
Angles of Coincidence

Rennes-le-Château and the Magdalen Mystery

by Ron Weighell

First published in booklet form by the Haunted Library in 1987.

For a full colour reproduction of the Aix Annunciation, click [here](#).

*The texts of [the Times article and MRJ's reply](#), and Ron Weighell's **Ghosts & Scholars** 7 article ["Two Masters: M.R. James and the Times Correspondence"](#) (both mentioned below) are also in the **G&S** Archive.*

~1~

By now I suspect there will be few lovers of mysteries who are unfamiliar with the name Rennes-le-Château. The story of how Berenger Saunière, an impoverished country priest of Southern France, discovered coded documents while renovating his church, followed a host of 'clues' - including some concealed in Poussin's painting *Les Bergers d'Arcadie* - and suddenly attained great wealth, has been told and retold in books, magazines and even television documentaries. From the basic facts a number of remarkable theories as to the nature of Saunière's 'treasure' have been developed. Some say he discovered proof that Jesus married Mary Magdalen, survived the crucifixion, and that his descendants live to this day. Others mention artefacts left by UFOs or massive and complex alignments of ancient sites in the area, providing the answer to every mystery from the identity of the Ark of the Covenant to the origin of Humankind.

As to the likelihood or otherwise of such theories I will pass no comment. My own contribution is altogether less dramatic, and offers no all-encompassing solution. My intention is merely to unravel a single thread of the mystery which has received little attention up to now, and in so doing throw some new and suggestive factors into the melting pot from which the gold of truth may eventually be forged.

On the 21st of January, 1932, the *Times* published an article by an unnamed correspondent, claiming that a late medieval triptych of the Annunciation, on loan to Burlington House from the church of Marie Madeleine in Aix-en-Provence, contained "Satanic" symbolism. Attention was drawn to the "sly minutiae" of the painting, including "evil herbs" in the lily pot, a carved monkey on top of a lectern, bats and demons in the arches, owl's wings on the angel and a magical gesture made by the hand of God. The letter drew a response from no less a figure than the great scholar and writer of ghost stories, M.R. James, who dismissed the writer's claims in short order and concluded, in effect, that the artist had no case to answer.

A flurry of letters followed, in which various experts offered sometimes contradictory observations on the details of the painting. One interesting comment was passed by Margaret Murray who identified the hand gesture as a fertility sign still represented on amulets in Southern Italy, Sicily and Malta. The last word lay with the original correspondent, who replied that the gesture had magical significance in Provence, Languedoc and Catalonia; that he had heard the local legends at first hand, and that while each separate detail of the painting might pass as innocent, the accumulation of abnormal features suggested otherwise.

The original letter and James's reply were reprinted in Peter Haining's *M.R. James: Book of the Supernatural*¹ without

significant comment. The prolific essayist Father Herbert Thurston wrote a piece on the subject,² but like James concentrated his attack on the specifically "Satanist" claims of the correspondent, which as we will see, may have directed him wide of the mark.

Thinking that the matter deserved closer examination, I prepared an analysis of the symbolism of the painting, which was subsequently published in issue 7 of *Ghosts & Scholars*, a magazine devoted to work in the tradition of M.R. James. Unfortunately, this issue is no longer in print, so in view of the discoveries which followed, I must deal briefly with a few of the major points again here. In so doing, I refer to a highly detailed colour reproduction of the central panel subsequently obtained from the church at Aix-en-Provence, as well as enlargements in several works of art criticism. It has been possible, for instance, to establish that a sculpted prophet on the left-hand pillar is making the same gesture with his left hand, and that it does *not* correspond to any manuscript of the Christian church. A winged demon and a bat are carved into the cuspings of an arch beneath which stands another winged figure, the angel. Local tradition attributes to him the wings of an owl. This is a good example of an 'old wives' tale' that is based on something more substantial than the mutterings of old wives, for the artist's delineation is so exact that we can not only verify that they *are* owl's wings, but identify *Asio Flameus*, the short-eared owl! The owl was certainly a symbol of doom, magic and death throughout the Middle Ages, but as the bird of Athena, goddess of *Wisdom*, it offers another interpretation, the recurring significance of which will become obvious.

The central image of the painting is a lectern at which Mary kneels. It is of a classic Gothic pattern with one noticeable exception. Instead of the usual clerical figure, divine being, eagle or pelican-in-her-piety, it is surmounted by an ape; unseemly symbolism to say the least. In the Christian tradition the ape symbolised prostitution, and was the creature said to have offered Eve the apple; Satan traditionally assumed this shape to snare souls, using the owl as a decoy. In his monumental study of Ape-lore in the Middle Ages and Renaissance,³ H.W. Janson refers briefly to the 'Satanic' claims concerning the Aix Annunciation, and rejects them in much the same way as James and Thurston, but two points emerge from his book which should be borne in mind while reading the present work. Janson finds it impossible to explain the origins of ape lore and symbolism at this period without making repeated references to Gnostic traditions; and in dealing with the subject of ape carvings in religious paintings, he is forced to concede that, the Aix Annunciation aside, he can come up with only two other examples. One is a Van Eyck Annunciation (where the carving is not given a prominent position); the other is a painting (by Lucas Moser) of Mary Magdalen.

The ape on the lectern stands midway between the face of Mary and the face of God, and despite claims to the contrary, the rays falling upon her clearly pass over the ape first. (I cannot help wondering whether the painting has been cleaned since the time of the exhibition. If so, the resulting enhancement of detail has again provided support for the 'legends'.) The lectern top reproduces exactly the curve and cusping of the arch containing the demon and the bat.

Among the pillars behind Mary's shoulder two figures stand with their heads close together. In the corresponding position behind the angel's shoulder is a doorway decorated with two stone heads. The one whose face is fully visible resembles the horned and bearded Cernunnos. This detail too proved to have unexpected significance.

The wings of the triptych depict Isaiah and Jeremiah, both justifiable choices from an orthodox point of view, but equally they may have a very different significance in the light of Apocryphal writings (which exercised a great influence on medieval iconography). The rays descending on Mary carry a small figure of the Christ-child, a symbol that the Church sought to suppress, for it suggested the heretical belief that the body of Jesus was not formed in the Virgin's womb. The Apocryphal *Ascension of Isaiah* claimed that Mary had not given birth in any natural way; the child appeared before her. Other writings in the same vein describe the child as materialising out of light. These beliefs had their influence on followers of the Marian cult, who saw in the writings of *Jeremiah* evidence that Mary had raised the status of women to equality; a dangerous belief in the eyes of a male-dominated Church. Marian cults identified Mary with the Gnostic *Lady Wisdom* (as the *Sedes Sapientiae*) and even proclaimed that she had manifested as *several* women called Mary, including the *Magdalen*.

Simon Magus, the figurehead of Simonian Gnosticism, seems to have believed in the concept of the Avatars of Wisdom, identifying the prostitute Helen (just as the Marys had been identified) with *Lady Wisdom*. Gnosticism was distinguished by *Gnosis*, their conviction being that *Knowledge* in the form of direct, inner mystical experience is the essential basis of the spiritual life. A Gnostic was 'one who knows'. Gnostic cults rejected the need for a hierarchy, and

gave equal rights to women. Their insistence on individual experience rather than dogma made an 'organised' Gnostic Church an impossibility. When I talk in this present work of the Gnostic influence I refer to a state of mind, a tendency of the spirit. A Secret Gnostic Church could never have existed, but the Gnostic *tendency* most certainly did. And for Gnostic sects, Mary Magdalen was the foremost disciple, the first to see the resurrected Jesus and recipient of his most secret teachings.⁴

In the Coptic literature, *The Discourse on Mary* includes a 'revelation' that the Virgin was also Mary of Cleopa and Mary Magdalen; in other words, a female trinity reminiscent of the Pagan triple Goddess. In Apocryphal works there are many accounts of Mary as the Magdalen, and (interestingly when we recall the tradition of the ape as Eve's tempter) as the 'second Eve'. In Provence a cult of the Goddess as a triad of Mothers called the Three Maries survived to recent times.

My own conclusion about the painting is that, while the 'Satanic' claims are highly debatable, there are too many dubious features for the picture to be entirely innocent. Given the odd internal symbolism of the painting, the persistent legends that Mary Magdalen travelled to Aix-en-Provence, and the fact that the church in which the triptych hangs is dedicated to her, an argument could be made for the Aix Annunciation as an image of the more esoteric reaches of the Magdalen cult. (As we shall see, it proved in due course to be a great deal more than that!)

~2~

At this stage I still looked on the Aix Annunciation as an intriguing isolated mystery, but a few trifling coincidences drew my attention back to Rennes-le-Château. The Aix mystery centres on a painting (15th-century) by a French Master (unknown). The Rennes mystery centres on a painting (17th-century) by a French Master (Poussin). The Church at Aix is dedicated to Mary Magdalen. Saunière's church at Rennes is dedicated to Mary Magdalen. The two churches are situated on opposite sides of the Golfe du Lion, less than three hundred kilometres apart, and between them, also on the bay, is the Church of Stes Maries de la Mer, long connected with Gnostic beliefs in the form of the cult of the Magdalen. The whole area is rich in miraculous Black Madonna shrines. All in all, the likelihood that some connection might exist was worthy of consideration.

In the late 1620s, Nicholas Poussin produced a number of sketches of the Annunciation, culminating in a painting that still survives at Chantilly. Internal evidence suggests a 15th-century influence, and the relative positions of the figures in the painting are reminiscent of those in the Aix panel, but to read anything into this would be clutching at straws. Much more interesting is the second version of this theme, painted in 1657. The iconography is very unusual. Mary sits cross-legged like an eastern woman, her arms open wide, while the angel makes hieratic gestures rare in 17th-century Annunciations, but more common in the 15th. J. Costello (quoted by Friedlaender⁵) is of the opinion that this painting was a design for a funeral monument to Poussin's friend and mentor Cassiano del Pozzo, an antiquarian scholar of distinction. This is a decidedly odd theme for a funeral monument, but Friedlaender offers some observations which are enlightening. Pozzo was to be buried in the Church of Sta Maria Topa Minerva, which stood on the site of an ancient sanctuary of the goddess Isis, and Friedlaender suggests that Poussin's painting combines the characteristics of *three* divinities - Mary, Minerva and Isis. He also observes that the posture of the female figure seems to represent the *sedes sapientiae* - seat of *wisdom*.

Poussin is known to have been a profound student of ancient myths from original sources. He often referred to Ripa's *Iconologia*, constantly carried Cartari's *Images of the Gods* with him, and embodied Neoplatonic doctrines in his paintings. (A fact not lost upon W.B. Yeats, who based the symbology of his own Neoplatonic poem, "News for the Delphic Oracle", upon the artist's *Marriage of Thetis and Peleus*.) Poussin's paintings contain multiple layers of meaning, often blending Pagan and Christian themes. One of the major sources of his learning was the library of Pozzo.

The Annunciation is the only late painting by Poussin that is signed and dated. It also contains a large inscription to commemorate the fact that it was painted in the reign of the Chigi Pope Alexander VII. Poussin might have been thought to have taken quite a risk when he mentioned the Pope in such a painting, but it seems that he knew exactly what he was doing. Alexander VII (who took the name of a former Pope who had been a keen student of astrology and magic and who had defended the cabalist Pico) was himself a devoted Hermetic scholar, and mentor of Athanasius Kircher. Kircher's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* was - indeed remains - a monumental study of ancient religions from a

sympathetic, syncretic stance. In its search for a common ground between Christian and Pagan philosophies it sets out to achieve in print what Poussin was seeking with his art. In such studies, with their obvious Neoplatonic, Gnostic and Hermetic inspiration, the Chigi Pope took a great interest. In fact, Kircher could have been called - had such a term existed at the time - 'Egyptologist' to the Pope. He was authorised to give advice on the raising of Egyptian obelisks in Rome, and supervised the excavation and raising of one, originally devoted to Isis, at the very church of Sta Maria Topa Minerva where Poussin's Annunciation was to be placed. Kircher dedicated the obelisk to "Divine Wisdom in the Forms of Isis, Minerva and Mary". And there can be little doubt that Poussin knew of the Pope's sympathies from first-hand information, for Athanasius Kircher instructed Poussin in perspective, and given the artist's enthusiasm for the ancient wisdom, of which Kircher was considered the leading authority, he surely discussed more than geometry with the Jesuit scholar.

Kircher is known to have visited Aix-en-Provence when staying with the fellow antiquarian Nicholas Claude Fabri de Peiresc, who showed him hieroglyphic and Coptic texts from which Kircher later sought to wrest the secrets of Egyptian language. We will never know if he was also shown the curious triptych, but few people at the time would have been better equipped to appreciate its strange symbolism. Kircher's *Ars Magna Sciendi* - an elaboration of Raymond Lully's *Ars Magna* - has as its frontispiece a figure of the Divine Sophia who holds in her hand a tablet listing the archetypes of experience, including *Sapientia*. And in the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, the Mother Goddess is shown with a list of her names, including Isis, Minerva and a title appropriated to Mary by the Church - "Lady of the Stars". Clearly ideas were circulating between Pozzo, Kircher and Poussin that only a Hermetic Pope of wide religious tolerance would have permitted. And it seems that Poussin, who revered and mourned Pozzo, thought the image of just such a syncretic mother goddess appropriate for his mentor's tomb. So we have at least established that Poussin shared with the Master of Aix a taste for some very curious Mary/Annunciation symbolism.

The subject of the Pozzo *tomb* draws us back conveniently to the painting at the very heart of the Rennes mystery, *Les Bergers d'Arcadie*. Here the chain of 'coincidence' seems to break, for apparently this painting, with its melancholy theme of Arcadian shepherds meditating on Death, does not have the slightest connection with our multiple Mary figure. Or does it?

Les Bergers was painted around 1635-36, and contains four very distinctive figures, three male and one female. Within a year - around 1637 - Poussin completed *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, in which three shepherds and - unusually - one shepherdess bow before Mary and the Child. Not only are they recognisable as the same four characters, but the kneeling shepherd is virtually an exact reproduction of his counterpart in *Les Bergers* [**Figure A**]. In one painting he gestures towards the tomb, in the other towards Mary. The intellectual and philosophical rules by which Poussin regulated the internal symbolism of his paintings were very strict. Their formalised postures were so rigidly controlled that one detractor described them as "coloured bas-reliefs". No artist would be less likely to include a feature for no better reason than whim. So the inclusion of the same figures in two works is no accident. A direct link between the two paintings is implied. And the contention that he intended his work to contain secret meanings finds support from the best possible source - Poussin himself. It was at this time (1638) that he wrote, concerning the symbolism of one of his pictures, that it contained "things which, I believe, will not displease those people who know how to read them."⁶

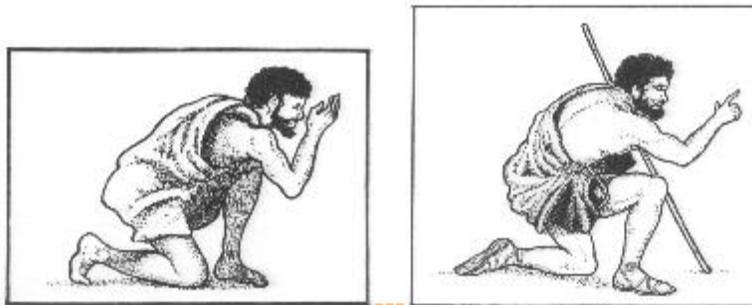


Figure A

A little 'reading' reveals some interesting points. Mary with the child on her knee is a Christianised version of Isis with the child Horus, and Poussin surely intended to evoke resonances of that connection. The Adoration takes place in a

ruined temple, and this is not the only picture he painted of Mary and the Holy Family in such ruins. Another shows a procession of Egyptian priests in the background, identifying the temple as that of Isis. (Poussin copied details of the procession from a temple frieze recorded in the library of Pozzo.) One other feature distinguishes the Adoration. In the background can be seen the 'Annunciation to the Shepherds'.

So symbolism uniting shepherds, Annunciation and Mary as a mother goddess is discernible. Nor does the connection stop there. Poussin painted two versions of *Les Bergers d'Arcadie*. In the first - usually called *Et in Arcadia Ego* - the design of the tomb and posture of the shepherds were surely influenced by the description of the tomb of Daphnis in Virgil's Fifth *Eclogue*. The later famous version, however, shows the influence of a poem by Sannazaro.⁷ But Poussin was *not* merely painting a second version of the same story; he was referring to an entirely different one, for Sannazaro altered the legendary background of the poem profoundly. The tomb no longer contains a man, but a *woman*. Part of the verses tells how the narrator will make *her* tomb renowned among the rustic folk, and how they will worship that part of the World because *she* once dwelt there. Such phrases have a strangely familiar ring when re-applied to the region of France where the Poussin tomb is located, for as we have seen, the whole region is permeated by legends that Mary Magdalen (identified as one part of the triple Goddess) resided there. Could Poussin have been hinting that the centre of the 'rustic folk's' attention in *Les Bergers* is the symbolic 'resting place' of our multiple Mary figure? Even the famous Latin inscription *Et in Arcadia Ego* offers suitable material for a second level of meaning, for one of Mary's titles - Ark of the Covenant - is *Arca foederis*, which prompted word play on *Arcas*, the name of the son of a wood nymph from whom Arcadia gets its name. Arcadia was the birthplace of Hermes, the son of Zeus and Maia. One of Maia's names in Rome was *Maiesta* - majesty - a name also given to many Black Virgins (often connected with Hermes). The Poussin tomb is located at *Arques*. It has been suggested that a secondary message of the inscription is the punning "And in the Ark I am the Goddess".⁸ (In a curious example of synchronicity, one of the sources of Saunière's information was a geometric clue on the tomb of "Marie de Negre".)

Be that as it may, we have stumbled upon another odd 'coincidence', for when Poussin drew inspiration from Sannazaro he chose a writer who had produced a highly unorthodox poem to the Virgin Mary. Edgar Wind, in seeking to illustrate the tendency to merge Christian and Pagan symbolism by reference to Renaissance paintings that combine the attributes of Venus with "A Madonna or a Magdalen", cites as an example Sannazaro's *De Partu Virginis*, which combines the form of a Virgilian epic and the ardour of mystical Christianity.⁹

~3~

I have already had cause more than once to refer to 'Heretical' traditions of Southern France. It might illuminate our present subject to look briefly at their nature. Provence and Languedoc had long been the centres of reaction - in the form of the Cathars and the Troubadours - against the male-dominated doctrines of the Church.

The Troubadours made the Virgin Mary their special patron, and revered her to such an extent that in many of their poems Mary is quite indistinguishable from the living objects of their 'courtly love'. They had strong links with the Cathars, a chaste and deeply ascetic sect in which women held positions of equality in community life and religious worship. In this respect the main tenets of the Cathari resemble very strongly those of Gnosticism. They worshipped the Lady of Thought, a parallel to the Gnostic Sophia, and identified her with the Virgin Mary. Bernard of Clairvaux was forced to concede that "no sermons are more Christian than theirs, and their morals are pure". What then could have prompted their condemnation and virtual extermination at the hands of the Church? Gordon Rattray-Taylor¹⁰ concludes flatly that the real 'heresy' of both the Cathars and the Troubadours was that very dangerous tendency in the eyes of a patriarchal authority - Matrism.

We need not look far, then, to see why our unorthodox Mary figure should have thrived in the region. As a manifestation of the mother goddess, Her worship was in the very blood of the people. But let us take the matter a step further and cite examples of roughly contemporaneous thought drawn from another, closely related, storehouse of Gnostic imagery and influence: the writings and emblems of the Alchemical tradition.

This is not the place to discuss the *original* purpose of alchemy, but we can assert without fear of informed denial that at an early stage in its development, a mystical and religious intention became inextricably interwoven with its purely chemical aspect. For many alchemists the search for the Stone of the Philosophers was a spiritual quest, and although

they drew on doctrines that were clearly pre-Christian in tone, it is certain that by the Middle Ages such texts were making rich use of ecclesiastical allegory to represent stages of the Great Work. During this period a particularly interesting body of symbolism began to coalesce around the figure of Mary.

The first authority for the identification of Christ with the Stone of the Philosophers (the Lapis) was probably Raymond Lully (whose *Ars Magna* had been elaborated by Kircher). Lully was not himself an alchemist, but he had followed the way of the Troubadours in his youth, and it is very likely that some of the alchemical texts ascribed to him were sincere developments of his ideas by his disciples, many of whom were centred in Provence. When this identification, also promoted by Petrus Bonus, Kunrath and Böhme, occurred, the whole process of Redemption took on an Alchemical significance, and the Immaculate Conception (already the subject of highly heterodox theorising, even within the Church) offered a perfect simile for a vital stage in the generation of the Stone. The *Liber de arte chymica*, an anonymous work attributed wrongly to Ficino, utilises the symbolism of the Immaculate Conception, stating that the Virgin equals Mercurius in the Alchemical process [**Figure B**]. The apotheosis of this theme occurs in the 16th-century writings of Nicholas Melchior, who propounded the whole alchemical process in the form of a paraphrase of the Mass, which includes the opening words of a hymn to the Virgin Mary - *Ave Praeclarum* - which had been dubiously attributed to Albertus Magnus. Melchior adds the gloss that the whole chemical art is concealed within the hymn [**Figure C**].

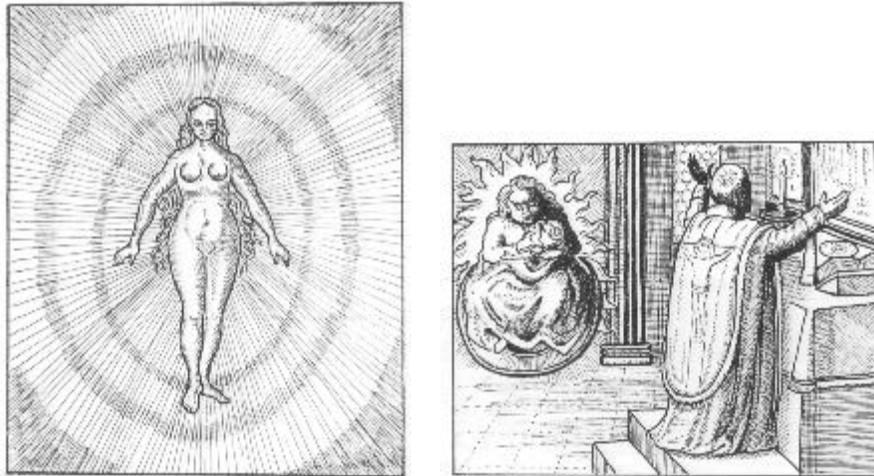


Figure B / Figure C

And in the *Introitus Apertus*, Philalethes states that the Virgin (whose identity is made clear in terms reminiscent of contemporary hymnology) gathers to herself the spiritual seed in the form of "sulphureous [*sic*] fire". She is thereby identified with Mercurius and is often shown carrying the serpent-entwined staff (*caduceus*) of Hermes, which may throw further light on the recurrence of Hermes legends in connection with shrines to the Black Madonna. (Certainly the alchemist Maria Prophetissa [**Figure D**], also called the Copt, is connected with the Maria of Gnosticism). An example of the influence of Mercurius symbolism on religious art is the Annunciation by Barter Bruyn (15th-century) in which the angel is shown carrying the caduceus.[11](#)



Figure D

These were not, of course, representative of any mainstream doctrines, but they do reveal an influential subterranean flow of ideas and associations; a spiritual 'gnosis' which offers many links with the 'heretical' traditions of Southern France. This is not to say that the Master of Aix and Poussin were the lineal descendants of Gnostics, and practised alchemy! Let us say rather that the two painters share a *tendency*; reveal an awareness of and sympathy with a tradition with an essentially Gnostic inspiration, which certain alchemists of the time also found ideal for their purposes.

~4~

Yet, through all this I was nagged by the suspicion that I was overlooking something obvious; that the link between the Aix panel and Poussin was quite literally staring me in the face. I tried another tack. Much has been made of the fact that *Les Bergers d'Arcadie* conceals geometry relevant to the layout of significant sites at Rennes-le-Château. In the light of this I began to examine - with only the faintest expectation of any result - the actual construction of the Aix Annunciation.

Here those legends that hung around the triptych, garbled as they were, and laughed to scorn by modern commentators, proved helpful, for they had preserved the idea that certain definite features of the painting should be singled out for special attention.

For example, the fact that the ape stood midway between the face of Mary and the face of God had been stressed. I began by marking the position of all three on a transparent overlay and drawing a line between them. I then noted that a line drawn from the ape to the head of the prophet making the strange sign passed through the head of the bat in the arch, and that a line from the ape through the head of the other prophet struck the head of a cherubic figure behind God's shoulder. Taking up the theme of heads, which is strangely prevalent in the Rennes mystery, I drew lines to the angel's head, the head of the demon on the arch, and the carved demon head in the doorway above the angel's shoulder. The traditional references to the flower vase suggested that it too should be marked. A line drawn from the ape to the face of God just touched the edge of the rose window. I thought it justifiable to draw another to touch the other side. The result of all this [**Figure E**] gives the impression of irregularly-spaced spokes radiating from a hub.

My intention was to apply the marked overlay to a map of the Rennes-le-Château area, and the radiating effect from a central point reminded me that a circle of churches had been identified there.¹² Positioning the overlay on the map so that the 'hub' coincided with the point claimed to be the centre of this circle, I rotated it clockwise, and had hardly completed more than 40 degrees before it produced the result shown [**Figure F**]. Using only the Aix central panel for reference I found that I had located ten alignments, including the tomb painted by Poussin, and that seven of the circles dictated by the painting fell upon specific sites in the area, including Berenger Saunière's 'Magdalen' church.

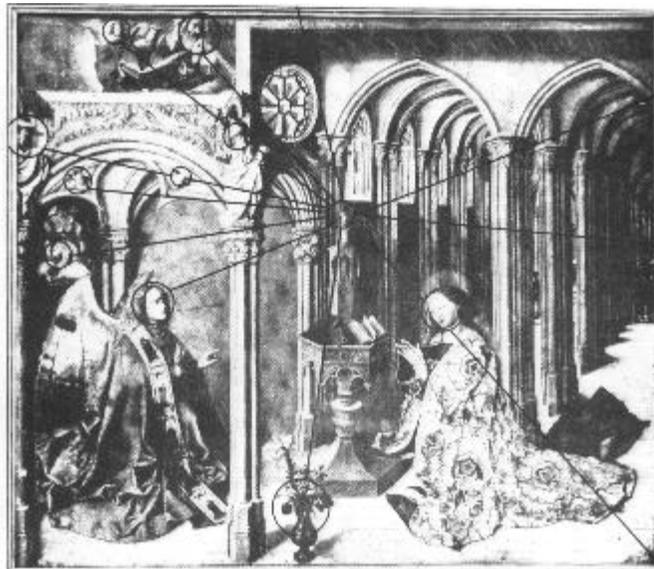


Figure E

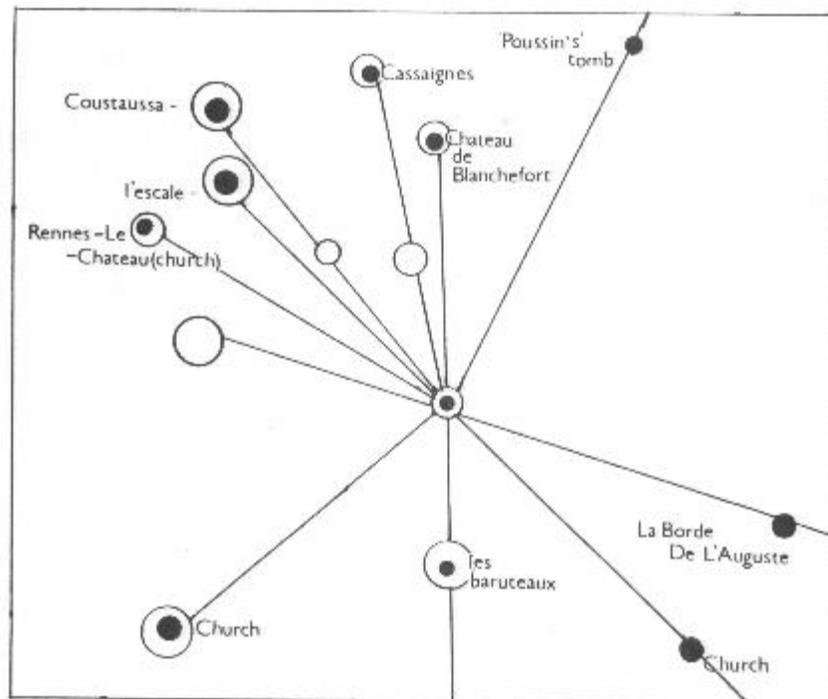


Figure F

To say that I had not anticipated such a result would be an understatement. The implications were so remarkable that some kind of 'control' was essential.

I therefore repeated the procedure with a random selection of 15th-century Annunciations, and even included medieval religious paintings on other themes. In no case was there any significant correlation between the features of a painting and the Rennes site. This adds something to the argument against chance, because the Aix Annunciation, far from being selected after the event, is the one painting which is already linked by all the previously mentioned 'coincidences' of circumstance and subject. One other 'coincidence' should be pointed out. The circle indicated by the bearded, horned demon in the doorway falls upon Rennes-le-Château church, where Saunière set up a bearded, horned demon in the doorway.

What can be made of all this? Perhaps it would be more prudent to avoid 'making' anything of it, for theories and speculations will flood readily into the mind of every reader. However, it would be little short of intellectual cowardice to go so far and then offer no attempt at constructive observation. If we accept for the sake of argument that we are not dealing with some purely unconscious reaction to geomantic forces in the landscape, or one of those inexplicable chains of weird events that so delighted Charles Fort, we are left with the conclusion that the Master of Aix incorporated this reference to the Rennes landscape quite intentionally; a view which at least finds some support in the fact that Poussin is known to have done much the same thing in *Les Bergers*. But what was the intention? He must have presupposed some prior knowledge on the part of the receptive viewer, for without some idea of the place on which to position the plan, it would convey absolutely nothing. Rather it seems that he included this element primarily because the Rennes-le-Château area held some special significance in relation to the subject matter of his painting. When Poussin performed a similar act he painted a tomb in the region and drew inspiration from a poem in which the occupant of the tomb was identified as female, and as the object of worship among the rural folk. The whole region had been rendered 'holy' in their eyes because she dwelt there. As a result of his later discoveries, Saunière made several ostentatious dedications to Mary Magdalen. The clear implication is that the region of Rennes-le-Château had long held vital symbolic significance for religious groups who had a special place of reverence for the Magdalen.

It might be constructive at this point to place the Aix Annunciation in its proper historical perspective. At the time when the unknown Master painted his picture, the whole region of Southern France had long been ravaged by one 'anti-heresy'

crusade after another. The name and nature of the victims may have changed, but the intention - to stamp out real or imagined deviations from orthodoxy - remained horribly consistent. Rennes-le-Château had been the scene of dreadful Cathar slaughter. It is easy for the reader, living in a religiously indifferent culture, to forget that this was more than an intellectual game; women, men and children died by the thousand for what were, in essence, Gnostic traditions. That alone could have been sufficient to invest the place with a special significance in the hearts of those sympathetic to such beliefs. There remains, too, the tantalising possibility that the Master of Aix was concealing more than a simple reference to a 'holy' region. There are those three areas which do not *appear* to correspond to any known landmarks. What could they have been intended to indicate? There is a natural pentagram formed by hills in the area,¹³ and if this is marked on the map, it is found that all three circles fall upon sides of the figure. But that is not a solution. It merely compounds the problem. If artefacts or documents still exist at these spots, they must be well concealed. Or have they been found already? It is possible that we are merely treading in the long-cold footsteps of Berenger Saunière, whose discoveries certainly interested his superiors in the Church.

Could a painting really have been used as a method by which information with a spiritual import might be conveyed in a memorable form? Well, a similar system did exist,¹⁴ the examination of which requires an imaginative shift into strange and mystical regions of the Medieval and Renaissance mind. And many familiar names - Lully, Albertus, Kircher, Ficino - contributed to its development.

The Medieval development of the Classical Art of Memory was a mnemonic involving the visualisation of a series of interiors with various objects and figures superimposed on them. It was gradually adapted by Hermeticists and Neoplatonists into a method of imprinting archetypal images on the mind as an "inner way of knowing the Universe". Several aspects of the medieval method are worth mentioning. It was held that Gothic architecture - especially the interiors of churches - offered ideal settings for the Art, and that mythical and legendary figures made perfect images to set within them. The juxtaposition of beautiful and grotesque figures was particularly memorable, especially if the scene depicted was dramatic. Paintings by great Masters were felt to offer the best memory images.

The whole question of the influence of such ideas upon alchemical and mainstream art has yet to be satisfactorily explored, and the task is beyond my capacities, so I offer this only as another possibility to be considered. It may be that in its own way the Aix Annunciation is one of the most remarkable and poignant 'memory' images of all.

The mystery of Saunière and his discoveries is undeniably fascinating, but in the context of the themes discussed here it assumes its proper place, as one piece in a rich and beautiful mosaic, a part of the Magdalen Mystery, which may yet have further secrets to reveal. I think we should hesitate before interpreting the journey of the three Marys to France literally. Might it not represent, like the journey of Bacchus to India, the dissemination of a cult rendered in dramatic terms? If so we are dealing with a manifestation of the Feminine Principle which the orthodox Church so misguidedly vowed to purge from its worship. And perhaps it was not, as its detractors have always claimed, merely a superstitious survival among the 'ignorant', but a fluid movement that could number among its adherents great artists, academics of the highest standing, and even the occasional dissenting voice within the Church itself. The Goddess survived, characteristically, in many forms. As the Crescent Madonna of 14th-century Crete she sat at the very centre of the Universe, and in a German manuscript of the same period she was the very heart of Paradise itself. She was the Philosophic Mercury of the Alchemists, the Cathars' Lady of Thought, the Eve within the Soul, and Dante's Divine Wisdom. As Philosophia she was revered as the inspiration of poets, philosophers and artists. When the Patriarchs of the Church denied her they were attempting more than subjugation of half the human race, which was reprehensible enough. They sought to suppress an Archetype without which the hearts and souls of Mankind wither and become sick.

Thankfully, they were attempting the impossible.

Bibliography

1. P. Haining, *M.R. James: Book of the Supernatural*, Foulsham, 1979.
2. Fr Herbert Thurston, "A Satanic Mare's Nest", *The Month*, February 1932, pp.159-61.
3. H.W. Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Warburg Inst., 1954.
4. E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980. (This is the simplest and most accessible introduction

to Gnosticism. For examples of Mary Magdalen's place in Gnostic exegesis see *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. J.M. Robinson, E.J. Brill-Leiden, 1984; and *Pistis Sophia*, trans. G.R.S. Mead, reprinted Spiritual Science Library, 1984, where the Magdalen questions Christ on the Fall and Re-Ascent of the Divine Sophia.)

5. W. Friedlaender, *Poussin*, Thames & Hudson, 1966.
6. Marshall Cavendish, *Poussin, The Great Artists, No. 64*.
7. E. Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Peregrine, 1970.
8. Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*, Arkana, 1985.
9. Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, OUP, 1980.
10. G. Rattray-Taylor, *Sex in History*, Thames & Hudson, 1953.
11. E. Neumann, *The Great Mother*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974.
12. D. Wood, *Genesis*, Baton Press, 1985.
13. J.M. Saul & J.A. Glaholm, *Rennes-le-Château A Bibliography*, Mercurius Press, 1985.
14. F. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Peregrine, 1978.

*Copyright © 1987 Ron Weighell.
Artwork copyright © 1987 Nick Maloret.
Not to be reproduced without permission.*

[back to top](#)
[back to Ghosts & Scholars Archive](#)
[back to Ghosts & Scholars Home Page](#)

Bar by [Syruss](#)