a small Roman onyx scent jar was discovered in 1934. Is this the Holy Grail?

Possible interpretations & Criticism: Phillips’ ideas are long and complicated and his conclusions rely heavily on previous argument, particularly his identification of King Arthur as a supposed ruler of Caer-Guricon named Owain Danwyn (White-Tooth). The Fulk FitzWaryn connection is an intriguing grail-link which has never been satisfactorily explained and Phillips makes a good attempt at explaining it, though the ancestral grail inheritance into the 1850s is not terribly convincing.

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