

# The Mysteries of Rennes-le-Chateau and the Prieur du Sion

by Steve Mizrach

## A Rennes-le-Chateau Refresher

For those who have not already read the excellently researched book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* , and have not stumbled across other books which have capitalized on the current Rennes "cottage industry" in France, I present the basic outlines of the mystery of Rennes-le-Chateau. It was clear that *Berenger Sauniere*, the parish priest of the small village during the late 19th and early 20th century, had been receiving vast sums of money to refurbish the local church and also to build many structures in the area, such as his Tower of the Magdalene (Tour Magdala). (Sauniere was originally so poor that he relied on the generosity of parishioners to survive in 1885.) Sauniere died in 1917, leaving the 'secret' of where he got his fabulous wealth to his housekeeper, Marie Dernaud, who promised to reveal it on her deathbed - but sadly she had a stroke which left her paralyzed and unable to speak before her death in 1953. Speculation was rife on the source of the parish priest's money. Was it the lost treasure of the Templars or the Cathars in the area? Might it have been buried Visigothic gold? Was he being paid by the Hapsburgs or some other government for his services? Did he know the lost goldmaking secrets of alchemy? Or was he blackmailing the Church with some terrible secret? The evidence that points to the last possibility is that Sauniere's confession before his death was so shocking that the priest who heard it denied him absolution and last rites[1].

What could Sauniere have known? The mystery is rendered greater by a series of parchments found by the cleric in 1891, which contained an easily discovered (but extraordinarily difficult to translate) cypher. They were apparently written by his predecessor, Abbe' Antoine Bigou, confessor to Marie d'Hautpoul, in 1781. (The same cypher appears on her tombstone.) The parchments were, on the face of it, Latin transcriptions of passages from the Gospels; but they contained deeper mysteries. Sauniere also appears to have left certain other "clues" in the highly unusual redesign of his church and of the other structures in the area. Hidden within those Latin parchments was a message in French:

"THIS TREASURE BELONGS TO DAGOBERT II KING AND TO SION AND HE IS THERE DEAD."

Within the second parchment was an even stranger message:

"SHEPHERDESS NO TEMPTATION THAT POUSSIN TENIERS HOLD THE KEY PEACE 681 BY THE CROSS AND THIS HORSE OF GOD I COMPLETE (*could also trans. as DESTROY*) THIS DAEMON GUARDIAN AT MIDDAY BLUE APPLES."

A third cypher that appears, not in the documents, but at Shugborough Hall's Shepherd Monument, is the curious **"D.O.U.O.S.V.A.V.V.M"** which has never been translated.

There is a famous painting by Poussin entitled *Les Bergers D'Arcadie* (the Arcadian shepherds) which shows them around a tomb containing the mysterious inscription **"Et in Arcadia Ego..."** This tomb appears to be a virtual replica of one not too dissimilar to it right outside of Rennes-le-Chateau. Sauniere's church indeed contains a "daemon guardian" which is a representation of the Biblical Asmodeus, who helped Solomon build his Temple; and some say the rays of the sun at midday passing through the glass create an optical effect they call "blue apples." Needless to say, these were not enough clues to unravel the mystery. But three intrepid historians searched far and away for others to help decipher the puzzle. Suffice to say, Lincoln, Baigent, and Leigh did a masterful job of "unearthing" the Merovingian monarch Dagobert, and tied together many mysteries of history with a fantastic thesis that can be stated as thus: *Jesus and Mary Magdalene, legitimate nobility from the Judaic Houses of Benjamin and David, married and sired heirs. Jesus did not die on the cross but went either to England or India.*

The Magdalene's heirs married into the Visigoth families of the time, and gave birth to the sacred Merovingian ruling family. The Visigoths of the area might have themselves been descended from the House of Benjamin, which had fled to the Arcadia region of Greece, and thence north into France, a thousand years earlier. The Merovingians were not wiped out by the Carolingian usurpers, and their lineage survives in some of the other royal families of Europe; apparently the goal of the secret society entitled the **Prieure du Sion** is a Merovingian restoration in France. *Apparently* . For nothing is as it seems with the Rennes mystery. But in the hands of Leigh, Lincoln, and Baigent, it seems to encompass myriads of others - the dissolution of the Templars, the downfall of the Cathars, the bizarre Rosicrucian manifestoes, and other political intrigues of French history. For it seems that Sion has a grievance against the Church, who betrayed the Merovingian dynasty and crowned its destroyers. If Sauniere was an agent of Sion, it might explain why he was denied absolution.

## Village of Mystery

Henri Boudet, the Abbe' of Rennes-les-Bains (which neighbors Rennes-le-Chateau) who wrote *The True Celtic Language and the Cromlech at Rennes-les-bains*.<sup>[2]</sup> may have been the "brains" behind Sauniere. Lincoln thinks his book may offer the key to the mystery [3]. Boudet *appears* to argue in the book the silly thesis that the Celts spoke Anglo-Saxon, and that it - English, in effect - was the language which was passed by Noah's sons before the Tower of Babel. But David Wood and Henry Lincoln conclude that the book may be averring something else - that perhaps there was a universal language before the Deluge: **Number** (or Measure). And that the "key" to the "Cromlech" of Rennes-les-Bains might be the old English mile [4]. Lincoln believes that metrology may play an important part in the Rennes-le-Chateau mystery. In any case, other authors have noted that Boudet died under strange circumstances, and that his book may have been sought out and destroyed by the Bishop de Beausejour. Boudet, a linguistic scholar, would have been a logical choice for Sauniere to approach with his curious Latin parchments.

There are a few grisly murders that have taken place in the area to add to the air of mystery[5]. One was that of the old priest Jean-Antoine-Maurice Gelis, who was parish priest for Coustaussa. Toward the end of his life he became a paranoid hermit and recluse; the only person he would admit to his presbytery was his niece, to bring him food. Despite his absurd precautions, someone surprised him on All Saints' Eve in 1897, bashed him with some fire tongs, delivered four blows from an axe, and then reverently laid the corpse on the ground with the hands crossed over the chest. Whoever it was ransacked the room, but took no money. A team of researchers found three corpses in Sauniere's garden in 1956, all of them shot. Were they World War II victims? Or something else..? Noel Corbu, who took care of Marie Denarnaud after her paralyzing stroke, and who may have learned of something from her incoherent dying whispers, was killed in a horrendous car crash in 1953 that some suspect was *not* an accident. Sauniere's "heart attack" in 1917 came on the suspicious date of January 17th (St. Anthony's day) and there are hints that the coffin had been ordered in advance. A courier who carried the secret dossiers found by Sauniere, Fakhur el Islam, was found dead on train tracks just outside of Melun, East Germany, in 1967.

There are many more tantalizing things about Rennes-le-Chateau. According to one researcher, it may be laid out in the shape of a "Ship of the Dead" with a helmeted warrior borne to sea. Yet another thinks that the Paris Meridian may have been drawn so that it quite deliberately passes, 'ley-fashion', straight through Rennes-le-Chateau, Arques, and Conques. Still others see links between the site and Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland or Shugborough Hall in Staffordshire, England. It is known that Sauniere took his parchments to the Abbe' Bieil, of the seminary of St. Sulpice, which was where the Abbe's nephew Emile Hoefft launched the Catholic Modernist 'rebellion' which would eventually land Modernist works on the Vatican's "banned" list. Through Hoefft, Sauniere apparently met important cultural figures active in the Symbolist movement of the time - the diva Emma Calve (who some say was his illicit lover), Maurice Maeterlinck, Stephen Mallarme, and Claude Debussy. Saint Sulpice's feast day, January 17th, is the date of Sauniere's sudden stroke. He was the bishop of Bourges, on the Paris Meridian, and in his seminary is an obelisk with a copper line marking the exact point of the alignment. His day is also the feast day of the 'hidden' saint, Rosaline de Villeneuve, daughter of the Catalan alchemist Arnold, and St. Anthony.

## Codes, Ciphers, and Scripts

Perhaps the most enigmatic elements mentioned in the text as decoded by Lionel Fanthorpe is the phrase *"Blue Apples at Noon."* It is a phrase that might have come from David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (does Lynch know the secret? Consider the mysterious Tibetan-chanting Agent Cooper who cannot reveal his true origin, the "hidden Lodge" and its dancing dwarf, and the mysterious "blue rose cases"... ) or one of Cocteau's more surrealist epics like *Beauty and the Beast* , described as a "minefield of symbolism." The code in the parchments is only decipherable through the use of the *knight's tour* - a logic puzzle wherein one "jumps" a knight to every square on a chess board, once and only once. It is a puzzle which has only one solution - as does the code, clearly. But the use of chessboard imagery at Rennes-le-Chateau is striking. Elizabeth van Buren, a "cottage industry" writer in the area, asserts that Rennes-le-Chateau is the site for a Manichean chess-like struggle between the cosmic forces of good (the Merovingians) and darkness (which would seem to be the Church)[6]. Van Buren feels that the *"Quinotaur"* (literally, "five-horn") which mated with King Merovech's mother in the sea, giving him his 'double' parentage, may have been an extraterrestrial.

Clearly, to some degree, the puzzle lies in the layout of the redesign of Sauniere's church, and his other building projects[7]. The village parish church had been dedicated to the Magdalen in 1059; during the restoration, he found the mysterious parchment (supposedly) in a hollow Visigothic pillar underneath the altar stone. A statue of the demon Asmodeus 'guards' near the door. The plaques depicting the Stations of the Cross contain bizarre inconsistencies. One shows a child swathed in Scottish plaid. Another has Pontius Pilate wearing a veil. Sts. Joseph and Mary are *each* depicted holding a Christ child, as if to allude to the old legend that Christ had a twin. Other statues are of rather esoteric saints in unusual postures: St. Roch displays his wounded thigh (like the Grail King Anfortas), St. Anthony the Hermit holds a closed book, St. Germaine releases a bevy of roses from her apron, and the Magdalene is shown holding a vase. Sauniere's library and study, the Tour Magdala, is placed precariously over a precipitous chasm, at the westmost point of the hilltop village, at a place which would be foolish for someone to build such a permanent structure, unless...

There are many writers connected with the Rennes mystery. It might be productive to reexamine their works with a new eye for such hidden codes. One, the novelist Victor Hugo, and another, the playwright, Jean Cocteau, are said to have presided over the *Prieure*. But other writers appear to be strongly connected to the mystery. Three in particular are the so-called *"Inklings"*: fantasy writer J.R.R. Tolkien, "Screwtape" writer C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. Lionel Fanthorpe also suspects that Isaac Asimov, Jules Verne, George McDonald, and Umberto Eco may somehow have provided clues to the mystery in their books. Sir Walter Raleigh, who is now thought to have been involved in an esoteric body known as **"the School of Night"** (whose motto was that "inspiration comes to the philosopher at night, when nature and the rest of humanity sleeps"), may have also been part of the Order of Sion. The theme of "Arcadia" was prominent in Elizabethan literature, and it appears in the works of writers such as Edmund Spenser, Sir Phillip Sidney, and even Shakespeare, for whom the word was synonymous with the Golden Age. Through the historical detective work of Frances Yates, we now know that this era was a time when many "Rosicrucian" ideas were moving to the Continent, and esoteric thinkers were confluencing around Frederick, Elector of the Palatinate of Bohemia, as the figure who would usher in the reforms of Church and State many expected[8].

## The Once and Future Kings

Perhaps the Merovingians' most unusual chronicler is Gerard de Sede, who claims the "Fabulous Race" descends from extraterrestrials from Sirius (!), and who points out that at their stronghold in Stenay (also known as *Satanicum*), frogs frequently fall from the sky[9]. (De Sede clearly keeps up on his Fortean literature.) Up until recently, little was known about these long-haired kings, as they inhabited that historical epoch derided as the "Dark Ages." The founder of the royal line, Merovech, was said to be of two fathers - his mother, already pregnant by King Chlodio, was seduced while swimming in the ocean by a 'Quinotaur,' whatever that was, and Merovech was formed somehow by the commingling of Frankish blood and that of the mysterious aquatic creature. Like the Nazoreans of old, the Merovingian monarchs never cut their hair, and bore a distinctive birthmark - said to be a red cross over the shoulder blades. Their robes were fringed with tassels which were said to carry magical curative powers. They were known as occult adepts, and in one Merovingian tomb was found such items as a golden bull's head, a crystal ball, and several golden miniature bees. And strangely, many skulls of these monarchs appear to have been ritually incised - i.e. trephanned.

The Sicambrians, ancestors of the Franks, were known as the "people of the Bear" for their worship of the bear-goddess Arduina. The word *Arcadia* comes from Arkas, patron god of that area of Greece, the son of the nymph Callisto, sister of the huntress Artemis. Callisto's constellation is also known to many as Ursa Major, the Great Bear. The name "Arthur" comes from the Celtic *arth* , related to "Ursus" (as in "Prince"), namely, "bear." In legend, the Merovingians were said to be descended from the Trojans; and Homer reports that Troy was founded by a colony of Arcadians. The 'Prieure documents' claim that the Arcadians were descended from Benjamites driven out of Palestine by their fellow Israelites for idolatry. "Arcadia" was also known to as the source of the River Alphaeus, the "underground stream" which figures so prominently in Coleridge's poetry and in esoteric literature. The Merovingians were "sacred kings" who reigned but did not rule, leaving the secular governing function to chancellors known as the Mayors of the Palace. It was the one of the Mayors, Pepin the Fat, who founded the dynasty that came to supplant them - the Carolingians.

One of the great Merovingian kings, Clovis, struck a 'deal' with the newly nascent Roman church. He would subdue their enemies, the Arian Visigoths and the pagan Lombards, in return for baptism into the faith and recognition of his right to rule a new Roman empire as "Novus Constantinus." Yet one of his descendants, Dagobert II, was murdered by a lance pierced through his eye (or poison poured in the ear - accounts vary) at the orders of Pepin. The church endorsed the assassination, flatly betrayed its pact with Clovis, and in turn recognized the family of usurpers as legitimate, culminating with the crowning of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor. It was thought that the Merovingian lineage was extinguished; in any case it was excised from the history books. But there is some evidence that Dagobert's son, Siegebert IV, survived, and that a Merovingian principality continued to be ruled in Septimania by Guillem de Gellone, a descendant - and ancestor of Godfroi de Bouillon. If the Prieure documents are to be believed, the Merovingian lineage persists to this day, largely due to efforts to preserve it through intermarriage. The significance of such alliances are key - Dagobert married the daughter of the Visigothic Count of Razes, giving his descendants hereditary title to the lands surrounding Rennes-le-Chateau.

## The Arch-Cabal

The **Prieure du Notre Dame du Sion**, or Priory of Zion, is said to be the cabal behind many of the events that occurred at Rennes-le-Chateau. According to the Prieure's own documents, its history is long and convoluted. Its earliest roots are in some sort of Hermetic or Gnostic society led by a man named Ormus. This individual is said to have reconciled paganism and Christianity[10]. The story of Sion only comes into focus in the Middle Ages. In 1070, a group of monks from Calabria, Italy, led by one Prince Ursus, founded the Abbey of Orval in France near Stenay, in the Ardennes. These monks are said to have formed the basis for the the Order of Sion, into which they were "folded" in 1099 by Godfroi de Bouillon. For about one hundred years, the Order of the Temple (Knights Templar) and Sion were apparently unified under one leadership, though they are said to have separated at the "cutting of the elm" at Gisors in 1188. (The Templar order was then destroyed by King Phillippe Le Bel of France, in 1307.) Sion appears to have been at the nexus of two French anti-monarchical movements, the *Compagnie du St.-Sacrament* of the 17th century (acting on behalf on the Guise-Lorraine families) and the *Fronde* of the 18th, as well as an attempt to make the Hapsburgs emperors of all Europe in the 19th- the *Hieron du Val d'Or*. It appears that there are vast connections between Sion and numerous sociocultural strata in European thought - Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, Arthurian and Grail legends, "Arcadianism," Catharism, chivalry, etc.[11]

Yet this mysterious secret society brought itself to light in 1956, and is listed with the French directory of organizations under the subtitle "Chivalry of Catholic Rules and Institutions of the Independent and Traditionalist Union," which in French abbreviates to *CIRCUIT* - the name of the magazine distributed internally among members. Depending on what statutes one considers, Sion either has 9,841 members in nine grades, or 1,093 members in seven, with the supreme member, the "Nautonnier" or Grand Master of the Order being, till 1963, Jean Cocteau. While it is believed the head has been Pierre Plantard de St.-Clair up until recent times, he claims to have left that post in 1984, so it is not clear who runs the organization at this time. But whoever he is, he has had illustrious predecessors - Jacques DeMolay, Leonardo de Vinci, Isaac Newton, and Claude Debussy, among others! Plantard, in any case, seems to have enjoyed the ear of many influential persons in contemporary French politics - deGaulle, Marcel Lefebvre, Francois Ducaud-Bourget, Andre Malraux, and Alain Poher, among others, many of which appear to know him from his efforts with the Resistance during the Vichy occupation. Despite its registry, however, the organization remains untraceable, its given address and number leading to dead ends - which might lead one to wonder why the government never bothered to verify the information.

Some interesting things have come to light about the Prieure recently[12]. One is that the **Swiss Grand Lodge Alpina** (GLA), the highest body of Swiss Freemasonry (akin to the Grand Lodge of England), may have been the recruiting body for the Prieure. But the GLA is also said by some to be the meeting place of the "Gnomes of Zurich" (the name comes from former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson) who are said to be the Power Elite of Swiss bankers and international financiers. The "Gnomes" are supposed to be like the exclusive members of "Bohemian Grove" in California - a group of richer-than-rich paparazzi who gather each year to burn "effigies of care," presumably representing concern for the poor. The GLA is also said by David Yallop to be the body which controlled the P2 Masonic Lodge in Italy. (P2 controlled the Italian secret police in the 1970s, took money from the CIA *and* KGB, may have had a hand in the kidnapping of Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades, had 900 agents in other branches of the Italian government *and* the highest echelons of the Vatican, bombed a train station and tried to blame it on the Communists, used the Vatican Bank to launder Mafia drug money, fomented fascist coups in South America, and is most likely linked to the arch-conservative Knights of Malta and Opus Dei in the Vatican.) P2's Licio Gelli may have had a role in the death of John Paul I, and, perhaps, even the assassination attempt on John Paul II.

One of the most interesting people to write about the Prieure may be Michael Lamy. He claims that Jules Verne was a member of both the Prieure and the Illuminati. Further, he maintains that the Prieure's politics must be understood as "Orleanist," which he describes as "aristocratic, anarchistic, and Nietzschean." Perhaps it all becomes most clear when Lamy reveals to the reader that the *true* secret of the village of Rennes-le-Chateau is that the extinct volcano Mount Bugarach leads down into the hollow earth to a realm of supermen. The Prieure seems to be a mirror for the projections of many investigators. Ean Begg feels it is connected with many of the Black Virgin sites all over Europe. Certainly, if the organization's full name is the Prieure de Notre Dame du Sion, and if it is site of Orval is connected to the worship of the bear-goddess Arduina, venerated by the Sicambrian Franks of the area and their Merovingian kings, then this may be the case. There are hints, of course, that "Notre Dame" is not the mother of Jesus, but Mary of Bethany aka *Magdalene* , a princess of the tribe of Benjamin, which is itself notorious for an outbreak of goddess-idolatry in the period of the Judges. That Mary may also be the one also known to the Gypsies of the south of France as one of the three "Maries-de-la-Mer," whom they call "Sarah the Egyptian," the sun-burnt one.

## Sailing and Grailing Across the Atlantic

The most bizarre chapter in the story of Rennes-le-Chateau may have to do with the *Money Pit* mystery on Oak Island just off Nova Scotia. According to Michael Bradley, some of the keepers of the Grail may have come to the New World long before Columbus[13]. (Key proof: acorns do not float, he notes.) He believes that some of the Templars may have fled to Canada after the dissolution of their order, carrying the Grail. (The Money Pit has more often been associated with pirates' buried treasure, but as many know, the "Jolly Roger" flag's skull-and-crossbones icon has long been associated with Masonic and Templar legend.) The so-called Venetian *Zeno Map* of the 15th century (the Zeno brothers are said to have brought Prince Henry St.-Clair to America a century *before* Columbus) shows a knight with a sword standing where Nova Scotia is[14]. (The Sinclairs of Scotland are "hereditary lords of Rosslyn Chapel," and said to be descended from the *Scots Guard*, a clique loyal to the Stuart dynasty, which in turn are thought to have contained 'converted' members of the Templar Order who fought with Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn, and to have provided the basis of Freemasonry[15].) In the Money Pit on Oak Island, a mysterious stone inscription was found: **"FORTY FEET BELOW TWO MILLION POUNDS ARE BURIED."** Every company which has tried to locate this treasure has failed. One author has even recently speculated that the site was the burial place of an *Arif* , or Coptic Christian holy man from the 5th century.

Along with the supposed visits of Prince Madoc of Wales and St. Brendan of Ireland, Prince Henry the Navigator's trip to the New World with the Zeno brothers makes it one of numerous European pre-Columbian voyages. The Zeno map, along with those culled by Viking travellers, may have even helped Columbus make his way across the Atlantic. (More than one writer has pointed to Columbus' possible Judaic heritage, and the ways in which "messianism" pervades his thoughts on the discovery.) Recently, a UFO "contactee" in Canada who calls himself only "Guardian" speculated wildly about some "Brotherhood of the Grail" being operative there for centuries. Geographically speaking, there are in fact *two* Oak Islands, surrounding a central river, at the confluence of which is a mysterious ruin, which appears to be a fortress or old castle. It does appear that there may be strands connecting Rennes-le-Chateau and the New World, awaiting clever Fortean researchers to disentangle them. Ultimately, the Rosicrucian ideas behind the American experiment (as documented by Manly Palmer Hall) may have deeper "Arcadian" roots. Bradley hints, but does not come out and say, that what is beneath the Money Pit may be the Grail.

It is not the only weird trail in the Rennes mystery. One researcher insists that the inventor Barnes Wallis was one of the most recent Grand Masters of Sion. Yet another feels it is worth pursuing the origins of the Cajun people of Louisiana. ("Cajun" is descended from "Acadian," Acadia being a land in Nova Scotia whose people were deported south by the British in 1755; it may be that "Acadian" is itself a corruption of "Arcadian.") And another current theory is that Johann Salvator, the young Hapsburg prince, finding his political ambitions rebuffed, may have sailed west and discovered the mysterious underground tunnels and lost cities of South America which so fascinated Colonel Perry Fawcett. Others have even found connections to the so-called "Baconian" theory, which suggests that Sir Francis Bacon authored Shakespeare's Plays. Bacon's works do suggest a Rosicrucian experiment taking place in the New World... Fanthorpe seems to believe that ultimately, Rennes-le-Chateau may be a "doorway unto the invisible"- a gateway to other dimensions, through the *Emerald Tablet*, which he speculates may have been a tesseract (3-dimensional representation of a 4-dimensional figure.) - or a place to contact Gaia itself.

These are all fascinating speculations, to say the least. The Visigothic kingdom of Rhedae was in the area, and they are known to have seized at least some portion of the treasure of the Temple (taken by the Romans during the Jewish Revolt of 70 CE) when they sacked Rome in the 5th century CE. Could that treasure have been the Ark of the Covenant, concealed at Rennes? Alternatively, the Copper Scroll of the Dead Sea sect (the Qumran Essenes) suggested some of the Temple treasure was hidden before the Roman invasion. Could the "Nestorian" Christians of the area have concealed the Ark, and given it to the Templars for safekeeping? Or could it have been hid in Solomon's Stables underneath the Mosque of Omar, where the Templars are known to have excavated? Might the Ark have been the item "smuggled" out by two Cathars under highly dangerous circumstances right before their brethren fell at Montségur? The Ark may not have been an extraterrestrial "power source," as some authors have claimed, but if it is the possession of Sion, it is an explosive secret, to say the least. Sion has claimed that they have items "which will be returned to the government of Israel, when the time is right..." And more than one author has suggested that the Grail is, in fact, the Ark under a new guise...

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