

## The Great Chalice of Antioch: On a Quest for the Holy Grail from Antioch to America and Back Again

Juliette Wood  
Cardiff University

The Great Chalice of Antioch has an interesting history even for an object mistakenly identified with the Holy Grail.<sup>1</sup> It was discovered about 1908, but not identified with the Grail until somewhat later. Neither was it the only 'Antioch' antiquity associated with Grail traditions. Two objects called confusingly the 'Cup of Antioch' and the 'Antioch Chalice' were put forward as candidates in the 1930s. One is a glass *krater*, a drinking cup fitted with a leather case. According to a somewhat vague tradition, a crusader brought it back from the East. It was displayed at an exhibition of artefacts from 'Palestine and the Bible Lands' in London in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> The other is the subject of this article, a magnificent silver-gilt object now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York which was lent to the Royal Academy in London for a recent exhibition of Byzantine art.<sup>3</sup> These more recent candidates for grailhood share certain characteristics. They are associated with the Crusaders and archaeological excavation rather than the Arthurian legend, and they operate in the context of the kind of Biblical scholarship and archaeology that became popular during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and into the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This contributed enormously (and still does) to the understanding of Biblical development, but it also has a more popular following searching for concrete proof of a more literal interpretation of Biblical events such as the location of the Moses Ark, the Ark of the Covenant and as here, the Holy Grail. Mysterious treasures have a perennial appeal and media coverage of the opening of the British exhibition still hinted at the possibility that this might, just might, be more than a highly crafted piece of antique silver.<sup>4</sup> This was balanced by an impeccable article in the Royal Academy Magazine detailing the history of this object and how the grail legend became attached to it.<sup>5</sup> Alas this kind of balanced approach is not reflected in Internet sites too numerous to list with tales of the grail and its adventures.

The Great Chalice of Antioch, originally called a Eucharist cup is now thought to be a liturgical lamp, probably crafted in one of the silver workshops near Antioch about the 6<sup>th</sup> century. It was put on display with a certain amount of fanfare in the Hall of Religion at the Chicago World's Fair of 1933-34. Gustavus Eisen, a colourful but respected antiquary had hinted strongly that it was the Holy Grail, and the owners, again a respected family of antiquity dealers, did nothing to discourage the interest which such a suggestion provoked. It is now on display among the Byzantine artefacts in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The journalist and novelist, Thomas Costain used it as the model for his historical novel, *The Silver Chalice*, in the 1950s. In the novel, Joseph of Arimathea commissioned a young pagan silversmith to provide a silver chalice to house the cup used at the Last Supper. In the course of his work the young craftsman seeks out the followers of Christ in order to sculpt their likenesses for the chalice. Naturally, he finds both adventure and romance with a beautiful Christian girl and becomes a convert to the new faith.<sup>6</sup>

According to the accounts recorded in the New Testament (Matt 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22: 17-20), Christ and the apostles observed the Jewish feast of Passover on the night before the Crucifixion. At that time Christ blessed bread and wine saying that it was his body and blood and exhorted his Apostles 'do this in

remembrance of me.' (1 Cor 11:25) This is the biblical context for the Eucharist, a Greek word meaning thanksgiving, the central ritual action of the Christian Mass at which some Christians believe that bread and wine are miraculously transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ. St Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:28-29) indicates that although the celebration of the Eucharist was an established practice uniting the followers of a new religion, it was not yet a universal or consistent one. In the early church, services were held in private homes, more as a gathering of believers than a formal rite enacted by a consecrated priest. Paul's emphasis in his letter to the Corinthians is not about the doctrine of the divine presence, but an exhortation to practice the virtues of moderation (by not overindulging) and charity (by sharing a meal with the poor).

However, practices surrounding the celebration of the Eucharist began to crystallize during the 4<sup>th</sup> century as Christianity became more widely practiced. Increasing numbers of believers made private homes less suitable, and eventually these gave way to purpose built churches. Pope St. Gregory established the Latin mass of the Roman rite as the standard for Western church. Once the emphasis of the ritual shifted from commemoration to worship and eventually to adoration of the divine presence, the practice of taking communion actually declined. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) encouraged Christians; especially lay Christians, to take communion more frequently. Throughout the 13<sup>th</sup> century, other related Eucharistic practices became popular. These included the elevation of the host and chalice during the mass, also Benediction, a special blessing of the congregation by the priest with the consecrated host, Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in which it was displayed on the altar in an elaborate container, and a special feast-day, the Feast of Corpus Christi (Latin for the body of Christ). There is still some diversity on how the Eucharist is celebrated, and several rites, such as Coptic, Syrian and Roman remain acceptable in the modern Catholic Church.

Medieval theologians and philosophers debated the details of a complex theology which aimed to clarify the mystery of transubstantiation, the theological term for the moment when the bread and wine were changed into the body and blood of Christ. Medieval grail romances incorporated Joseph of Arimathea's role in the *Apocrypha* and more abstract spiritual ideas that the grail provides nourishment and comfort. The imagery used in the romances reflects some elements of popular lay devotion. Several refer directly to the grail and the celebration of the Eucharist. One of the most striking is Gawain's vision in which he sees the grail as a divine child, while Robert de Boron, who introduced the notion of the Holy Grail to medieval romance, places the grail feast celebrated by Joseph of Arimathea and his followers at a symbolic midpoint between the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist and the Round Table and Arthur's court.<sup>7</sup>

St Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, is perhaps the earliest source for the celebration of the Eucharist, but it gives no information as to what the vessel containing the wine looked like. References in the writings of the church fathers suggest a glass vessel of the kind that would be used in ordinary daily life. Illustrations in early mosaics and on sarcophagi depict double-handled objects with short broad bases, and special vessels made of precious metal to honour the sacredness of the event soon became popular. By the medieval period, these had developed into a characteristic shape consisting of a cup with a short stem and a broad base. The stem usually had a round knob to make

them easier to hold. There is evidence that priests used chalices of wood and other materials for private services,<sup>8</sup> while more elaborate *calices ministeriales* (ministerial chalices) like the Ardagh Chalice, which can hold considerable liquid, were used for special feasts when large numbers of Christians would take communion.

The Antioch vessel is shaped like an up-turned bell. One theory suggests that it may originally have been two cups: a plain, inner cup fused to the outer, much finer shell.<sup>9</sup> This outer cup with additional gilding depicts two Christ-like figures and possibly ten disciples, or ten philosophers surrounded by a fruit-laden grapevine, animals and birds. At first glance it does seem credible to see it as a large ministerial chalice, like the famous example from Ardagh, but the depth and steepness of the sides would make it an awkward shape for drinking, especially the liquid at the bottom of the vessel, without spillage. In the 1980s the object and the circumstances of discovery were reinterpreted. More precise information about where exactly it was discovered had become available. The date was fixed to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, a suggestion which had been made by a number of archaeologists and art historians already,<sup>10</sup> and its function explained as a liturgical lamp.<sup>11</sup> The adornment depicts men sitting among a motif of vine and grapes. The figures may represent either the apostles or the classical philosophers whose work was thought to prefigure Christianity. If the object is not a chalice, but a liturgical lamp, this would suggest that the decoration relates more closely to the idea of Christ as the vine and Christians as the branches or to Christ as the light of the world, rather than just the Eucharist and the Last Supper.

The history of this piece of Byzantine silver is summed up in the Royal Academy Magazine article written at the time of the exhibit. The author rightly calls it ‘a 20<sup>th</sup> century adventure story’ set in the newly exciting world of archaeological discovery when scientific studies in relatively new disciplines like archaeology seemed to offer a window on the Bible and the medieval grail narratives and precious objects could be unearthed and pondered and traded without undue hindrance from international regulations. It was the ‘era of educated adventurers’, who combined treasure seeking with the promise of fame and rich rewards, an era so well evoked in the Indiana Jones films.<sup>12</sup>

The story of its discovery in 1908 or thereabouts, allegedly by workers digging in a well in an old quarter of Antioch, even perhaps the site of a cathedral, suggests an accidental find which needed the expertise of one of these ‘educated adventurers’ to explain it. The circumstances are perfectly credible, although it is now likely that the find occurred near rather than in Antioch. However, the idea that some precious object is found accidentally by someone who does not recognise its true worth until it passes into the hand of some expert is one of the most widely recounted archaeological legends.<sup>13</sup> It was soon acquired by a family of Syrian antiquities dealers, the Kouchakjis who owned a gallery in Paris and had access to a wide network of wealthy collectors. In 1910 the Kouchakjis sent the object, not then connected with the grail, for extensive restoration, and in 1914, no doubt to avoid the dangers of the First World War, they sent it on to New York and began to look for a buyer. Here they were visited by the distinguished Swedish-American antiquarian, Gustavus A. Eisen. This highly respected antiquarian was interested in ancient glass and ancient sequoia trees, Maya textiles and the mysterious calendar glyphs, the portraits of George Washington, and according to one source the legends is the Holy Grail, in short, subjects that ranged from archaeology and the natural world to the

very prevalent interest in things mildly mystical. In a series of articles, a lavish book (published by the Kouchakji firm) and a pamphlet, he advanced a theory about the objects early date, two-level construction (an inner cup with a protective outer shell) and rather masterfully made it clear that he thought the object was the cup of the Last Supper without ever actually saying so.<sup>14</sup> Treasure, valuable antiquities and a bit of mystery are a heady combination. Despite the fact that Eisen's ideas were not universally accepted and, even the minority of scholars who agreed with him were not inclined to identify it with the grail, the link has persisted.<sup>15</sup>

The 'Great Chalice of Antioch' was shown at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933 with a pamphlet by Eisen published by the Kouchakjis, at the Brooklyn Museum and Philadelphia's Franklin Institute in 1936, at the Worcester Museum in 1937, and the Baltimore Museum in 1938. Reaction to Eisen's theory was mixed. Journalists like Alexander Wollcott, who saw it at the Chicago World's Fair, and James Thurber, who saw it in the Brooklyn Museum, would not dismiss it, but did not enthuse either.<sup>16</sup> By the 1940s, just after Eisen's death, serious arguments linking it to the Holy Grail were not really credible. One factor that may have influenced this was a major expedition to Antioch undertaken by three American Museums, Baltimore, Worcester and Princeton, in cooperation with French museums. This produced a considerable amount of new data and the opportunity to re-consider some of the older arguments.<sup>17</sup> In 1950 the Kouchakjis finally found a buyer in John D. Rockefeller who acquired it, together with other objects acquired by the Kouchakjis, for the collection of medieval art housed in the Cloisters Museum in New York. In 1952 it became the subject of Thomas B Costain's best-selling historical novel. The object was displayed for many years in the Cloisters until it was moved to the collection of Byzantine silver in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. In 1986 an Oxford specialist in Byzantine archaeology, Marlia Mundell Mango, suggested that the original hoard came from farther south than Antioch, and that the object is most probably a liturgical lamp, minus its original glass lining.<sup>18</sup>

Several of the traditions attached to the 'Great Chalice' resemble features of another popular grail legend, the Nanteos Cup.<sup>19</sup> This too has a remarkable history, which though dispelled once experts in medieval antiquities identified the cup as an ordinary medieval mazer bowl and not an exotic object made of olive wood still has it adherents. Before restoration the 'Great Chalice' had several small punctures or holes. These, according to one account, explains as pieces removed by relic seekers just as the damage on the Nanteos cup is not attributed to the fact that it was found in this condition, but rather to the depredations of pilgrims over the years. Both objects languished in security vaults, a sad fate for a supposed relic. Both were allegedly offered to religious institutions on condition that they be properly displayed and venerated.<sup>20</sup>

Although discovered in Syria, the history of our understanding of the 'Great Chalice' and its significance is intertwined with the building up and great American museum collections.<sup>21</sup> My research into the legends surrounding the Antioch Cup coincided with the aftermath of 9/11 and was conducted in the United States. Several times I was told that a copy of the Antioch Chalice had been given to a Catholic Church, variously St Patrick's Old Cathedral, St Andrews and St James (all located in the vicinity of the Twin Towers) to commemorate this tragedy. These anecdotes may be related to others reported by the Metropolitan Museum of Art that members of the public

occasionally appear with rather crudely worked copies of the Antioch Holy Grail. Such stories carry the story of the Great Chalice of Antioch into a new context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I was once sent a computer printout (alas without sufficient details to follow it up) for a firm that made 'authentic' copies of the Chalice and at least one is still to be found on the Internet.<sup>22</sup> These anecdotes, like the stories of accidental finds of precious objects, incorporate many urban legend motifs. Like such legends they could of course be partially true. Certainly, like the continuing media and Internet interest in the links between this wonderful silver object and traditions about the grail, they demonstrate our continued need for a meaningful past and quite simply for a bit of romance.

---

<sup>1</sup> Juliette Wood, *Eternal Chalice the Enduring Legend of the Holy Grail* (London, Tauris, 2008)

<sup>2</sup> Gentle-Cackett, 1935, 7, 23-27; Barber, 300

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/50.4>;  
<http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibitions/byzantium/about/>

<sup>4</sup> Jerome Taylor, 'The Big Question: What was the Grail and why our centuries old fascination with it?' *The Independent* Wed. October 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Sally Kinnes, 'On the trail of the Holy Grail' *RA Magazine* (Issue 101) Winter 2008, 46ff; Charles Darwent, 'Byzantium 330-1453, RA London' *The Independent* Sun 26 Oct 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Costain, *The Silver Chalice* (Doubleday: New York 1952).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief* (Cambridge, 2004) 135-40.

<sup>8</sup> D. R. Thomas, "On Some Sacramental Vessels of Earthenware and of Wood" *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 6(1906) 4th ser. 57-60.

<sup>9</sup> Wm. Romaine Newbold suggested this. See, for example, 'The Eagle and the Basket on the Chalice of Antioch' *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1925) 357-380.

<sup>10</sup> Janet Tassel, 'Antioch Revealed Treasures from an ancient city dazzle in a new exhibit' *Harvard Magazine* 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Susan A Boyd, Marlia Mundell Mango editors, *Ecclesiastical Silver Plate in sixth-century Byzantium* International symposium Harvard University 1992 (papers from the International Symposium, at Walters Art Gallery, Dumbarton Oaks; Christine Kandoleon, *Antioch: Lost Ancient City* (Princeton: University Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Sally Kinnes, 'On the trail of the Holy Grail' *RA Magazine* (Issue 101) Winter 2008, 46ff.

<sup>13</sup> Walton Brooks McDaniel, 'The Great Chalice of Antioch' *The Classical Weekly*, Vol. 18, No. 16 (Mar. 2, 1925), pp. 123-127. The author makes this point about supposed antiquities coming out of an 'anonymous hole in the ground' in this early and excellent survey of the problems with this rather optimistic attempt to create a rational background for something like the grail.

<sup>14</sup> Gustavus A. Eisen, 'Preliminary Report on the Great Chalice of Antioch Containing the Earliest Portraits of Christ and the Apostles' *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Oct.- Dec., 1916) 426-437; 'The Plate with Seven Loaves and Two Fishes on the Great Chalice of Antioch' *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 21,

---

No. 1 (Jan. - Mar., 1917) 77-79; 'The Date of the Great Chalice of Antioch' *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Apr.- Jun., 1917) 169-186; *The great chalice of Antioch, on which are depicted in sculpture the earliest known portraits of Christ, apostles and evangelists*, New York, Kouchakji frères, 1923; *The Great Chalice of Antioch* (New York, Fahim Kouchakji, 1933) In the introduction to the booklet prepared for the Chicago World's Fair, Eisen wrote "My monograph, *The great chalice of Antioch*, published in 1923 in two volumes. . . is both technical and expensive. . . In response to . . . demand. . . this brief untechnical account has been prepared." p. 6-7. <http://century.lib.uchicago.edu/>

<sup>15</sup> Guillaume de Jerphanion, *Le calice d'Antioche: les theories du Dr Eisen et la date probable du calice* Series *Orientalia Christiana* vol VII num. 27. (Rome: Pont. institutum orientalium studiorum, 1926); James J. Rorimer, 'The Authenticity of the Chalice of Antioch' in *Studies in Art and Literature for Belle Da Costa Greene* ed. Dorothy Eugenia Miner (Princeton 1954); H. Harvard Arnason, 'The History of the Chalice of Antioch' *The Biblical Archeologist* vol. 4, no 4 (1941) 49-54. Many historians and archaeologists were interested in the broader context of Byzantine art and culture. See for example G. Downey 'The Inscription on a Silver Chalice from Syria in the Metropolitan Museum of Art' *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Oct., 1951) 349-353; 'The Authenticity of the Chalice of Antioch' James J. Rorimer in *Studies in Art and Literature for Belle Da Costa Greene* ed. Dorothy Eugenia Miner (Princeton 1954); H. Harvard Arnason, *The History of the Chalice of Antioch* *The Biblical Archeologist* vol. 4, no 4 (1941) 49-54.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Woollcott, 'Shouts and Murmurs, Believe It or Not', *The New Yorker* 1933 July 22, 1933, 30; James Thurber, 'The Talk of the Town 'The Great Chalice'' *The New Yorker* Jan 4, 1936, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Christine Kandoleon, *Antioch: Lost Ancient City* (Princeton: University Press, 2001). This includes an account of the 1930s Antioch excavation.

<sup>18</sup> Susan A Boyd, Marlia Mundell Mango editors, *Ecclesiastical Silver Plate in sixth-century Byzantium* International symposium Harvard University 1992 (papers from the International Symposium, at Walters Art Gallery, Dumbarton Oaks; Marlia Mundell Mango; with Carol E. Snow and Terry Drayman Weisser, *Silver from early Byzantium the Kaper Koraon and related treasures*, A Walters Art Gallery publication in the history of art (Baltimore, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Juliette Wood 'Nibbling Pilgrims and the Nanteos Cup: A Cardiganshire Legend' in *Nanteos A Welsh House and its Families* edited Gerald Morgan, (Gomer Press Llandysul, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Harold Norman Denny, 'If the Holy Grail Has Come to New York' *New York Times, Sunday Book Review and Magazine*, May 14 1922, 51.

<sup>21</sup> Kurt Weitzmann, 'Byzantine Art and Scholarship in America' *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1947) 394-418.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.indyprops.com/pp-sc.htm> accessed 30/05/2010