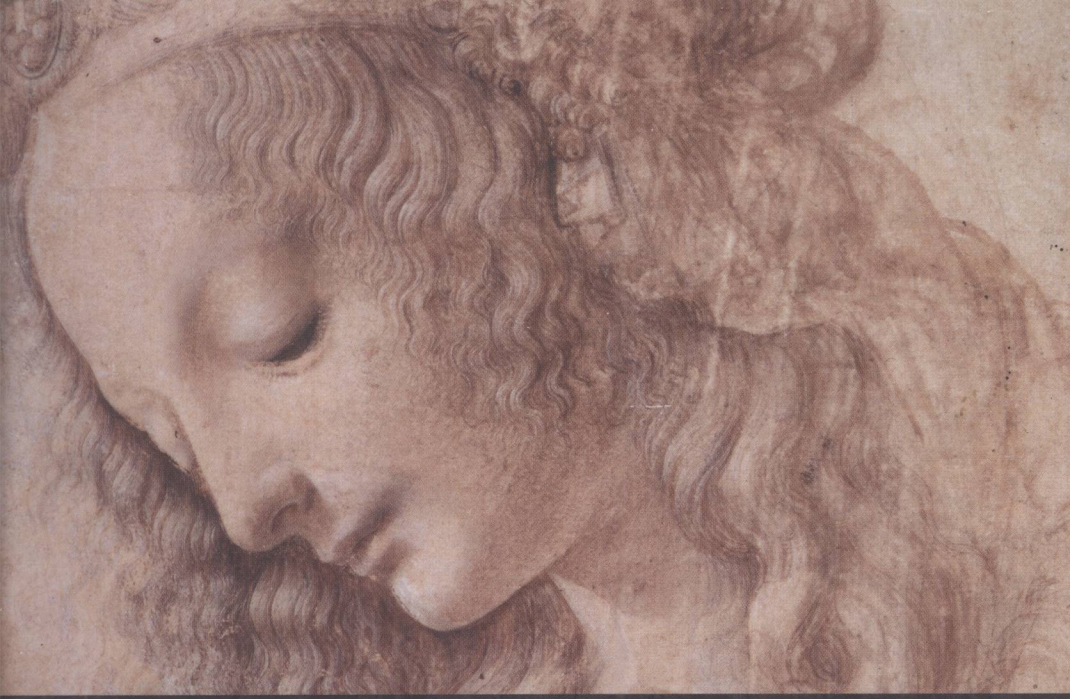

THE REAL HISTORY BEHIND THE DA VINCI CODE

SHARAN NEWMAN

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To real historians everywhere,
who slog in the archives for nothing more than the hope of
coming a little closer to knowing the truth.

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INTRODUCTION

"It is difficult to distinguish fact from legend. . . . I have found no consensus on what is fact; it depends on the viewpoint. Interestingly enough legend—which is by definition distorted—gives a far more acceptable view of events. Everyone agrees on legend, but nobody agrees on facts."

MICHAEL CONEY
The Celestial Steam Locomotive

We all believe in legends in one form or another. We all believe in myths. Societies exist on shared beliefs.

The popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* is an example of this. The story is a thriller in the classic sense: an innocent accused of murder, a hunt for a precious artifact, secret cabals working in the shadows to help or hinder the hero. All of these elements are familiar. On top of this has been added an overwhelming amount of esoteric lore and bits of what might be history. These add their own sense of mystery. Finally, there is a blend of several of the most popular legends of Western civilization: the Holy Grail, the Templars, the Crusades, along with the possibility that some of the most famous men (always men) in history may have had secret lives. It's a great mix.

When *The Da Vinci Code* was published, people began asking me to separate the legends from the facts in the book. As a medievalist and novelist, I had researched the background of many of the topics, both those central to the plot and those mentioned in passing by the charac-

ters. After a few months of constant queries, I decided to write down the answers instead of repeating them all the time. This is the result.

Despite what most of us were taught in school, history is not just kings, battles and dates. History is people; contradictory, unpredictable, messy people.

When I started teaching, I was told by a colleague that I had two choices: I could either lie to students or confuse them. What I believe he meant was that it is impossible to explain all the complexities of history in a ten-week survey course that goes from the beginning of time to Charlemagne. Even something more narrow, like the Industrial Revolution, has to be summarized and simplified, leaving out so much that affected the people of the time. And we have to create categories, like "Renaissance" or "Industrial Revolution" to cope with the enormity of the subject.

Since I chose confusion, it's probably just as well that I didn't make the university my career but published much of my research in the form of novels. This has its drawbacks, too, since novels are, by definition, made-up stories. I try to make mine as accurate as I can, but I always find out too late that there was a piece of information I didn't have or a fact I didn't understand.* The other problem with accuracy in historical novels is that every reader brings his or her own needs and preconceptions to the book. I do when I read. So, if there is a character who is a hypocritical bishop or a rapacious knight or a battered wife, readers may assume that all bishops, knights and wives of the time were like that.

It's in our nature to do this. And it's also in our nature to pick up information from a novel or a movie and remember it as fact. This isn't a new situation. The people of the Middle Ages tended to put their faith in novels, too, especially in the case of the quintessential Western legend, that of King Arthur.

This was greatly lamented by the more "serious" authors of the day. In the thirteenth century, Gottfried von Strassburg, whose story of the Grail wasn't as popular as Wolfram von Eschenbach's racier version,

---

* I *still* don't really understand how to use a crossbow.

complained, "[These writers are] inventors of wild tales . . . who cheat with chains and dupe dull minds, who turn rubbish into gold for children."[1] A century earlier, the historian William of Newburgh, who could spin a pretty good tale himself, desperately tried to convince readers that Geoffrey of Monmouth's immensely popular *History of Britain*, containing the first stories of Merlin and King Arthur, was all nonsense "and should be spurned."

I have no intention of doing that. My book is meant as a companion to *The Da Vinci Code*. I am filling in background on many of the subjects and places mentioned in the book. I've done this in alphabetical order so that the reader can look up only the things that interest him or her at the moment.

For those who develop a burning fascination with some aspect of the book, like the trial of the Templars, there is a list of scholarly books for further reading. Since most people are not as obsessed with research as I am, I've tried to find studies in readable English.

For those who might share my form of insanity, I have also put in copious footnotes so that you can check out everything I say and use it to form your own conclusions. But if you just want a quick bit of background, you are free to ignore them.

And the next time someone asks me to tell them about a factoid they've come across in *The Da Vinci Code*, I'm going to give a sigh of relief and hand them this book.

I hope it's useful to you.

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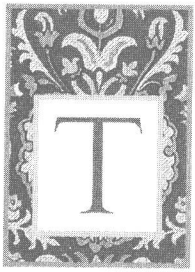
1 Quoted in Malcolm Barber. *The New Knighthood*, p. 74.

APOCRYPHA



The root of the word "apocrypha" is Greek, *apocryphos*, meaning "hidden." The meaning of the word has altered from the original, and it is now used for information that is spurious or of untrustworthy origin, as "an apocryphal story."

Many of the early Christian writings were later judged to be apocryphal. The reasons for this varied. Sometimes the supposed author couldn't have written the text. The Gospel of Peter was written long after the apostle died, so it wasn't included in the New Testament. Some texts simply repeated others without adding new information. Some were considered heretical or impossible. Many of the **Gnostic** texts come under this category. Others were done in the style of popular Greek romances and were suspect for that reason. Some were considered perfectly orthodox but not early enough. Only writings done by the apostles or their immediate followers were accepted.

However, excluding a text is not the same as suppressing it. Some of

the apocryphal texts were lost. Perhaps no one cared enough to copy them. Perhaps all the copies were mislaid by time. There are many works that we know of by reference but don't have now simply because fire, flood, war, mice or lack of interest destroyed them. So much of what did survive did so only through luck. This is true even of great literature. The Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* exists in only one manuscript, for instance.

Knowing this possibility may be why the Emperor **Constantine** commissioned his biographer, Eusebius, to have fifty copies of the Bible (New Testament only) made up. Eusebius made a list of the books he thought should be put in.[1] But his wasn't the final word. While the four Gospels were agreed upon fairly early, along with some of the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of Paul, later compilers added other books or left some out according to their opinions.

The Old Testament hadn't been completely agreed upon either, in the first centuries. The Torah, or the first five books, was the basis of the Jewish faith, but which other books should be included hadn't been decided. That's why the **Dead Sea Scrolls** were such an exciting find, because they showed how much of the Old Testament was already in place as early as AD 75.[2] Some books that the Christians included the rabbis finally decided were apocryphal.

Enough copies were made of most of the apocryphal material that the stories contained in it have entered the popular consciousness as orthodox. The story of Saint Veronica using her veil to wipe the face of Jesus is shown in every Catholic church in the world in the Stations of the Cross. Veronica is not in the Bible. The story of Peter meeting Christ as he fled Rome and being sent back to face his martyrdom is from the Apocrypha. Just because they didn't make the cut doesn't mean that these stories were discarded. Even the Gnostic tales found their way into other collections.

The following books contain a list of apocryphal texts that have been translated into English. You may be surprised to discover how many are familiar.

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RECOMMENDED READING

The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. VIII. Ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, revised by A. Cleveland Coxe. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995.

Bart D. Ehrman. *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament.* Oxford UP, 2003.

———. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies of the Text of the New Testament.* Oxfod UP, 1993.

J. K. Elliot, ed., *The Apocryphal Jesus: Legends of the Early Church.* Oxford UP, 1996.

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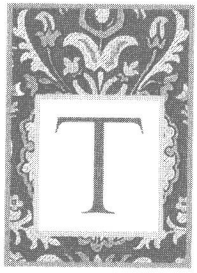
1 Eusebius. *The History of the Church.* Tr. G. A. Williams. Penguin Books, New York, 1965, p. 424.

2 Norman Golb. *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?* Simon & Schuster, New York, 1995, pp. 327–361.

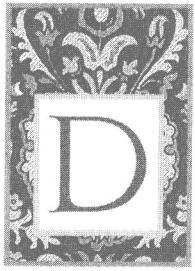
ARINGAROSA, MANUEL



he name of the Spanish **Opus Dei** bishop in *The Da Vinci Code* is Italian for "red herring." However, knowing how the author likes to play with words and concepts, I wouldn't take that for granted.

Because Opus Dei is a personal prelature, answerable only to the pope, Aringarosa does not have a geographical diocese but is part of the Opus Dei network. There are also bishops and cardinals who are sympathetic to the goals of Opus Dei who are within the normal hierarchy of the Church.

BAPHOMET



uring the trial of the **Templars**, one of the charges was that they worshiped an idol called "Baphomet." The inquisitors may have accepted this as plausible because they had heard the name before. In the Middle Ages most Europeans knew little about the beliefs of Islam. The Koran had been translated into Latin in the 1140s at the request of Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny.[1] However, most people received their knowledge through fiction.

The French *chansons de geste,* tales of the deeds of great warriors, were full of battles against "Saracens," their word for Moslems. In these stories, the Sarcacens were pagans who worshiped many gods, among them Apollo and "Baphomet."

Under various forms, Baphomet appears often in the *chansons de geste,* always associated with Islam. For instance in the twelfth-century epic *Aymeri de Narbonne,* he is one of the Saracen kings of Norbonne whom Aymeri must fight.

Rois Baufumez . . .
avec aus .xx. paien armé
Qui Deu ne croient le roi de majesté
Ne sa mere hautisme

King Baphomet . . .
with twenty pagan warriors
Who don't believe in God, the king of majesty
Nor in his mother most high.

ll 302–306[2]

The late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century Crusade poem, *Chanson d'Antioche*, has a character called "Bausumés" or "Baufremé" who is the uncle of a Saracen warrior.[3] The *Enfances Guillaume* of the thirteenth century also has a Moslem character named Balfumés.[4]

It is generally agreed that "Baphomet" is a corruption of the name "Mohammed," and linguistically, this is probable. However, I have only found it as the name of Saracen kings or lords.

There is no information that indicates that Baphomet was the name of an ancient fertility god. The descriptions given by the various Templars of the "idol" ranged from the head of a bearded man "which was the figure of Baphomet, a figure called Yalla (a Saracen word [possibly Allah]), a black and white idol and a wooden idol."[5]

My conclusion is that the Templars may well have had a relic of some sort in their churches. A reliquary in the form of a head was common for even a piece of skull from a saint. There might also have been a bust of a saint. Knowing the methods of the inquisitors, there might have been one reliquary in Paris or none at all. A good questioner, even without resorting to torture, can make a person confess to just about anything. The accusations against the Templars are straight out of the "heresy for dummies" book. Baphomet is just a twist on the tale.

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1 Charles Bishko. *Peter the Venerable and Islam*. Princeton UP, Princeton, NJ, 1964, p. 32.

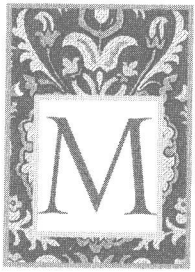
2 *Aymeri de Narbonne*. Ed. Louis Demaison. Société des anciens textes Français, Paris, 1887, pp. 13–14.

3 *La Chanson de Jérusalem*. Ed. Nigel R. Thorp. Alabama UP, 1992, p. 236, line 9019.

4 *Les Enfances Guillaume*. Société des Anciens Textes Français, Paris, 1935, p. 117, line 2755.

5 Malcom Barber. *The Trial of the Templars*. Cambridge UP, 1978, p. 62.

CHAUVEL, MARIE



arie Chauvel de Chauvignie (1842–1927) was the first "Sophia" to be consecrated by the Gnostic Church of France. As Sophie's grandmother in *The Da Vinci Code* she has a small role, but the influence of her namesake on the plot is immense.

The Gnostic Church was founded in 1890 by Jules-Benoit Stanislaus Doinel de Val-Michel (1842–1903). He created it out of readings of the **Gnostics** of the third century and also the history of the Cathars, a dualist heresy that was very powerful in the early thirteenth century, especially in the South of France.[1] To this was added a vision he had of Jesus, who consecrated him a Gnostic bishop. Following his vision, Doinel spent many nights at Gnostic séances. During these he was contacted by a spirit who identified itself as "Sophia-Achamôth, the Eternal Androgyne."[2]

As a result of this and other visitations, Doinel "gradually developed the conviction that his destiny involved his participation in the restora-

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