

The Search for the True Graal

(Sir Saturnin @ SET-XL, Austin, TX [LVI AES])

*Flegetanis the heathen saw with his own eyes
in the constellations things he was loathe to talk about.
A hidden mystery, with trembling he revealed,
that there was a thing called the Graal,
whose name he had read clearly in the stars.*

Today we're going to be talking about the Holy Grail, and why it's neither holy nor a cup. We'll be talking about why the Grail is the model and the symbol for the perpetual quest within the OTr and beyond--and this despite the popular connection these ideas have with Christianity in later versions of the tale.

The Earliest Graal Stories

The first thing to note is that virtually the entire corpus of the original writings about the Grail takes place in a period from around 1180 to about 1225. It appears suddenly, and disappears just as suddenly. There are reasons for both of those.

On your handout [ed. note: see the last page of this PDF] you have a timeline of the major works that added to the stories of the Grail and popularized the idea in general. The two most important ones for what we'll talk about today are the works by Chrétien de Troyes and especially Wolfram von Eschenbach, at the tail end of the 12th century and very beginning of the 13th respectively.

Wolfram was a knight. Chretien was a cleric. Chretien didn't even finish his story—he only wrote down about 9000 lines himself, before a few others tacked on many more of varying quality. The reason Chretien didn't finish the work is unknown, but likely explanation is that, being a cleric, he didn't like where the story was going as he was compiling and recording it. Wolfram looks at this

tale, and says that while this story is interesting Chretien got it wrong, that Chretien was not a knight and thus didn't understand what this is really about.

Changes in the Medieval Church

I mentioned that all this suddenly stops around the year 1225 or so. One of the reasons stories about the Grail suddenly became very popular (despite have been around a couple of decades already) was due to the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. This Council definitively settled the question that the presence of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist is literal. And so now they look at some of these stories about a cup that continues to issue forth whatever those gaze upon it desire, and they think, "Ah! That's where all the blood is coming from." The stories about the Grail now begin to take on more orthodox Christian overtones. After a decade or so though, nevertheless, the spread of the Grail stories suddenly stops.

In southern France, there was a religious sect called the Cathars who were considered a heretical threat to the Church. They had also become heavily associated with stories about the Grail due to being based in the same region where the Grail stories originated. The actual connection of the Cathars to the Grail is rather tenuous, but in the popular mindset of the time they were associated with the Grail and that's what counted.

In 1229 The Council of Toulouse convenes and permanently establishes what was to become known as the Inquisition. When the Inquisition starts to clamp down on the Cathars, because of their close association with the Grail those stories are shut down as well.

Heresy As Far As the Eye Can See

It's important to know what was in the background in the centuries preceding when the Grail literature starts to pop up. There were two significant heresies that figure into this, which the Church struggled to suppress. The first is the Pelagian Heresy: you cannot inherit the sin of another, therefore there's no such thing as Original Sin, therefore you don't need to receive the sacraments since the purpose of the sacraments is to continuously purge you of the taint of Original Sin. Therefore Jesus is just a model of salvation not a required means of intercession for your salvation.

The other, which was related to the Pelagian Heresy, is called the Donatist Heresy. The Donatist Heresy says that original sin **is** valid, and the sacraments *are* required; however, if you receive the sacraments from a corrupt or unworthy priest they don't work. Now you have a problem: is your priest on the level?

This was actually a major problem in the Church in the centuries leading up to the 12th. You had, especially in western Europe which was less directly under the thumb of Rome, lots of priests who were in it mainly because they think it's a great racket. This is one of the meanings of the symbolism behind the Waste Land in the Arthurian romances: there is a spiritual wasteland that you're stuck in. If your priest is corrupt or unworthy, you are now exposed to eternal damnation because you've not been properly purged of your sins. And you might not know it until it was too late.

When you have a spiritual wasteland like this, life is kind of fake. You have a system of rules which do not give you a means for achieving individual excellence. The system simply says that if you follow the rules, and as the Church says it doesn't even matter if the guy giving you sacraments is full of it, it still works if you just believe. The Church says, at least until the Inquisition starts to focus on the laity too, that we don't care what you believe as long as you follow the rules. This leaves them with nothing to offer those looking for individual development with personal integrity, or those wanting to realize their own potential above and beyond the limitations of the world.

Another significant factor in the advent of the Grail stories is the vast cultural differences between northern and southern France at the time.... in northern France, there were the states of Normandy, Brittany, and Anjou, who were in a constant war with the French king even their leaders were nominally his vassals. Normandy was also fighting to retain control of England following the death of William the Conqueror's sons.

Compare this with southern France. It was peaceful, and they got along with their neighboring lands. But there's a side effect of this peace. You have all these knights and nobles who are sitting around with nothing to do. There's nobody to fight, and the training and equipment of a knight are expensive to maintain if they're not going to be used for fighting. So you do what good Initiates also do: if you don't have enough challenges in your life, you go find or create new ones, then you overcome those instead.

So they took cultural elements of nearby Moorish Spain, and they combined this with some of their own aesthetics and culture, along with some myths they borrowed and adapted from the Celts when they inhabited the region, and came up with these new ideals to live up to, along with a story telling style which we now know as the medieval romance—tales of pure love and noble deeds, guided by new and elaborate secular rules.

An Alternate Setting

With the Grail Romances, the Arthurian heroes and the Grail seekers achieve things through integrity and character. There is no room for the clergy, because the Church of the day has nothing to offer this kind of people. The clergy tells the laity you must follow the rules, whereas the knight says that these rules don't allow me to become who I need to be.

In these tales of the Grail, from their very beginning, you have a keeper of the Grail who is a king, *not* a clergyman. You have a carrier of the Grail, who is a pure woman attended by maidens. No clergy, no church. These romances were in effect attempts to create a new form of Christianity that was not dependent on the Church. This is why in the later more heavily Christianized versions, the focus is on the purity of the questing knight; in Wolfram's and Chretien's tales, the knight is a man of the world.

In the Grail stories, in contrast to the blind ritual of consecrating the sacraments, the Grail is only accessible to those who have made **themselves** worthy. Within the dogma of the Church you're not worthy, which is why you need the sacrament to make you temporarily worthy enough.

As is probably clear, the message of the original Grail stories was a direct challenge to the Church, and was widely understood as such. This is why the Inquisition puts a stop to it—this group of heresies, if too widely embraced, would run the whole thing off the rails for the Church.

Stone of the Wise

Chretien set his tale in the sort of fairytale world typical of the Arthurian romance. Wolfram has his heroes participate in the actual events of the day. These are people of action, doing things in the real world. In Wolfram's story, in *Parzival*, the Grail is not a cup. It is a green gemstone. There was a lot of

interesting gemlore within the Church in the middle ages—green was the holiest gem color. Having a holy stone of the holiest color that is venerated **outside** of a church setting is another instance of where Wolfram's story in particular was a bold statement against the Church.

Wolfram tells us explicitly that this green gem fell from Lucifer's crown during the war in heaven between Lucifer and the Trinity (not God). The stone, when it fell, was protected by what Wolfram called the 'doubting angels', those who had taken neither side in the conflict.

There are parallels with other holy magic stones falling to earth. There is the black stone of Islam—recall the Moorish connections to the origin of the Graal. There is also the famous Philosopher's Stone, which Wolfram directly correlates to the stone of the Grail. The ultimate source of Wolfram's tale is after all claimed to be a Moorish alchemist, Flegetanis.

Another parallel is with H.P. Lovecraft's shining trapezohedron. Again, you have a magic stone of unconventional origin which those who know how to use it can see things beyond what just the normal person can.

In the followers of the Trinity vs. the followers of Lucifer, we see conflict between collectivists and individualists. You have those who do as they're told, going with the flow, vs. those who are not so inclined. These doubting angels who sided with neither of the sides—their symbol is the Graal. The Stone. It is the symbol for those who transcend and reconcile opposites. In a bit of a folk etymology, Wolfram says that the name "Parzival" means "one who pierces the valley". One who takes that path between extremes and sees both sides, understanding how to synthesize them into something greater.

One of the interesting properties of the Graal, whether portrayed as a cup or stone or a dish, is that those who witness it enjoy an unlimited supply of what they desire. When the Graal appears during a feast, then every food that you enjoy comes forth from it in unlimited supply, and it's the best version of that you ever had.

But there's a catch: you can only see and experience it briefly. The procession comes, the Graal appears. The procession leaves, the Graal goes with it.

Parzival the Story

In Wolfram's tale, Parzival starts out sheltered by his mother. He is a posthumous son, in the tradition of great Germanic heroes. Since his father had been killed in battle, his mother was determined that a similar fate would not befall her son. She shelters him to such an extent he doesn't even know his real name: she refers to him only as *bon fils*, *cher fils*, *beau fils* ("good son, cherished son, beautiful son"). The name functions as a sort of shibboleth, so that when he introduces himself by that name to others, they know who he is and teach him something about himself.

One day Parzival is out playing in the forest and encounters three knights of Arthur's court. He learns who and what they are, and resolves that he will go join them. His mother hears this, and is not pleased. But she realizes, this is how it starts and she cannot stop him from fulfilling his destiny. But... she *can* undermine him. So she dresses him in the clothes of a fool, hoping that they will take one look at him when he shows up at Arthur's court, make fun of him, and throw him out the door.

She is so heartbroken that when he leaves, she dies soon after.

Through various experiences and adventures, he does learn his true name and lineage as part of interacting with Arthur's court. They realize there is *something* to this kid. He may be unpolished, but there is profound potential. Soon he leaves; he's learned about the Grail, and has resolved to seek it. Parzival is then taken in by a knight named Gernemanz who senses his potential and teaches him the ways of knighthood.

Gernemanz taught him many things, most of them good. There is one thing he is taught that is not so good—that, especially among people at a royal court, he should not ask too many questions. This is bad advice for someone like Parzival who has great individuality and great curiosity. He is driven by both of these qualities to embark on this Quest, so telling him this is just going to undermine his ability to pursue the Quest.

Parzival starts off on his horse, a gift of Gernemanz, but he rides off with the reins loose and just lets the horse lead—the instinctive nature of the horse contrasting with the controlling mind of Parzival. Parzival is trusting in life itself that it will be a worthy guide for him and his own becoming.

This is suggestive of the rune *raidho* (𐀀), the great journey guided by what is right and necessary, and also the runes *ehwaz* (𐀓) and *mannaz* (𐀇)—the sacred relationship between the horse and its rider, between the vehicle and its controller, between the objective universe and how the psyche relates to it.

The Graal Castle

After some other adventures, Parzival finally finds the Graal castle. He meets the Fisher King, Amfortas, guardian of the Graal, who has a mortal wound yet he will not die. Amfortas, who unbeknown to Parzival is his uncle, was wounded for seeking the Graal without the right intentions, and without adhering to the proper knightly virtues. And so he must suffer, and his land suffers as well. His penance is that he must safeguard the Graal until the worthy successor appears, and until then his kingdom is going to suffer. Parzival witnesses the Graal procession, sees the stone and the other objects as they are revealed mostly without explanation. Amfortas however specifically describes the stone to him as the philosopher's stone. Thus Jung's famous alchemical statement applies to the Grail as well: "Behold this insignificant stone, despised by fools yet the more cherished by the wise."

What Parzival didn't know was that what was needed to heal the king's wound was to ask the proper question with the proper compassion. He wants to but he can't. But he was given a bad piece of advice which backfired: don't ask too many questions. So he sits there. And the king continues to suffer. Parzival thought about his reputation not about his true nature, following his advice in an effort not to appear as a fool. So the next morning, he wakes up. He's not in his bed, not in the castle. He just wakes up on the floor of the forest. The castle is nowhere to be seen.

He's not able to heal the king, and so the king is not able to heal the land—perpetuating the waste land. Parzival resolves to find the castle again, and to heal the king. He has one problem: he doesn't know how to do either of these things, yet he still resolves to do them.

We are at a critical point ... when Parzival rides forth from where the castle had been, he renounces God. He states, according to Wolfram, "I despise and hate God. I have served God and he has not been loyal."

He has now cast aside what he knew of God. He has become himself a spiritual waste land, and is also in need of regeneration. If he didn't have that,

he couldn't go on the quest—he couldn't know anything of the actual nature of the quest until he suffered in a spiritual way that is analogous to the physical suffering of the Fisher King.

When he returns to Arthur's court, the Graal messenger appears—a woman named Cundry. She appears and she curses him in the name of the Graal, saying that he has lost his honor because he failed to heal the king. “You had one job, Parzival, and you blew it.”

This is actually the *real* beginning of the quest. He didn't have all the pieces he needed, and so he wasn't truly ready to quest after the Graal until he had suffered in these ways. Until he had renounced what was holding him back. He enters into what is referred to in the Graal romances as the “forest adventurous”, where adventures come to find you, but only when you're ready for them.

He turns loose the reins, again trusting his horse to lead him where he needs to go. Eventually he encounters a hermit named Trevrezant, who is the brother of Amfortas. Parzival tells Trevrezant about his desire to find the Graal castle, and Trevrezant reiterates to him, “there is no second chance. Once you see the castle, you can never find or see it again.”

Parzival is not deterred.

At this point in the tale, the knight Gawain enters and is the focus for a while. I'm not going to go through Gawain's adventures, interesting though they are. The crucial part here is that eventually their paths cross, and this encounter with another questing knight helps to refine Parzival's own quest.

Ferefiz

Following this, Parzival rides forth again, and this time he encounters Ferefiz, who it turns out is his Muslim half-brother. Until this, neither of them knows of the other's existence, much less their name or appearance. As they fight, Parzival's sword breaks at a crucial moment—this is a common element in the Graal romances and also in tales of Germanic heroes like Sigurd. This is good advice: if you're on a quest after the Graal, make sure you've got a backup piece because you'll likely need it at some point.

The surprising thing here to audiences of the time is that the heathen has

compassion, and lays down his own sword when Parzival's breaks instead of taking advantage of the situation. This chivalrous gesture bonds the two of them, and they learn about their relationship. They then visit Arthur's traveling court, which is conveniently being held nearby.

This time, now that Parzival has had these additional adventures through which he has become his true self rather than just who he **thinks** he is supposed to be, Cundry returns. She recognizes Parzival for who he has become and says, "You are the one who is now the Graal king, the one with integrity, and loyalty, and resolution." But she tells him that he must still come to the Graal castle first, and bring with him a male companion.

To everyone's surprise, Parzival brings with him not another knight of the round table, but rather his Muslim half-brother Ferefiz. This time they find the castle, and go to the fisher king Amfortas, who is still wounded with the land still suffering. This time, Parzival knows who he is and what he must do. He asks the question. "What ails thee, uncle?" And then the king is healed. Parzival is now officially the new Graal king. But here's the interesting part: he inherits the role, but he doesn't inherit the wound. This shows, in contrast to Amfortas's experience, that it is possible to pursue and safeguard the Graal while still being your own intact self. You don't have to make this massive physical sacrifice to do it. There will be sacrifices, but not necessarily of that kind.

Parzival and Ferefiz then depart for a journey, and see Trevrezant again, brother of Amfortas. The word of Parzival's deed has reached Trevrezant, that he has against all odds and divine decree found the Grail castle again. Trevrezant tells him, through your own will you have caused the Trinity—again, not God but the Trinity—to change its mind. You convinced the unmovable to move on your behalf because you have proven **yourself** so worthy.

They return to the castle again, and witness the Graal procession. A curious thing happens: Ferefiz is unable to see the Graal. He sees the other objects and what people take from the Graal. He sees the joy everyone experiences with it. But he is mystified as to where these things are actually coming from, unable to see anything. The word gets out, and the answer comes from Trevrezant that it must be because Ferefiz has not been baptized, and that only a Christian can see the Graal.

Now this looks like we're about to have a deathbed conversion so to speak on Parzival's part, slipping back into a familiar Christianity and negating the fact that he had fully renounced God. But that's not the case. They bring in an empty baptismal font, missing the essential holy water. They tip the font in the direction of the Graal—in the direction of the philosopher's stone. The font then fills with water issuing forth from the stone. Again, whatever you need comes forth in abundance from the Graal. We have the elixir of the philosopher's stone, the transmuting power, issuing forth to fill the font. This is no ordinary baptism [note: no priests or clerics are present either!!]. This orthodox tradition in the Church has been reformed to give it a very European significance and it also suggests the water sprinkling ritual referred to elsewhere in the Germanic tradition.¹

Urðarbrunnr

There is a parallel to the Well of Wyrð here as well. The Old Norse word we normally translate as 'well', '*brunnr*', is a bit misleading when translated that way. You most likely pictured a small stone and wood structure with a roof and a bucket; a slightly more accurate way of picturing the implications of the word '*brunnir*' is as an artesian well, where water rises and flows from the ground naturally due to the pressurized aquifer that has been tapped.

Consider the source of a spring, and what that source actually signifies. Where the spring ends, where it opens into the air, is that where the source begins? Of course not. The apparent source disappears into the ground. Is the ground then the source? Not really. In fact, the source and the spring blend. You have a hidden origin from which everything issues. Everything that comes from the well, from the spring, flows out of this hidden source. And this describes what is happening with the Graal. It is the manifestation of the hidden source of the things that are issuing forth from it. As with the Well of Wyrð.

Takeaways

What are some of the key takeaways from this? First, only those who are faithful to their ideas will gain even a glimpse of the Graal. You can't find the

¹ "I know a thirteenth: if I sprinkle water on a young thain, he falls not though he fairs into the fray; he sinks not before swords." - *Hávamál* 158

castle, much less the Graal, unless you have proven your worthiness. You only have a fleeting glance at the Graal. It happens according to its own schedule, and only those who are worthy are able to see it even if they accompany someone else who is worthy to see it. Everyone must earn their own way to encounter it. Even more importantly, at no point does Parzival or anyone else pick up the Graal or touch it. It is always just out of reach. You can take advantage of what issues forth from it, but the source is always just beyond.

This is connected very closely with *Rûna*, the idea that what is just outside your experience and understanding is not visible to you until you have built up those experiences and understanding to become a vantage point that **allows** you to see it. Yet you still sense that it is there and can align your actions in ways that may yet reveal it.

Sir Michael noted in the charter of the Order: "Honor is known by one's faithfulness to the quest for the Graal, which is the self, soul, or psyche made perfect through conscious refinement and exercise of the will. Attainment of the Grail results in transformation of the individual to a state of dynamic existence energized by the psyche, not by the physical body derived from the material universe."

So the Graal is ultimately a truth about yourself that's always sought but never fully found. Yet there are always ways to partake of it, of that which cannot be fully grasped, and the keys are to be found in the act of seeking itself.

Quaerendo invenietis.

Timeline of the Major Grail Works

<i>Author</i>	<i>Text</i>	<i>When Written</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Significance</i>
Anonymous	<i>Historia Brittonum</i> (<i>History of the Britons</i>)	ca. 828	Latin	First mention of Arthur (as warrior, not king)
Geoffrey of Monmouth	<i>Historia Regum Britanniae</i> (<i>History of the Kings of Britain</i>)	1136	Latin	First mention of Arthur as king -- no mention of the Grail
Chrétien de Troyes	<i>Perceval, ou le Conte du Graal</i>	ca. 1181; incomplete	Old French	First mention of Grail, Arthur's court, Knights of the Round Table
Wolfram von Eschenbach	<i>Parzival</i>	ca. 1197-1205	Middle High German	most fully-developed pre-monastic version of the Grail story -- Grail is a stone
Robert de Boron (Borron, Bouron)	<i>Joseph D'Arimathie</i>	ca. 1210	Old French	first association of the Grail (cup) with the Last Supper and Crucifixion, and the character of Joseph of Arimathea
Anonymous (likely Cistercian monks)	<i>La Queste del Saint Graal</i> , <i>L'Estoire del Saint Graal</i>	late 1210s to early 1220s	Old French	Fully Christianized version of the story, reworked to remove all heretical ideas
Thomas Mallory	<i>Le Morte D'Arthur</i>	1485	Late Middle English	immensely popular retelling of existing tales; source for virtually all later Arthurian/Grail literature in English