



In Search of the Emerald Grail

In the old-town portion of Genoa, Italy, the city where Christopher Columbus was born, stands the great Romanesque-Gothic cathedral of San Lorenzo (Saint Lawrence).¹ Here in the subterranean Museum of the Treasury—which houses reputed pieces of the True Cross, relics of John the Baptist, and other religious objects—is displayed *Il Sacro Catino*, “The Holy Basin.” This is one of the most famous embodiments of the legendary “Holy Grail,” and I was able to study both it and its legend there in the fall of 2009 (figure 1), attempting to resolve some of the mysteries and controversies concerning it.

Grail Legends

Romantic stories about the quest for the *San Gréal*, or “Holy Grail”—reportedly the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper—have proliferated for centuries. Popularly, the Grail (originally the word meant “dish”) is the talisman sought by the knights of King Arthur’s Round Table. The quest is known to English audiences largely through French romances compiled and translated by Sir Thomas Malory in his *Morte d’Arthur* in 1470. Therein the Grail is represented as the chalice from which Jesus and his disciples drank at the Last Supper and which was subsequently used to catch and preserve his blood from the Crucifixion. This act was usually attributed to Mary Magdalene or Joseph of Arimathea (the latter having claimed Jesus’s body for burial—see Mark 15:43–46).

The earliest Grail romance is *Le Conte du Graal* (“The Story of the Grail”), which was composed by Chré-

tien de Troyes around 1190. It describes how, when a girl “entered holding the grail, so brilliant a light appeared that the candles lost their brightness like the stars or the moon when the sun rises. . . . The grail . . . was made of fine, pure gold, and in it were precious stones of many kinds. . . .” Two other grail stories, both written by Robert de Boron circa 1200, were *Joseph d’Arimathie* and *Merlin*. These gave the Grail quest a new Christian focus, representing it as a spiritual rather than chivalrous search. This epic constitutes the most important and best-known English version of the Arthurian and Grail adventures (Barber 2004, 19; Cox 2004, 75–76).

Other legends represent the Holy Grail variously as a silver platter, a miraculous cauldron or dish of plenty, a salver bearing a man’s severed head (like that of John the Baptist in Matthew 14:3–12), or a crystal vase filled with blood. Over time the Grail has also been represented as a reliquary (containing the Sacred Host or holy blood), a secret book, an effigy of Jesus, the philosopher’s stone, and many other portrayals. Around 1205 in a Bavarian poem titled *Parzival*, it was described as a magical luminous stone, more specifically as an emerald from Lucifer’s crown that had fallen to earth during the struggle in heaven. The term *Holy Grail* now popularly refers to any object of a quest, usually an unattainable one (Nickell 2007, 50–53).

The Historical Evidence

Unfortunately, there is no story about Joseph of Arimathea and the Holy Grail in any text until the close of the

twelfth century, when Robert de Boron penned his romance. Notably, the Gospel accounts of Jesus’s death do not suggest that Joseph or anyone obtained a dish or other vessel from the Last Supper and used it or any other receptacle to preserve Jesus’s blood. Records of the Holy Blood—the reputed contents of the cup Joseph possessed—are also of late vintage, perhaps the earliest coming from Mantra, Italy, in 804 (Nickell 2007, 53–56).

Nevertheless, several vessels lay claim to being the true Holy Grail—some twenty of which had surfaced by the sixteenth century. John Calvin ([1543] 2009, 62, 63) reported on several of the rival claimants for the title of “the cup in which Christ gave the sacrament of his blood to the apostles” (at the Last Supper). Calvin mentioned one at Notre Dame de l’Isle, near Lyons; another was in a monastery in the Albigeois; still another could be found at Genoa. This was “a vessel or cup of emerald” so “costly,” says Calvin sarcastically, that “our Lord must have had a splendid service on that occasion.” (See also my introduction to Calvin [1543] 2009, 32–33.)

The Emerald Bowl

Calvin is clearly referring to *Il Sacro Catino*, “The Holy Basin.” Most sources allege that this vessel—actually an emerald-green, hexagonal bowl—was brought to Genoa by Guglielmo Embriaco, following the conquest of Caesarea in 1101.² A fresco on the main façade of the Palazzo San Giorgio (figure 2) depicts crusader Guglielmo (“William” in English) holding as war booty the distinctive *Catino*. Twelfth-

century writers acknowledged the purported intrinsic value of the bowl. For example, William of Tyre noted circa 1170 that it was “a vase of brilliant green shaped like a bowl” and that “the Genoese, believing that it was of emerald, took it in lieu of a large sum of money and thus acquired a splendid ornament for their church.” He adds, “They still show this vase as a marvel to people of distinction who pass through their city, and persuade them to believe it is truly an emerald as its color indicates” (quoted in Barber 2004, 168).

Others have seemed even more skeptical. States George Frederick Kunz in his *The Curious Lore of Precious Stones* ([1913] 1971, 259):

A queer story has been told regarding the Genoese emerald. At one time when the government was hard pressed for money, the *Sacro Catino* was offered to a rich Jew of Metz as pledge for a loan of 100,000 crowns. He was loath to take it, as he probably recognized its spurious character, and when Christian clients forced him to accept it under threats of dire vengeance in case of refusal, he protested that they were taking a base advantage of the unpopularity of his faith, since they could not find a Christian who would make the loan. However, when some years later the Genoese were ready to redeem this precious relic, they were much puzzled to learn that a half-dozen different persons claimed to have it in their possession, the fact being that the Jew had fabricated a number of copies which he had succeeded in pawning for large sums, assuring the lender in each case that the redemption of the pledge was certain.

Be this anti-Semitic folktale as it may, the *Catino* was pawned in 1319 and redeemed in 1327 (Marica 2007, 7; “The Dish of the Last Supper” 2010). It is still owned by the municipality of Genoa (Marica 2007, 12).

In any event, the *Catino* is not made of emerald—no matter how much its color and hexagonal shape give it the appearance of a faceted gemstone. At about fifteen inches in diameter it would have been an immense emerald indeed! Actually, according to the museum’s guidebook (Marica 2007, 12), it is sim-



Figure 1. In Genoa, the author poses with // *Sacro Catino* (“The Holy Basin”), long believed to be the Holy Grail.

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Figure 2. A Genoese palace fresco depicts Guglielmo Embriaco, merchant and military leader, with the *Catino* as war booty.

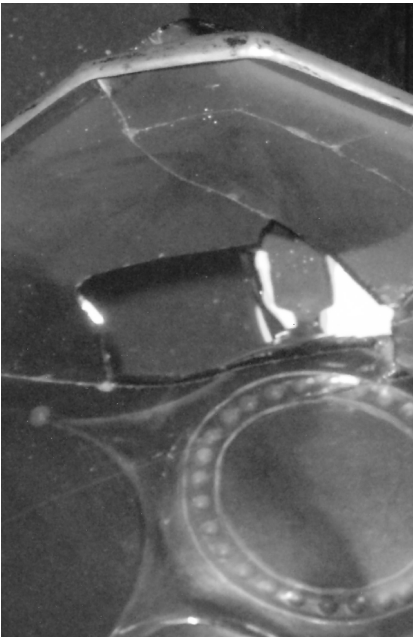


Figure 3. Supposedly made of emerald, the *Catino* was broken in the early nineteenth century, disproving the claim. (Photos by Joe Nickell)

ply of “mould-blown green glass.” Its manufacture is said to be Egyptian (Barber 2004, 168) or ninth-century Islamic (Marica 2007, 12), or possibly later.

Its glass composition was revealed when it became broken (figure 3). According to the 1910 *Encyclopedia Bri-*

tannica (s.v. “Genoa”), the *Catino* “was long regarded as an emerald of matchless value, but was found when broken at Paris, whither it had been carried by Napoleon I., to be only a remarkable piece of ancient glass.” (Another view is that it was broken on its return to Genoa [Marica 2007, 7], and a 1914 *New York Times* story claimed—possibly because of erroneous translation—that it had just been “accidentally broken” and was “beyond the possibility of repair” [“Holy Grail’ Shattered” 1914].) In any case, the bowl was restored in 1908 and again, finally, in 1951, when it received the metal armature that holds the pieces together (“The Dish of the Last Supper” 2010; Marica 2007, 7). (A rumor claims that the missing piece—again see figure 3—was kept in Paris in the Louvre [“The Dish of the Last Supper” 2010].)

Unholy Grail

When the belief that the *Catino* was made of emerald was broken to pieces, so was the claim that it was the Holy Grail. Its alleged Christological link was asserted long after the bowl arrived in Genoa, and *it was predicated on the basis of its supposed emerald composition*. This leap of faith was made by Jacopo da Voragine, archbishop of Genoa and author of *Legenda Aurea* (*Golden Legend*).

In a chronicle of Genoa written at the close of the thirteenth century, Jacopo, believing the vessel was indeed made of emerald, linked it to one of the Grail traditions. He cited certain English texts that claimed that Nicodemus had used an emerald vessel to collect Jesus’s blood when his body was placed in his tomb and that these texts called it “Sangraal”—that is, “Holy Grail” (Marica 2007, 7; Barber 2004, 168).

Alas, there is nothing to credibly connect the *Sacro Catino* to a first-century Grail, and the same may be said of other supposed Grail vessels. Indeed, observes Barber (2004, 170), “there is little or no evidence that anyone claimed in the thirteenth century to possess the Grail.” Certainly, claims for all such vessels date from after the period when most of the Grail romances were penned: between

1190 and 1240 (Nickell 2007, 60). This realization should put an end to fanciful Grail quests, but it probably will not: witness the popularity of such books as *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown 2003) and the book on which its author drew heavily, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (Baigent et al. 1996)—silliness all. ■

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Notes

1. St. Lawrence was a deacon of the Roman Church, martyred during the persecution of Valerian in 258.

2. Another source reports that the bowl was booty from Almeria, Spain, taken in 1147. (See Marica 2007, 7.)

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