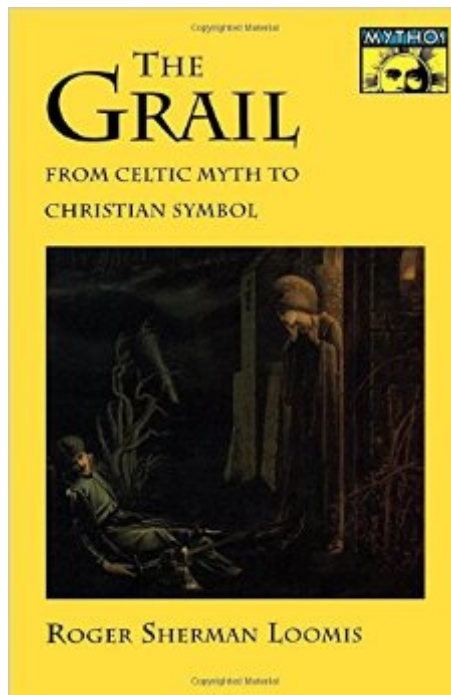


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The Grail: From Celtic Myth To Christian Symbol



Synopsis

The medieval legend of the Grail, a tale about the search for supreme mystical experience, has never ceased to intrigue writers and scholars by its wildly variegated forms: the settings have ranged from Britain to the Punjab to the Temple of Zeus at Dodona; the Grail itself has been described as the chalice used by Christ at the Last Supper, a stone with miraculous youth-preserving virtues, a vessel containing a man's head swimming in blood; the Grail has been kept in a castle by a beautiful damsel, seen floating through the air in Arthur's palace, and used as a talisman in the East to distinguish the chaste from the unchaste. In his classic exploration of the obscurities and contradictions in the major versions of this legend, Roger Sherman Loomis shows how the Grail, once a Celtic vessel of plenty, evolved into the Christian Grail with miraculous powers. Loomis bases his argument on historical examples involving the major motifs and characters in the legends, beginning with the Arthurian legend recounted in the 1180 French poem by Chrétien de Troyes. The principal texts fall into two classes: those that relate the adventures of the knights in King Arthur's time and those that account for the Grail's removal from the Holy Land to Britain. Written with verve and wit, Loomis's book builds suspense as he proceeds from one puzzle to the next in revealing the meaning behind the Grail and its legends.

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Customer Reviews

After "From Ritual To Romance" caused a sensation (positive and otherwise) among grail scholars

in the early part of the 20th century, much scholarship relating to Arthurian myth relates to the discourse over its origins. In "The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol," Roger Loomis convincingly argues (as the title might suggest) that the idea of the Holy Grail has its roots not in apocryphal Christian eschatology but in the Celtic myths of the British Isles. From the knights of the round table to Indiana Jones to Heinrich Himmler and everyone in between, the Grail has been a much sought-after artifact. The only question is "what is it?" According to Loomis, the Holy Grail is not the cup from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper, but rather a mistranslation of the archaic compound word "sankgreal," meaning "royal blood" rather than "holy grail." This will sound familiar to anyone familiar with the novel "the Da Vinci Code," but this is more or less where the similarities end. Loomis does not view the Grail as an essentially literal object and says that it refers to a mythical bloodline. He further objects to the characterization of the grail as a cup, showing that before it was identified as a chalice, it had previously been portrayed as a flat dish and even a rock (!). He says that myth of the Fisher King lay in Celtic mythology and that Christian symbolism was later attached to it when the Grail myth hit continental Europe from a French monk and scholar living in Wales. The concept of the grail as an ever-replenishing source of sustenance is based on another linguistic misinterpretation that has an archaic Welsh word for "cup" being mistranslated into French as "body," as in the body of Christ (i.e. a communion wafer).

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