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New York City, 1938. In a high-rise art deco apartment, America's most intrepid archaeologist is peering at a mysterious stone tablet found in the mountains north of Ankara.

Sandstone, he murmurs. Christian symbol, early Latin text. Mid-12th century, I should think.

And then, almost in disbelief, he begins to translate the inscription.

Who drinks the water I shall give him, says the Lord, will have a spring inside him, welling up for eternal life.

Let them bring me to your holy mountain in the place where you dwell.

Across the desert and through the mountain, to the canyon of the crescent moon, to the temple where the cup that holds the blood of Jesus Christ resides forever.

The Holy Grail, Dr. Jones, says his host. The chalice used by Christ during the last supper.

The cup that caught his blood at the crucifixion and was entrusted to Joseph of Arimathea.

And so, Tom Holland begins our hero's thrilling hunt for the Holy Grail in the film Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.

Now, you love the Holy Grail, Tom, don't you?

I do love the Holy Grail. I love that film. It was my favourite. I know that your favourite is the one of the first three Indiana Jones films we're not covering.

The Temple of Doom. So, Last Crusade was definitely my favourite.

And I think the reason for that is that I was obsessed by the Holy Grail when I was a child. I read endlessly about it.

So much so that actually, when I watched Monty Python and the Holy Grail, which for those of you who maybe haven't seen it,

is a comedy mocking the Arthurian legends. I was much more offended by that than I was by Life of Brian.

I thought Life of Brian was great, but I was very, very offended.

I don't actually find Monty Python and the Holy Grail very funny.

No, I didn't think it was funny at all. I would say, as I say, very upset by it.

But I think that, of course, I now understand that it comes actually from a position of enormous learning.

Terry Jones is a medieval enthusiast.

Great medieval scholar. And basically, the more you know about the medieval tradition that gave birth to the Holy Grail,

the funnier Monty Python the Holy Grail becomes.

And I think that as with the Arthur Covenant, which we talked about in our previous episodes, so with the Holy Grail, the holiness is the point because Monty Python are mocking something that is actually rather sacred to them,

certainly to Terry Jones. You can only blaspheme something that you believe in.

And I think that the same is obviously true of the plot of The Last Crusade,

that if the Holy Grail isn't holy, then the plot doesn't work.

Well, it's basically, in The Last Crusade, it is basically the Ark of the Covenant all over again.

It's a MacGuffin that people seek, but you kind of know what's coming and that it will destroy you,

don't you?

I mean, they basically reuse the same device.

Are you a big fan of the series?

Our overseas listeners won't know what this is, but this is for our British listeners.

The TV series Detectorists, Tom, you're a fan of Detectorists.

I love the Detectorists, yeah.

So for our overseas listeners, it's set in East Anglia, isn't it?

It's set in Suffolk.

Suffolk, Suffolk.

It's set in Suffolk around, I think, around Sutton Who.

And it's two people with metal detectors who go searching for buried treasure.

I think last week I did my road trip across England and I saw the field that I think inspired a lot of those episodes near Rendlesham,

where metal detectors discovered a kind of lost palace.

But anyway, yes, but the Holy Grail appears in that.

Yeah, there's a lovely episode where the central device of it is whether or not they have discovered this cup,

which actually could have enormous cosmic significance.

And that idea, so more than almost any other artifact in history, I would say,

the Holy Grail carries this extraordinary charge, doesn't it?

I mean, it's fascinated people for centuries.

But unlike the Ark of the Covenant, so the Ark of the Covenant is biblically attested.

The Holy Grail is not, am I right?

It doesn't appear in the Bible at all?

Well, the Holy Grail is, I think, it's a much more mysterious object,

because the question of where it comes from and what it is is something that,

I mean, it's provided fuel for popular entertainment.

We've talked about some of those, but also in the 20th century,

it helps to inspire what is probably the single most influential poem written in English of the 20th century,

namely The Wasteland.

So T.S. Eliot.

So T.S. Eliot, in his notes to The Wasteland, is open about this,

says that he's inspired by a book called From Ritual to Romance

by a very great medievalist called Jesse Weston.

Yeah.

And Jesse Weston wrote about the Grail,

that no theory of the origin of the story can be considered really and permanently satisfactory unless it can offer an explanation of the story as a whole

and of the varying forms assumed by the Grail.

Why it should be at one time a food-providing object of unexplained form

at another a dish at one moment the receptacle of streams of blood from a lance,

at another the cup of the last supper.

Here, something wrought of no material substance there a stone,

and yet everywhere and always possessed the same essential significance.

In each and every form be rightly described as the Grail.

And so this is published in 1920.

And the answer that Jesse Weston gives to her own question

is basically that the Grail is the survival into Christian times of pagan fertility rights.

And she talks about there being a wasteland that surrounds the castle of the Fisher King, this mysterious figure who guards the Grail.

Yeah.

And she sees this idea of a wasteland that then you have to ask the right question of the Fisher King and then it will heal the wounds that he's been given and bring him back to life and all the land with him.

And she sees this as being proof for the origin of the Grail story in rituals of death and rebirth.

And there's a sexual element to this too, right?

That the cup is female kind of sexuality and the spear.

So there's the idea of this sort of this lance piercing the side of Christ, the blood pour and the spear is, she's argued that the spear was basically male sexuality, right? Yes.

And the cup is female.

Yeah.

And so this is very exciting for T.S. Eliot who's looking for some way of kind of coordinating his sense of post-war Europe as a wasteland.

And so he draws on it very kind of openly.

And there are actually, there's kind of, there are two couple of illusions in the wasteland to this mysterious figure, the Fisher King who guards the Grail.

So it's brilliant passage, one of my favorite passages from the wasteland.

A rat crept softly through the vegetation, dragging its slimy belly on the bank while I was fishing in the dull canal on a winter evening round behind the gas house.

It's very T.S. Eliot, the gas house detail.

Yeah, very, very T.S. Eliot.

So Dominic.

Yes.

How true is this theory?

How likely is it that the Grail was the cup that held the blood of Christ or that it was derised from pagan fertility rituals or where did it come from?

What is it?

All that stuff.

That's what we're looking at today.

Very good.

Well, so the Grail doesn't appear in the Bible, right?

The Grail does not.

There's no cup.

And the word Grail, you forget that I did French at university so I know that the word Grail, it's kind of, it's rare in kind of 12th century French but not unknown.

Is that right?

That's right.

So you learnt this when you were doing your medieval French course?

Of course.

Yeah, I absolutely didn't read your notes.

Yeah, so Grail in, as you say, it's a kind of unusual word but not unknown and it seems to refer to a kind of large serving platter that's large enough to hold a salmon or a fish.

Right.

And it is, you know, it's a kind of utensil.

It's kind of, you know, it's a piece of crockery basically and it carries no particular magical or spiritual significance.

And the etymology, it seems to derive either from Greek Crata, which is a kind of a shallow two-handled drinking cup, or brilliantly from the Latin word gadalis, which was a kind of pot used to hold garum, the fermented fish guts that the Romans use, this equivalent of ketchup.

So very exciting.

So it basically, it has no sacral connotations, Dominic, in the 12th century.

That's a first on the rest of history?

But of course it does become sacral.

I mean, it becomes, you know, it becomes holy.

And so the question therefore is how does this process happen?

And actually we can pinpoint very, very precisely when it happens.

It happens in the 1180s, the late 1180s.

And the guy who makes the grail into something holy is a French writer called Cretien de Troves.

So Troyes is a city on a town on the river Seine.

Cretien, literally Christian, so the Christian from Troyes.

And he's the father, really, of the chivalric romance, isn't he?

Cretien de Troyes?

And not only the chivalric romance, but there's a case for saying the entire tradition of the novel.

So Dominic, what is French for novel?

Roman.

So derives from romance.

Oh, romance, yeah.

Yeah.

And so this Romanus originally was the word that was given to the language spoken by Gallo-Romans in the late Roman Empire, which goes on to become French.

So the key thing is that Cretien de Troyes is writing romance and he's doing that in French, not in Latin.

So therefore it is kind of readily accessible to everybody and not just the scholars.

Yeah.

And he is to Arthurian romance, what Geoffrey of Monmouth, who we talked about in our episode on King Arthur, is to the kind of historical traditions.

I.e. he is the guy who takes this great corpus of Welsh Celtic traditions and converts it into a form that makes it readily accessible to people across the French-speaking world. Yeah.

And although, as with Geoffrey of Monmouth, Geoffrey's Arthur is recognizably a medieval king.

He's not a kind of, you know, early medieval king.

He's a king from the high Middle Ages.

The same is true of Cretien de Troyes' romances, that although they are set in the Arthurian past, they are actually a reflection of the world in which he is living.

The life of the courts, the tournaments, the nightly codes, and perhaps also the specific understandings of religion at this period.

So, Tom, is there one text, one kind of romance from which we get the grail story with Cretien de Troyes?

Yeah.

The number of famous romances, one of which Lancelot has a huge influence on the whole idea of Lancelot as the kind of the paradigmatic knight.

But his most influential by Miles is one called Percival, after the name of the hero, which also Cretien himself, in his introduction to it, calls Le Comte de Grail, the story of the grail.

And he wrote that, as I said, in the 1180s.

And this is the romance that introduces us to the grail as something holy.

So in Cretien's account, it's not the grail, it's a grail that is holy.

So it's kind of key distinction there.

It only becomes the holy grail over the next, the decades that follow.

So Dominic, the plot of Percival, and I'm sure you must have read these, you must have been into King Arthur.

I wasn't into this, but Percival, in my mind, and I am hoping you're going to shed some lights on this, Percival and Galahad are very confused and we think that's the feature rather than a bug.

So what I think, Tom, is I do like the opera, Percival, the Wagner opera, which seems to go on.

As my wife said, we've sat here for six hours, nothing has happened.

People are just singing constantly and moving incredibly slowly around the stage.

The grail is there the whole time, but I don't understand what's going on and nothing is happening at all.

So that's, I don't want to, I mean, I'm really selling it to the audience.

Okay.

Okay.

We'll listen, Dominic.

We will come to Galahad and we might touch on Percival and Wagner as well.

So the plot of Percival, I'll go into some detail because it's incredibly influential on the grail.

I mean, basically without this story, we would not have the Holy Grail. Okay.

I think.

So it begins with this small boy, Percival, who is being brought up in a forest by his mother and his mother has lost two sons to, they've both been knights, they've both been killed.

Her husband, Percival's father, has died of grief and of his wounds that he also has sustained from fighting.

So Percival's mother is desperate that Percival doesn't grow up to fulfill his kind of ancestral destiny, namely to become a knight.

But inevitably, having set this up, Percival does become a knight because he's wandering through the forest and he suddenly sees these incredible figures in all their armor coming through on horses.

He has no idea what they are.

He's completely dazzled.

He asks one of them, are you God?

And the knights explain who they are, what they are, Percival wants to become a knight and he goes with them without telling his mother.

And he has various adventures.

He has the whole kind of comedy of it is that he's somebody who's wholly ignorant of what's going on.

And so in a sense, it's a kind of story of how a bumpkin becomes a sophisticated chivalric figure.

And he has to, although he has a completely natural aptitude for fighting, for doing everything that a knight showed in tournaments and so on, he has to be instructed in what is expected of a knight.

And so he's aware of this and he hunts out people who he think will be good tutors.

And among the lessons that he's taught by his tutors is that a good knight should not jabber too much.

He should not ask needless questions.

He should know when to hold his tongue.

Is that a hint from you, Tom, to your co-presenter?

No, not at all.

I mean, obviously that would make Percival a terrible podcaster if you just sat there not asking questions or not being allowed to say anything.

But as a knight, this is the lesson that he takes on board and this is very important.

So he's coming on leaps and bounds as a knight.

He's, you know, knocking rival knights out of their saddles and rescuing ladies and doing all the things that a knight should.

And he's out and he reaches a river and there he meets two men, one of whom Dominic is fishing.

And this man, who is the Fisher King, it turns out, offers Percival lodging.

And he says to Percival, ride up through the cleft in that rock.

And when you come to the top, you'll see a castle in a valley ahead of you.

This is where I live near the river and the woods.

And Percival rides up, looks around, can't see the castle at all.

No sign of it.

And then suddenly it materializes.

And so you have this sense of it that you he's passing into the dimension of something, of the weird, of the supernatural, of the strange.

So he rides into the castle and there he discovers not the Fisher King, but the man who turns out to be in the father of the Fisher King, who is terribly wounded, can't get up off the couch that he's lying on.

And he's in this great hall.

There's a blazing fire.

Cretia tells us that 400 men could have sat around the fire and each would have been warmed by the flames.

So it's a tremendous place, clearly a place charged with adventure.

And immediately strange things start happening.

So a magical sword is brought to Percival and he's told, this has been waiting for you.

And it's kind of strapped onto him and it's the best sword he's ever seen.

It's all very kind of Aragorn.

He's chatting away to the wounded king on his couch.

And then I will describe what happens in Cretia's own words.

While they were talking, a boy from a chamber clutching a white lance by the middle of the shaft came out and passed between the fire and the Lord and his guest.

A drop of blood issued from the tip of the lance's shaft and right down to the boy's hand, this red drop ran.

Now, Percival obviously is dying to know what is going on.

Yeah, there's a lot going on there, I think, Tom.

He remembers his coaching and so he doesn't ask what's going on.

Then two other boys appear and they're holding candlesticks and then comes a girl, very, very beautiful girl, beautifully dressed.

And she, Cretia says, is holding a grail.

So not the grail, a grail.

And when she comes in holding this grail, this kind of brilliant light radiates the entire room so that all the candles lose their brightness.

And then after her comes another girl holding a silver trencher.

And the grail, Cretia says, which went ahead was made of fine, pure gold and in it was set precious stones of many kinds, the richest and most precious in the earth or the sea, those in the grail surpassed all other jewels.

And the grail then magically serves all the assembled quests.

It kind of provides food for them.

So it's a kind of mobile magical food dispenser.

Right.

And still Percival doesn't ask what's going on.

I mean, you think, come on, ask, ask the questions.

What, what the hell is this all about?

But he doesn't.

And he goes to bed and he still hasn't asked what's going on.

And he wakes up and the castle is completely empty.

And it becomes apparent that his seeming lack of curiosity has been understood as a lack of compassion, because he hasn't asked the wounded king, you know, how did you get wounded?

He hasn't asked about the grail.

And this gets bundled up with another piece of devastating news he's brought, namely that his mother has died of grief because he's gone away without telling her. Right.

And he comes back to Camelot, feeling a bit crestfallen.

And he sits down at the round table.

And as he does so, a loathsome damsel appears.

I remember her from the start.

And she denounces Percival in front of all the nights of the round table and King Arthur and she says to Percival that ladies will lose their husbands, lands will be laid waste, girls will be left in distress and orphaned and many nights will die.

And all these evils will happen because of you.

Now, it's important to say this is not because of any supernatural connection between the Fisher King or his wounded father and their lands.

It's because the wounded king cannot adequately defend his lands.

That is why there will be all this suffering.

So at this point, there is no supernatural connection between the idea of the wasteland and the king.

OK, right. Just bear that in mind.

Percival is so devastated by this that he basically loses all his faith in God.

He just roams around kind of fighting and doing his stuff.

And five years pass and he comes across.

He's riding along in full armor and he comes across five nights, ten ladies.

They're walking barefoot.

They're wearing hair shirts.

They're in procession.

And they say to Percival, why are you in armor?

Why are you riding around?

Don't you know it's Good Friday, the day on which Christ suffered death.

And Percival is ashamed by this, shocked by this.

And he says that he will seek redemption.

And he's guided by the the knights and the ladies to go and seek instruction  $% \left\{ 1\right\} =\left\{ 1\right$ 

from a nearby hermit who is conveniently located just around the corner.

And even more amazingly, this hermit turns out to be Percival's uncle.

What are the chances, Tom?

Absolutely stunning.

And this hermit, Percival's uncle, tells Percival the story of of the grail.

And he says, you know, that the grail is is holy.

This is where you get the idea that of the grail being holy.

Right.

And the hermit instructs Percival in how to be a godly knight,

that he has to defend girls, widows, orphans.

And Percival, we're told by Creti, I came to recognise that God received death and was crucified on the Friday.

And at Easter, most worthily, Percival received communion.

And presumably this is setting him up to go back to the grail castle and ask the questions and put it right.

He should have asked and everything will be all right.

But at this point, Creti breaks off and it's the story is left uncompleted.

That is an unbelievably disappointing way.

It's a massive cliffhanger.

Yeah. So we don't ever find out.

I mean, I would say, Tom, you know, exactly what I'm going to say, I imagine, which is that all that stuff with shafts, tips of things,

a commonly made and holding a cup that there's a very obvious explanation for what's going on here, that it's all about fertility and actually that Iesse Weston stuff is not.

That's what you'd say.

That is what I'd say. Well, I mean, it doesn't take any great...

I don't have to...

It doesn't take any penetrating insight for me to come up with that.

I mean, that's surely blinding the obvious.

Before we come to that, the question of what this might all mean,

let's just kind of finish off the account of how the grail legend came to emerge,

because all Creti and his romances were massively popular and influential.

But this was the most influential of the lot, I think,

precisely because it was left unfinished and therefore it was really, really

tantalising. And over the course of the decades that follow,

basically five decades that follow, there are endless attempts to rewrite it.

And so you have two particularly influential sequels.

One of them is written by a guy called Robert de Boron.

And he's writing not a romance, but he specifies a history of the grail.

So his account is focused not on the romance of finding it,

not the quest for the grail, but the grail itself.

And he is the person who introduces Joseph of Arimathea,

who is a biblical figure.

Joseph of Arimathea is the person who takes Christ's body after the crucifixion and buries it in the tomb.

But there are kind of various late gospels in which Joseph of Arimathea plays a kind of leading role.

And Robert de Boron draws on these traditions.

And in his account, we learn how the grail is the vessel in which Christ broke the bread at the last supper.

It was taken from the house where the disciples had met by one

of the Jews who then take Christ prisoner.

And this Jew gives it to Pilate, who in turn gives it to Joseph of Arimathea.

And Joseph then takes this cup to the crucifixion and he gathers

the blood of Christ that's flowing from the wound where the Roman soldier

has stabbed it with the spear and he gathers it in the in the grail.

And he establishes this kind of lineage of people who guard the grail.

So the Fisher King is actually Joseph of Arimathea's brother-in-law,

a man called Bron, and so he's incredibly venerable.

I mean, he's lived for, you know, centuries and centuries and centuries.

And he lives in the castle with with his

companions who are called the company of the grail.

And in his history, Percival does return to the castle of the Fisher King.

And he does ask the right question and Percival becomes the keeper of the grail.

And Bron departs from the world, having taught in Robert de Boron's

words, having taught Percival the sacred words that Joseph of Arimathea had

taught him and which I cannot and must not tell you.

So there you have this idea of the Holy Grail being the cup of Christ,

guardians, secrets, all that kind of stuff.

Yeah.

The second key text that is written as a sequel to T'Cretiandre Toie is by a German writer called Wolfram von Eschenbach.

And this is a very radical reworking of basically the French traditions.

And in it, the Fisher King is a man called Anne Fortas,

and he's been wounded through his genitals.

So introducing a eunuch into into the story, which will gladden the hearts of all Restless History listeners as punishment for an extra marital affair.

Yes. The lance is the spear that is carried, you know,

in the procession is the spear with which the Fisher King has been wounded.

The grail itself is not a cup.

It's not a dish.

It's nothing like that.

It's a stone and Parcival is part of a long kind of line of

it's very holy blood and holy grail.

So his ancestors include Vespasian, the Roman emperor.

It includes a Trojan prince, and he in turn is the father of Loengrin,

who will be the hero of a Wagner opera and a long line of keepers of the grail.

So in other words, a sacred bloodline.

So Eschenbach's version that Wagner was really.

Yes. So that's what Wagner draws on.

Yeah. So these are the two key accounts.

There are various other accounts as well, which add further ingredients.

So one of them, for instance, adds the detail that the lance is.

And this is basically what becomes canonical, except in von Eschenbach's version

that the lance is the spear of a Roman soldier called Longinus,

who used it to stab the side of Christ.

So you have the grail, which is gathering the blood of Christ

and was used at the last supper and you have the spear.

So it's all about the passion of Christ. Yeah.

You also have a very detailed romantic account,

which folds in the whole of the round table.

So the guest for the grail becomes something that's not just exclusive to Percival,

but all the knights of the round table.

And in this version, the person who wins it is not Percival,

but the knight that you mentioned earlier, Dominic Galahad.

And Galahad is the son of Sir Lancelot, the best of Arthur's knights

and the girl who keeps the grail.

So you remember in Cretanus account, it's a girl who carries the grail.

Lancelot in this sleeps with her and has this son, Galahad, who is kind of who is perfect.

And what you have in this romance, Lancelot does not get the grail

because of his affair with Guinevere.

So he's been having an affair with Guinevere, the wife of King Arthur for 24 years.

And so he approaches where the grail is and gets hit by a kind of great fiery blast

and is knocked out for 24 days, one day for for each of the year

that he's been having an affair with with Guinevere.

And basically, Galahad wins it because he has the right lineage to win it.

He is descended from the grailkeeper.

He's descended from Lancelot, who is Arthur's best knight.

So he's the fusion of the best of the chivalric and the kind of the holiness

that is required for a keeper of the grail.

And so when he comes to Camelot, his approach is signalled

by all kinds of supernatural occurrences.

So an inscription appears by magic on the on the round table.

There's this empty seat, the siege perilous, where only the best knight can sit

or he will be kind of consumed and vanishing to hell.

Galahad sits there and and it's all fine.

A sword in a stone floats down the river miraculously.

And there's kind of lettering on it says only the best night

who is destined to win the grail can draw it.

Galahad draws it and and so it becomes apparent.

And so this is the stuff that then feeds into the version of Arthurian legends.

It's best known to English speakers, Valerie's account.

And basically, that's the count that has passed into the kind of.

Just to be clear, you can't really have both Percival and Galahad, can you?

Is it kind of either or? Is that right?

Yeah, pretty much so.

So Percival is in this account is with another knight called Bors,

both of whom are kings in this account.

They do end up kind of attaining the grail.

But it is Galahad who has a particular experience of the grail that perhaps we could come to in the second half because the spin that is given on what exactly it means for Galahad to win the grail is quite an important part, I think, in explaining what is going on here.

Excellent. Well, I mean, to put it in simple terms,

the next line of your notes, Tom reads, WTF is going on.

And that is what we will explore in the in the second half of this episode.

See you after the break.

Welcome back to the rest of this history.

If you've seen Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade,

you will remember that when they finally get to, it's basically Petra,

isn't it? Petra and Jordan and the adventurers think they've got the grail.

But then there's a remarkable twist at the end, Tom,

which nobody could possibly have anticipated.

Now, no doubt you've got all kinds of remarkable twists in store,

but you are going to explain exactly what is going on.

Because when I hear all this stuff about lances, piercings, cups,

I mean, my mind only works one way.

You think fertility symbols?

I do, Tom, I don't know if it makes you to know that.

But you've got all kinds of stuff because I've seen your notes.

So I know there's all kinds of weird and wonderful things going on  $% \left\{ 1\right\} =\left\{ 1\right\}$ 

in the second half of this episode.

We tend to think of this now

uniquely in kind of Freudian, Jungian terms, don't we?

Well, I think it's clear that the fascination that the grail has held for  $% \left\{ 1\right\} =\left\{ 1\right\} =$ 

people over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries

is fundamentally wrapped up in the sense of it being mysterious.

I mean, the sense that there is there is a kind of truth there,

a secret there that if only you can grasp it, then you'll understand it.

And it's kind of written into the fabric of the romances itself.

I mean, they talk about, you know, the secrets of the grail, you have to win it.

And so I think that there've been kind of three really influential theories

that have grown up over the past century or so to explain it.

And one is absolutely the one that you were alluding to.

The idea that it's a kind of which Jung pushes himself,

the idea that it's a kind of a universal symbol, a key to all the mythologies.

Did you ever read Joseph Campbell's books on mythology?

So Joseph Campbell, his book, The Hero of the Thousand Faces, inspired

George Lucas, who was the guy who came up with the with the idea of Indiana Jones and for the Star Wars. Yeah. Yeah.

So he wrote a four volume history of mythology.

And his last one was called, I think, creative mythology.

And and pass and Eschenbach's Parsifal was kind of central to that.

This idea of the grail as a symbol that explains and symbolizes

everything about the relationship of humanity to the kind of the supernatural, the mythological realms.

But the problem with that, of course, is that I think if you are trying to explain it in historical terms, because that explains everything, it explains nothing.

So I mean, it might work in terms of psychology,

but I don't think it works as historical explanation.

The other very popular theory that we have explored in a previous episode

is the one that is best exemplified by Holy Blood and Holy Grail.

And then by Dan Brown, the Da Vinci Code, the idea of the Holy Grail as a secret, perhaps it's the bloodline of Christ.

So the song grail, the Holy Grail becomes the song grail that the royal bloodline.

Yeah. And again, in our in our episode on the Da Vinci Code,

we explored the inadequacies of that as a historical explanation for what the Grail might have been.

And then we come back to this idea that I mentioned at the start of the program, the one that so excited T.S.

Eliot, Jesse Weston's idea that it's all about fertility rituals derived from paganism.

And specifically, of course, because these are Celtic traditions,

Celtic stories, Arthur is a figure from pre-Anglo-Saxon Britain.

The mythology presumably, therefore, if this theory is correct, must be Welsh.

And there's a guy scholar, RS Loomis, in the mid 20th century,

who particularly argued that the grail is a Christianization of Welsh mythology.

And he focuses particularly on this figure called Bran the Blessed,

who is kind of involved with a cauldron that is able to bring the dead back to life.

And so this idea that perhaps the grail is a cauldron.

There's also the idea that Bran himself loses his head.

It speaks prophecy.

It ends up being buried where the Tower of London is built.

Perhaps the Bran's head is in some way the holy grail.

So all this kind of stuff is being teased.

Now, there are kind of problems with this, namely that the idea,

so the Jesse Western idea that the wasteland is kind of central to the myth.

The reason that I emphasised that in Parsifal in Cretia and Atroias telling of it,

that there's no supernatural link between the Fisher King and the wastelands around him,

that it's simply the result of kind of depredations following on from the fact

that he can't defend his lands.

The idea that there is a supernatural link is medieval, but it's very late.

So in other words, if that tradition is coming from pagan sources,

you would expect it to be the other way around, but it isn't.

So that kind of, I think, undermines that theory.

The other problem with so all the arguments,

Loomis' argument that this is Bran the Blessed and his cauldron in his head or whatever,

is firstly that the grail initially is, you know, it's not a cup,

certainly not a cauldron, it's a platter.

And also, so far as we know, there is no translation of the legends of Bran

into French in the Middle Ages.

You persuaded me, it's not Welsh.

It seems very implausible to me.

So, but if it's not from...

Let me just say, on the topic of the last crusade,

there was also in the 50s, there was a theory that it came from Iran.

Oh, interesting.

Again, for absolutely nonsensical reasons that...

Okay.

I mean, I don't want to offend Ali Ansari,

who would of course be very keen to know that the Holy Grail is actually Iranian.

But that perhaps might tie it in with the idea that it came from Petra

or from Turkey or wherever that you get in the Holy Grail.

Perhaps that's where they got the idea.

You get in the last crusade.

Yeah.

Yeah. So, okay, where does it come from then?

Or does Kretien to try?

He doesn't just dream it up.

I think he does.

Oh, crikey.

I mean, I think it's that simple.

And I think that what is interesting is that all these stories,

all these motifs, the Fisher King, the Lance, the Holy Grail,

Dozeran Rathaer, all of it basically comes in essentially a kind of 50-60 year period

from the 1180s through to the first decades of the 13th century.

And I think therefore that the origins of the Grail do not lie in the mists of prehistory or in human psychology.

They lie in a very, very specific and massively tumultuous period of medieval Latin history.

And that period, Dominic, is a period that we have already done various episodes on, namely the period of the Alborgencian Crusade.

It's the age of Innocent III, the Great Pope.

So, this is kind of the papacy Latin Christendom at its kind of militant peak.

And so, just to go through what is happening at this period and to link it to certainly some of the authors of these Grail romances, as I said, you've got the Alborgencian Crusade.

This crusade against heretics in the south of France that is very, very bloody.

So, the Cathars, is that called?

The Cathars, as they're called.

And the people who take the kind of the ideological lead in this are the Cistercians, so a kind of order of monks who are the shock troops in the war against the supposed heretics in the south of France.

And one of the sequels to Cretia is a former poet, a former enthusiast for chivalry called Elina. He becomes a Cistercian monk and he actually goes the south of France and he preaches against the Alborgencians.

So, that's the context for his romance.

1204, you have the sack of Constantinople.

So, this terrible event when the capital of the Roman Empire in the east is destroyed by the crusaders.

And Robert de Borre, who we mentioned in the first half, he's the guy who comes up with the idea of the Grail being the cup of Christ.

He was in the service of a lord who actually took part in the sack.

Right.

You have the Ray Conquista in Spain going on.

And according to a book from von Eschenbach who wrote Pasifal, he says that he got the story from a guy who found it written in Arabic in Toledo, which is the kind of the great city where people are finding manuscripts of Aristotle and so on written in Arabic and translating it. So, presumably he doesn't really, he says that because it makes it seem exotic and exciting and glamorous and dangerous and so on.

So, in other words, the Grail romances are, I think, patently influenced by what is going on in the broader world.

And basically, what you have is this is a period where a kind of long drawn out century and a half process of revolution is coming to its climax.

And this is a revolution that began back in the 11th century when radicals seized control of the commanding heights of the Roman church.

And they embark on this great project to separate out the dimension of the church, the dimension of the holy from the kind of what they call the dimension of the cyclum, the dimension of the mortal, the dimension of things that are born and die that we come to call the secular.

Right.

And the church defines itself as being over and above this.

It has divorced itself from that.

So, this is the period when priests, for instance, have to commit themselves to celibacy. And the reason they have to commit themselves to celibacy is that this enables them to preside over the great mystery that lies at the heart of the claim of the Roman church to hold the keys to heaven, which is the ritual of the Eucharist.

So, this is taking mass, basically.

Taking the mass.

And the claim is that taking the host, the wafer, the bread, that this is literally the body of Christ, and that drinking the wine from the chalice from the cup, this is literally the blood of Christ, thanks to a process called transubstantiation.

And this is kind of key to the claim that the church has to embody a holiness so awesome, so profound that it licenses them to establish the church as something sovereign and supreme over all the kind of various secular states of Europe.

And as we discussed in our episode on the albergensians, there are people who are not in the kind of the cutting edge centers of Latin Europe in this time, whether it's Rome,

whether it's the great universities of Bologna and Paris and Oxford, but people out in the sticks, out in the provinces, who really resent that. And the albergensians are kind of emblematic of that.

And this is why, in exactly the period that the Gros romances are being written, the albergensians are being targeted basically for kind of annihilation.

So the church, if it's going to embark on these crusades, whether it's directed against heretics within the fabric of Christendom, whether it's the Muslims in Spain, whether it's schismatic Christians in Constantinople, they can't do this on their own. They need warriors, they need soldiers to do it for them.

And this is where knights come in, because the paradox is that even as the church is claiming to have emancipated itself from kind of the earthly demands, the earthly compromises of fallen humanity, it still needs warriors to defend it.

And so therefore the question of what, in what way can being a warrior, being a knight, being a chivalier, someone who rides around on a horse with swords and shields and lances, in what way can they be integrated into this kind of awesome vision of Christendom? So what they need is stories. They need an ideology to reconcile the military and the religious, right? I think the ideology comes first, because what you see in the two centuries that precede the emergence of the grail stories is a series of attempts on the part of the church to sacralize knighthood. So the earliest of these is something called the peace of God, where you have all these chivaliers, all these knights who are busy attacking each other, attacking monasteries, attacking churches. And the churches bring out holy relics from their kind of inner sanctum. And the knights are so overwhelmed by the power of this that they kind of swear to hold the peace. They kind of swear to the relics that are paraded through the streets or brought out into fields. And this idea of the peace of God, that the church can entrust knights with a kind of holy duty, then becomes militarized with the idea of crusades, which is born at the end of the 11th century. And these crusades kind of obviously roll out throughout the century that follows and are launched both against Constantinople and against the Muslims and against the Alpigencians. But you also have this emergent idea that comes to be known as chivalry, this idea that a knight should properly follow Christian missions. So that's the bit, you know, the hermit who talks to Percival saying you must look after young girls, after women, after orphans, after widows and so on. That's where that is coming on. And that feeds into the romances that Cretyan tells. And this, again, I think is why they are so massively influential, so popular, is that because these are being written in French, therefore they are appealing not to clerics, not to scholars, but to the kind of people who would gather in a knight's hall. And the kind of the tensions, the complexities, the ambiguities that hedge figures like Lancelot and Gawain, and indeed Percival around, these are stories that directly appeal to knights who are trying to think, I want to be a brave knight, I want to fight, but I want to be a good Christian as well. What does it mean to be a Christian knight? So why therefore, why then, the Greya, why the spear with the blood, why the Fisher King, why all those details, why those details specifically?

Right, so it is only the priests who can approach the Eucharist. This is their awesome power. This is why they have sworn themselves to celibacy. Knights can't do that. But what Cretyan does in a very, very bold manoeuvre is to construct a kind of a myth in which knights are shown doing exactly that. Percival goes to the castle of the Grail and he beholds the spear and he beholds

the cup. And we're not told in Cretyan's account that this is the spear that pierced the side of Christ or that the Grail is the cup that gathered the blood of Christ. But it's pretty evident from the speed with which people come to understand that that's what it is, but that probably was his intention, that that probably was the plot twist that he was building up to. And so aside from Von Eschenbach's Percival, in which it's a stone, pretty much all the other Grail accounts are absolutely making play with these symbols of the passion, the Grail, the spear dripping with blood. And in these romances, the Fisher King is able to stay alive for, despite his wound, for decades, centuries, millennia, because he is consuming a host. This is what keeps him alive, the body of Christ. And this similar miracles are reported in this period. So you have, there's a girl who's supposed to have lived for 40 years on nothing, but the host, which is said to have been brought to her by a dove every Friday and then given to her by a priest every Sunday. There's a woman who lives only on the host that she gets at communion for 30 years. So this is an idea that is simultaneously pretty heretical, the idea that knights can approach the body and blood of Christ without priests to mediate it. But it's also very orthodox because it's upholding the mystery that lies at the heart of the claims of the Latin Church to its supremacy. And this is basically one of the things that the Arbogenzians are being targeted against. But this is the idea that the heart of Christianity, isn't it? That you have the body and blood of Christ and you will get eternal life. In essence, that's what the Christian promise is. Yeah, but the idea that it is literally the body and blood of Christ is something that's been kind of building up over several centuries, but it gets weaponized in this kind of particularly revolutionary period of the 11th century through the 12th century into the early 13th century. So the period that culminates in all these various crusades and in the grail stories kind of emerging. So I think essentially that is what is going on, that the grail romance is they're dangerous. They are kind of faintly treading on the toes of the clerical establishment. And that I think is why basically the Church never mentions them. I mean, it preserves a very frosty silence about them. But at the same time, it tolerates them because they recognize that it is embodying a kind of very militant understanding of trans substantiation of this idea that the body and the blood of Christ is incredibly that is dispensed by the priests is indeed the mystery of mysteries, the kind of the profoundest thing that you could possibly have. And it's that that gives the grail its sense of holiness. And it's that that underpins the whole plot of the last crusade. Famously, the knight who guards the grail in the last crusade, you have to choose which grail do you drink from? Which cup do you go for? Someone chooses poorly,

someone chooses wisely. And basically, to revert back to early 13th century terms, from the perspective of the establishment of the Latin Church, the Alpigencians, the Saracens, the Schismatic Christians in Constantinople are choosing poorly. The devout, those who follow the teachings of the Latin Church are choosing wisely. And in that sense, the grail knights are choosing wisely. From the Church's point of view, even if this does verge on heresy, surely the point is that basically the grail story is an excellent recruiting tool. So all of these Shabbat romances are fantastic in recruiting people to be knights, to fight for Christendom, to fight for in the name of the papacy, all of that sort of stuff that that's what they're after, right? Yeah. And so I think that that's why Galahad gets introduced and replaces Perseval, because to begin with, and this is why Perseval has been so influential, not just in the Middle Ages, but right the way through the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, it does have the quality of a

dream. You see that the action through the eyes of Perseval, these strange haunting images, I mean, they're so powerful, they live so vividly in the imagination. But with the introduction of Galahad, it becomes much more kind of programmatic. So Galahad is a mountain that is named checked in the Song of Songs, very important to the Cistercians, these monks who are taking the lead in the war against heresy. And they say that this mountain, Galahad, is the head of the Church. So there's a kind of very self-conscious kind of almost allegorical role that is being played by Galahad that I think makes those stories less influential, less effective actually.

Well, they're less strange, aren't they?

Although, there is a kind of strangeness in the climax of Galahad's vision of the Grail when he attains it, because basically what Galahad has is what Dante also gets in the Divine Comedy, which is what's called the Beatific Vision, the vision of the Beatus, the happiness, the joy that the Christian soul after death has when beholding the face of God. You're not supposed to get it in this life, but Galahad does get it. And what's amazing is the description of how this Beatific Vision is framed in the romance. So this is from the Quest of the Holy Grail, which kind of describes Galahad's winning of the Grail. And Galahad, as he sees, as he has the Beatific Vision, the revelation of the Grail, the face of God, for now I see openly what tongue cannot describe nor heart conceive. Here I see the beginning of great daring and the prime cause of prowess. Here I see the marvel of all other marvels. And it's being couched in nightly terms. These are not terms that Thomas Aguinas or other great theologians would go for. He's describing it as being brilliant. The Beatific Vision is all about being a great knight, going on adventures, going on quests. But you can see why I think this is a problem for Protestants. So you said that the people have been continuously fascinated for the Grail. Actually, they haven't been. The moment the Reformation comes, interest in the Grail kind of stops. Because it's seen as superstitious.

Absolutely. Transubstantiation. I mean, this is the idea of whether the wine and the bread at communion are literally the blood and the body of Christ is fundamental to the Reformation. Protestants say it isn't. And so I think they kind of instinctively recognize that the Grail rituals, the Grail romances are very much a product of the Catholic Middle Ages. And that's why they kind of drop it like a hot plate. But I think it also explains why when the Grail romances get rediscovered in the 19th century and into the 20th century, there's a sense that you've got the hardware there, but the software has been erased. And so all the kind of theories, whether it's the Jungian theories, the idea that it's kind of secret bloodlines, or that it's pagan myths that have been Christianized, this is an attempt to kind of rewrite software that can power the hardware, if that makes sense.

Right. So yes, so we like the story, but we've lost sight of actually the essence, the meaning. Yeah, we've got all these amazing images with these kind of adventures, but we can't quite get a handle on it. We want to know what the secret of the Grail is. I mean, actually, the secret of the Grail is there. It's written very, very obviously in the history of the late 12th and early 13th centuries. But because we're not familiar with that anymore, we look for other secrets, other ways of explaining it.

Right. Yes. Okay. That makes complete sense to me. And also, Tom, that explains why, to my mind, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade is the weakest of the original trilogy, because actually the Grail is just a pure McGuffin. It doesn't quite have the... It's a very Christian symbol, which is why it's my favorite.

No, no, no, no. It's not as powerful as the Ark of the Covenant, which is really weird. And the ending of that film for those people who've seen Raiders of the Lost Ark, when you first see it, if you're a child, comes as a great shock and is really charged with this kind of supernatural power. Of course, Temple of Doom, as everybody knows, is the best of the three films. So on the Grail, Tom, one place you haven't mentioned at all, finally, just as we come to an end, we're getting towards mid-summer, well, late summer, Glastonbury. It's not at Glastonbury? Where does that idea come from? It's not at Glastonbury, and that's never really part of the Glastonbury myth. The Abbotts of Glastonbury do vary late in the 15th century. So just after Mallory has written his accounts of the Arthurian myths, they do start saying that the Holy Grail was bought to Glastonbury. But it's a bit late, because 30 years later, the Abbey gets closed down, and there's no place in Thomas Cromwell's world

for holy thorns and supernatural chalices or any of that stuff.

All right. Well, listen, so you've rather debunked the Holy Grail, which is kind of a shame. I don't think I have debunked it. I've placed it in the context of the great mystery that lay at the heart of medieval Christendom. Yeah, but I think a lot of people are looking for lost bloodlines, aren't they, and aliens and Atlantis and things.

Tough. Sorry. All right. Well, on that bombshell, Tom, that was really, really fascinating. You've inspired me to go back and listen to Vargas Parsifal, which is a terrifying prospect for the other members of my household. Who knew that two podcasts about Indiana Jones would end on such a high brown note. And on that note, we will say goodbye. Goodbye.

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Thank you.