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Cracking the Da Vinci Code

Simon Cox

Published by Michael O'Mara Books

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First published in Great Britain in 2004 by
Michael O'Mara Books Limited
9 Lion Yard
Tremadoc Road
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ISBN (10 digit): 1-84317-103-1
ISBN (13 digit): 978-1-84317-103-4

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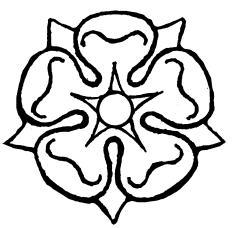
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Designed and typeset by Design 23

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Cox and Wyman, Reading, Berks

Terribilis est locus ist

Inscription found at the entrance to the
church at Rennes-le-Château



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Acknowledgments

All books are team efforts; don't let anyone tell you any different. The team effort involved with this labor was a brilliant one, and I would like to offer my absolute thanks as I call out the roll of honor.

It seems appropriate that I have my own group of goddesses to thank first and foremost. For the brilliant research by one of the world's best, I would like to thank Jacqueline Harvey—dinner is on me. For the extra material, my thanks are to Robin Crookshank (no hyphen) Hilton. SPD, you were brilliant. No words can describe my thanks adequately.

Chaps there were, too, who helped a great deal. Mark Foster, for the artwork and the photo manipulation—where have all the people gone? Mark Oxbrow for Rosslyn—Templars? What Templars? Geoff Petch for the calls and the encouragement. Andy Gough for the list and great conversation. Jim Chalmers whose idea it was in the first place.

My thanks also go out to my friends and family—Mum, Dad, Mark, and Claire. Gemma Smith for the gee up and the kick up the butt, Sam for being good at last.

Lindsay Davies at Michael O'Mara for the commission and the coffee—next time can I have a bit longer to finish, please? Robert Kirby at PFD—the world's most patient literary agent—now lunch is on me.



Introduction

Considering the context of the Holy Grail, it is not surprising that the subject has polarized opinion for many years. Even so, it is rare for a novel to cause as much controversy as *The Da Vinci Code*. As this book goes to press, the figures for worldwide sales of Dan Brown's murder mystery are racing toward the six million mark, with sales set to go even higher on the release of the paperback version. There doesn't seem to be any middle ground in the reaction to the book—people either love it or hate it, a fact that makes the book the more extraordinary.

Let's take the detractors first. These are generally divided into certain subgroups. First, there are those who consider Brown's book to be historically inaccurate and poorly researched. Then there are those who see in Brown's novel a major challenge to Christian dogma and orthodoxy. It's not too hard to see why, when one flicks through the pages of *The Da Vinci Code*, its main premise being that the Christian Church has been hiding something from us all for two millennia. Powerful stuff indeed, and strong enough to draw venomous attacks from fundamentalists, apologetics, and Christian liberals alike. A quick flick through some pages on the Internet will show you that Brown has raised the ire of more than one Christian scholar, with page upon page being dedicated to "breaking" his novel and its adjudged attack on the Christian faith. Indeed, some of these selfsame Christian apologists are bringing into print their own books, denouncing Brown's novel as a sham and a heinous crime against God-fearing folk the world over.

These arguments are based around Brown's retelling of the idea, drawn from various books in the alternative history genre, that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, who bore their child and so promulgated a family line through history. Such a notion seriously questions the concept of Christ's

divinity, as this hypothesis would make him a "flesh and blood" man rather than the Son of God. I discuss the bloodline thesis at length in the Mary Magdalene section of this book, so will not go over the main argument here. What I will say, however, is that taken at absolute face value, and using the Gospels and Scriptures of the New Testament as our guide, the apologists are quite correct in their counter-claims that there is no direct evidence for such a union between Christ and the Magdalene. However, what they haven't addressed with their reading of the Scriptures and Gospels is one of the central themes of this hypothesis: namely, that this information was deemed so damaging and disruptive to the early Church that it was actually suppressed by the original redactors and editors of the New Testament—being, in effect, written out of the original texts, to be replaced by a sanitized version that was much more appealing to the early Church Fathers. If you are looking for a denouncement of Brown and his novel, you have come to the wrong place—there are other books that will interest you more. This book is aimed squarely at the first subsection of detractors and at those who love the novel but are a little puzzled about the history and factual evidence behind the book. I have tackled these issues head-on in the following pages.

Dan Brown undoubtedly drew on a small handful of books for his main themes and background material. For the general idea that there exists a bloodline of Christ and that this was through the union of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, along with the theory that a secret society known as the Priory of Sion exists to keep this arcane secret safe, Brown has used the controversial best-seller, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, by Michael Baigent, Henry Lincoln, and Richard Leigh, as his basis. For the idea that Leonardo Da Vinci encoded some of these themes and secrets into his paintings, he has turned to *The Templar Revelation*, by Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince,

and for his material on Mary Magdalene and the Sacred Feminine he has used *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*, by Margaret Starbird. Those who have read *The Da Vinci Code* will be familiar with the fact that these three books adorn the bookshelf of the fictional Grail scholar, Leigh Teabing, at his home, Château Villette. The books are named, but their authors are not. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown only scratches the surface of some of the theories put forward in the above books; to fully understand the depth of research and argument posited, it would be well worth reading at least one of the books cited above and included in the bibliography at the end of this book.

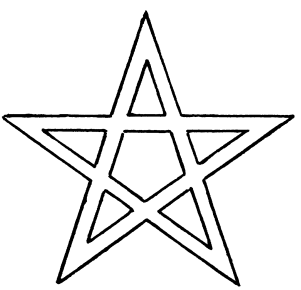
If there is indeed a bloodline from Christ, then we are faced with what we can loosely call two heresies: a small heresy and a larger, more fundamental, heresy. The small heresy is a simple one: the Church has lied for 2,000 years, hiding the truth from Christians for various reasons. The larger heresy is huge. For if this theory is proved correct, then whole swathes of history have to be rewritten and, with them, our very understanding of the fabric of life, faith, and the world around us. There is much at stake.

So why is *The Da Vinci Code* so popular? First and foremost, it's a good story. The book reads well, and no doubt it will make a great movie, under the directorship of Ron Howard. I also think there is a deeper reason for its success. What Dan Brown has touched is a raw nerve in much of his readership. Many people are unhappy with the way they have been taught to think and believe, and a desire to break out of the box and dig deeper into life's mysteries is gaining momentum as we settle into the twenty-first century. It's this raw nerve that *The Da Vinci Code* has jumped on. I seriously doubt that the book is compelling thousands of Christians to question their faith and abandon the Church. What it is doing, however, is bringing into the mainstream a

river of thought and a host of theories that have until now been seen as alternative and in some way heretical. Surely this is a good thing.

This book is designed in such a way as to give the reader of *The Da Vinci Code* a primer on many of the factual elements in the book. It is set out in a simple A-to-Z format and is, I hope, easy to navigate and read. I have endeavored to keep the entries as brief as necessary in order to avoid the feel of an academic textbook, or indeed to bore the reader. What I hope I have achieved is an awakening in the reader of a realization that there is real mystery and strangeness in the historical world. I hope I have encouraged at least some to read further and to dig deeper—in this I am sure that Leonardo would have approved.

For more facts behind the fiction, visit:
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Adoration of the Magi

"Everyone loves a conspiracy." So Dan Brown prefaces his snippet of information concerning the Leonardo unfinished masterpiece, *Adoration of the Magi*. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown, through his narrative, retells the story of how a Florence-based art diagnostician (a modern-day art archaeologist, one might say) called Maurizio Seracini had found that layers of grime and overpainting actually covered a very different composition by Leonardo and that the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, embarrassed by these findings, had "banished" the painting to a nearby warehouse. For this information, Brown has his characters quote from a *New York Times Magazine* article titled "The Leonardo Cover-Up."

The *New York Times Magazine* article referred to was indeed real, written in April 2002 by Melinda Henneberger. The article highlighted the work of Maurizio Seracini, who is a real Florence-based art diagnostician. Seracini has become famous for his use of ostensibly medical technology to reveal the secrets of the old masters. His work has encompassed the paintings of Botticelli, Caravaggio, and Raphael as well as many other great master painters. The Uffizi Gallery, where the *Adoration of the Magi* resides, asked Seracini to examine the painting and resolve the debate raging in the art world: should the masterpiece be subjected to restoration, as *The Last Supper* has in recent years? Many believed that the painting was in too fragile a condition to be subjected to the rigors of restoration, and others, principally the head of the Uffizi, countered that the painting was suffering after years of neglect and badly needed, at the very least, a good cleanup.

Seracini came to some remarkable and controversial conclusions about the painting, conclusions that are still to be fully appreciated and accepted by the art world. In Seracini's words, "None of the paint we see on the *Adoration* today was put there by Leonardo. God knows who did, but it

was not Leonardo." Seracini believes that a much later hand was responsible for the clumsily applied layer of brown and orange paint that now adorns the painting. He points out that many of the painted features are totally devoid of the finesse and quality of Leonardo's hand, especially in the way parts of the human anatomy are depicted. Not only that, but Seracini has found evidence that beneath the layers of paint and grime a wholly different scene awaits the viewer from the one that was later painted in.

So far, *The Da Vinci Code* is correct in what it has to say about the *Adoration of the Magi*; however, there is more. Dan Brown seems to intimate that the Uffizi took the painting down after Seracini's discoveries about the masterpiece. This is not the case. The painting was removed to a warehouse while undergoing the scans that Seracini carried out and while the directors of the Uffizi decided on the appropriate action to take. A notice was indeed put up in room number 15 at the Uffizi, the Leonardo gallery, saying that the picture had been removed for restoration, common practice in these circumstances. The findings of Seracini are difficult ones for both the gallery and for many in the art world who have for years ascribed the painted portions of the work to Leonardo. The idea that there is a conspiracy to hide the real "meaning" of the painting from the general public is perhaps pushing things a little far.

However, it is clear that the work of Seracini has revealed much that was previously hidden under the paint. The images beneath the layers of paint and varnish were glimpsed at by the use of infrared reflectography. These images show a scene quite different from the general theme now seen in the painting. It seems that Leonardo wanted to portray a world that was being reconstructed from ruins, a reflection of the master's feelings at the beginning of the Renaissance. This theme can be glimpsed by the figures that are building a

staircase in the original version. Another area of the original painting shows several horses joined in a violent clash, making this scene an early version of Da Vinci's legendary *Battle of Anghiari*, and showing that Leonardo had mastered the movement and expression of intense emotion that the later painting was said to have. Seracini is currently engaged in a search for the fabled *Battle of Anghiari*, which was said to have been painted on one of the walls of the Hall of 500 in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. He is convinced that the painting could still exist behind one of the walls of the great hall.

The *Adoration of the Magi* was commissioned in 1481. It is a large painting—96 by 97 inches—and painted on some 10 wooden boards that are glued together. It has been considered a work of genius, and until Seracini's recent work it was held in high regard because of its contrasting use of paint and sketched figures. It shows a scene, now fading, of the three kings visiting the infant Jesus and His mother Mary. There are some interesting and possibly symbolic elements to the picture that *The Da Vinci Code* does not highlight. In the painting, there appears to be a carob tree behind the central scene and gathering of people. As Clive Prince and Lynn Picknett point out in their book *The Templar Revelation*, the carob was a tree associated with John the Baptist, a central figure in many of Leonardo's paintings. Around this tree in the painting, a second set of people is gathered, seemingly paying homage to the tree itself, one of them raising the index finger of his left hand in what Prince and Picknett call the John gesture. A second figure in the crowd around the Virgin and Child is also raising his finger, a gesture that Leonardo used many times in his works. The John gesture remains one of the most enigmatic and mysterious elements of Leonardo's body of work.

See also: Leonardo Da Vinci.

Albigensian Crusade

One of the anti-heretical Crusades, carried out by the Christian Church in the thirteenth century against the Cathars, also known as Albigensians after the Cathar stronghold of Albi, a town in the Languedoc, France. The story of the Cathars is central to the themes raised in *The Da Vinci Code*. The main 'secret' at the heart of the novel—the theory that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married—is a Cathar belief. It is the Church's suppression of these heretical theories that forms the basis of Dan Brown's plot.

The Albigensian Crusade was a particularly bloody and ruthless Crusade, and it is estimated that from 1209, when it was started, to 1255 over 100,000 Cathars and Languedocians had been massacred. The campaigns were chronicled by the Cistercian monk Pierre des Vaux-de-Cernay in his book *Historia Albigensis*.

In the Languedoc, the Cathars' influence and authority were seriously undermining the Catholic Church. Pope Innocent III was particularly concerned and exasperated by the attitude of the Languedocian nobility, who did little to prevent the Cathars from practicing their faith or to deal with their growing threat. In 1206, Count Raymond VI of Toulouse refused to join a league of knights that the Papal legate, Abbot Arnaud Amaury, had sought to form in order to rid the region of Cathars. Raymond VI had no wish to wage a war against his own subjects, and in May 1207 he was therefore excommunicated at the behest of Amaury's assistant, Pierre de Castelnau. In January 1208, while visiting Raymond VI, Castelnau was murdered by one of the count's knights. This blatant attack on the Papal authority infuriated Innocent III to such an extent that he called for a Crusade against Languedoc, and the Cathars in particular. The call was taken up by the northern barons, probably tempted by the wealth of the Languedoc and the Papal authority to take

Cathar lands with impunity. One such knight was Simon de Montfort, who played an integral role in the Albigensian Crusade and whose name spread fear and hatred into the inhabitants of the region.

The first major casualty of the Crusade was the town of Béziers, which de Montfort's forces reached on July 21, 1209. The Crusaders ordered the Catholic townspeople to hand over the Cathars living among them, but they refused. They were then told they could leave the town without fear so that the Crusaders could enter it and arrest the Cathars. If they failed to do so, the townspeople were threatened with excommunication—a real and forceful deterrent at that time. Despite this warning, the townspeople refused to leave the Cathars and even swore an oath to defend them. The forces of de Montfort, therefore, besieged the town, with Amaury, the Papal legate, telling them to "show no mercy neither to order, nor to age, nor to sex. Cathar or Catholic, kill them all. God will know His own." The ensuing massacre resulted in the slaughter of approximately 15,000 men, women, and children, of whom only 222 were Cathars.

The next town was Narbonne, which submitted to de Montfort's forces, and by August 1209 Carcassonne also surrendered after a short yet vicious siege, after which the townspeople were allowed to leave taking "only their sins with them." The conquered lands were given to de Montfort, and most of the army was disbanded.

However, in his absence the recently defeated towns and castles aligned with Raymond VI of Toulouse, only to be re-conquered by de Montfort and his allies at a later date. As the Crusade re-commenced, many more towns and castles fell, and by 1213 all the lands of the Trencavel had been conquered and Toulouse captured.

The only power at this time that was capable of defeating the Crusaders belonged to Peter, King of Aragon, who held

suzerainty over some lands in France and sought to maintain and increase his influence there. In September 1213, he attacked Muret in Toulouse but was defeated and killed by de Montfort's army. In 1215, de Montfort campaigned along the Dordogne, seizing many abandoned Cathar castles, including Domme and Castelnaudary. At this time, Prince Louis of Spain and his forces joined de Montfort's army at the siege of Toulouse.

From 1215 to 1225, many towns rallied together against the Crusaders, including Avignon, an important town that fell within the Count of Provence's domain. In 1216, the garrison town of Beaucaire saw de Montfort's first major defeat, but his forces regrouped and were able to go on to capture Toulouse and Bigerre, being defeated at Lourdes, the western limit of the Albigensian Crusade.

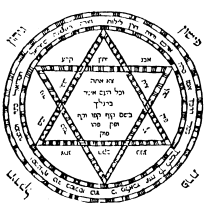
In September 1217, Raymond VI's son, Raymond VII, with help from Aragon, took Toulouse. In the spring of the following year, de Montfort besieged the town but was killed on June 25, 1218, by a stone fired from an artillery engine that was being operated by a group of women. With the loss of de Montfort, the Crusade took on a different outlook from this point hence as there was no longer a man of his abilities and energy to lead the Crusaders. The lack of a coherent leader allowed Raymond VII and the Count of Foix to defeat the French at Baziège. Much of the Midi region was now in the hands of Raymond VII and his allies. The triumphs of Raymond VII led to a resurgence of Catharism, and by 1224 the status quo was such that little had been gained by the Crusaders and the position was similar to how it had been in 1209.

In 1226, Louis VIII of France led a new Crusade into the Languedoc, with the majority of towns and castles surrendering without a fight, a sign of the battle-weariness of the population. However, Avignon held out for three months

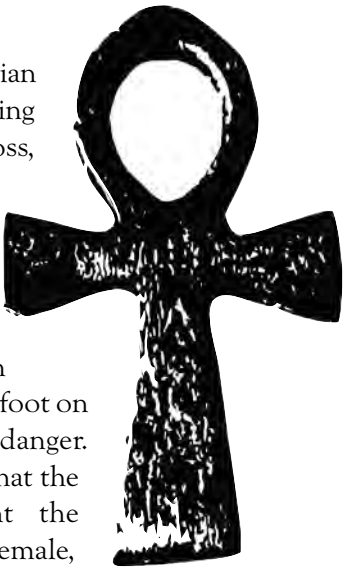
before surrendering on September 12, 1226. On King Louis VIII's death in Auvergne on November 8, 1226, his seneschal, Humbert de Beaujeu, conducted the Crusade, besieging Labécéde, where he slaughtered the whole population. The last bastion of resistance was Toulouse, which endured a harsh siege. This ended only when it was agreed that the daughter of Raymond VII would marry the son of Blanche de Castille. On April 12, 1229, Raymond VII agreed to the terms of the Treaty of Paris, agreeing also to fight the Cathar heresy, demolish the defenses of Toulouse, obey the Church, and pay damages of 20,000 marks. It is at this point that the Inquisition was established in Toulouse, and from 1233 within the whole of Languedoc. All Cathars were hunted down, tortured, and burned. The horrific activities of the Inquisition caused great unrest within the region, causing revolts at Toulouse, Cordes, Albi, and Narbonne. In 1240, Raymond-Roger IV of Trencavel led a final revolt at Carcassonne but was defeated and left France with his army.

The persecution of the Cathars led most to flee to the few remaining Cathar fortresses, the most famous being Montségur in the Pyrenees, a strongly fortified fortress perched atop a steep mountain. The siege began in November 1243, and by February 1244 the people within finally surrendered. On March 16, the 210 Cathars within Montségur marched down the mountain and were burned as heretics in a field below. In August 1255, the siege of Quéribus, a small Cathar fortress, marked the end of the Albigensian Crusade.

See also: Cathars.



Ankh



The ankh is the ancient Egyptian symbol and hieroglyph meaning "life." Depicted as a looped cross, it is thought to represent a sandal strap or penis sheath. Most Egyptologists believe it to be the former, because of the importance of wearing sandals in Egypt, bearing in mind that death by treading barefoot on a scorpion was a very real danger. However, some have theorized that the ankh may in fact represent the reproductive organs of the female, which would make logical sense, given its life-giving qualities. This association with the female or goddess is why Jacques Saunière, curator at the Louvre in *The Da Vinci Code*, has added a large number of ankhs to the museum collection.

The life-giving quality of the ankh was closely associated with the king as depicted in ancient Egyptian temple scenes. This was especially emphasized in the reliefs of the Amarna period, where the sun's many rays end in ankh symbols that are offered to the noses of the pharaoh Akhenaten and his wife Nefertiti. The offering to the royal nostrils was called the "breath of life."

As the ancient Egyptians believed that the written word was so powerful and mysterious it could bring objects to life, individual signs were considered to have their own divine potency. Because of the nature and intrinsic power of the sign, the ankh became a common magical icon used widely as a protective amulet. When color was added to the ankh symbol, protective energy could be summoned up for the