

Priory of Sion

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The Prieuré de Sion, usually rendered in English translation as Priory of Sion (occasionally as 'Priory of Zion'), is an alleged thousand-year-old cabal featured in various conspiracy theories, as well as being listed as a factual ancient mystery religion in the bestselling novel *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown. It has been characterized as anything from the most influential secret society in Western history to a modern Rosicrucian-esque ludibrium, but, ultimately, has been shown to be a hoax created in 1956 by Pierre Plantard, a pretender to the French throne. Some scholars of esoteric history consider the controversial Sicilian Traditionalist philosopher Julius Evola's (1898-1974) ideas as sources for Pierre Plantard's later claims ([1]). The evidence presented in support of its historical existence has not been considered authentic or persuasive by established historians, academics, and universities, and the evidence was later discovered to have been forged and then planted in various locations around France by Plantard and his associates. Nevertheless, many conspiracy theorists insist on the truth of the Priory's role as a powerful secret society. [1]

History

The alleged Priory

The different claims described the Priory of Sion as a secret society that was founded in the 11th century, to protect and preserve a secret involving the bloodline of Jesus Christ. Supposed branches of the priory include: The Knights Templar, the Order of the Rose-Croix (Rosicrucians), Amici, Ormus and the brotherhood of Sion. The Priory allegedly created the medieval order of Knights Templar as its military arm, and had a series of Grand Masters which included such notable (and real) historical figures as Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton and Victor Hugo. The existence of the thousand-year-old Priory was supposedly "revealed" in the 1970s, via a series of documentaries and books by writers Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, such as in their 1982 book *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, which they claimed was pieced together from evidence in documents which had been found in the French National Library, as well as documents which were supposedly found in the late 1800s, hidden inside a pillar of a small church in southern France. Further attention came to the Priory when it was referred to as a factual society by the 2003 bestselling novel *The Da Vinci Code*.

The actual Priory

The real Priory of Sion is an association that was founded in 1956, in the French town of Annemasse, as the beginning of a massive hoax.

As with all associations, French law required the association to be registered with the government. It was registered with its Statutes at the Sub-Prefecture of Saint Julien-en-Genevois, in May 1956, and its registration was noted on 20 July 1956, in the *Journal Officiel de la République Française*. The founders and signatories are inscribed with their pseudonyms as Pierre Plantard (known as "Chyren"), André Bonhomme (known as "Stanis Bellas"), Jean Delaval, and Armand Defago. The purpose of the association according to its Statutes was entered as, "Études et entraide des membres" ("education and mutual aid of the members"). In practice, the originator of the association and its key protagonist was Pierre Plantard, its General Secretary, although its nominal head ("President") was André Bonhomme. The choice of the name, "Sion" was based on a popular local feature, a hill south of Annemasse in France, known as 'Mont Sion'. [2] "Sion" is also the standard French spelling of "Zion", originally the name of a hill in Jerusalem. It had already been used in the name of previous Catholic organisations, such as the Congregation of Notre-Dame de Sion. The accompanying title, or subtitle to the name was, *Chevalerie d'Institutions et Règles Catholiques d'Union Independante et Traditionaliste*: this forms the acronym CIRCUIT and translates as "Knighthood of Catholic Rule and Institution and of Independent Traditionalist Union."

The Statutes and Registration Documents of the Priory of Sion were deposited on 7 May 1956, while the first issue of its journal *Circuit* is dated 27 May 1956 (in total, twelve numbers of the journal appeared). Considering the political instability of the French Fourth Republic, the objectives of the journal were regarded with suspicion by the local authorities. It was indicated as a "Bulletin d'Information et Défense des Droits et de la Liberté des Foyers HLM" ("News Bulletin for the Defence of the Rights and the Freedom of Council Housing"). Indeed, some of the articles took a political position in the local Council elections. Others attacked and criticized property developers of Annemasse. It also opposed the gentrification of the area. The offices of the Priory of Sion and the journal were at Plantard's council flat.

The articles of the Priory of Sion as indicated in its Statutes also desired the creation of a monastic order, but the activities of the Priory of Sion bore no resemblance whatsoever to the objectives as outlined in its Statutes. Article VII says that its members are expected, "to carry out good deeds, to help the Roman Catholic Church, teach the truth, defend the weak and the oppressed". There is ample evidence that it had several members, as indicated by the numerous articles contained in its journal *Circuit*, written by a number of different people. Towards the end of 1956 the association had aims to forge links with the local Catholic Church of the area involving a school bus service run by both the Priory of Sion and the church of St Joseph in Annemasse.

The hoax

Plantard hoped that the Priory of Sion would become an influential cryptopolitical irregular masonic lodge dedicated to the restoration of chivalry and monarchy, which would promote Plantard's own claim to the throne of France.

Between 1961 and 1984 Plantard contrived a mythical pedigree of the Priory of Sion claiming that it was the offshoot of the monastic order housed in the Abbey of Sion, which had been founded in the Kingdom of Jerusalem during the First Crusade and later absorbed by the Jesuits in 1617. The mistake is often made that this Abbey of Sion was a "Priory of Sion", but there is a difference between an abbey and a priory. Calling his original 1956 group "Priory of Sion" presumably gave Plantard the later idea to claim that his organization had been historically founded in Jerusalem during the Crusades.

Forged documents

Le Tresor Maudit de Rennes-le-Chateau, 1967In order to give credibility to the fabricated lineage and pedigree, Plantard and his friend Philippe de Cherisey needed to create "independent evidence." So during the 1960s, they deposited a series of forged documents, the so-called *Dossiers Secrets d'Henri Lobineau* or "Secret Dossiers of Henri Lobineau," at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, in Paris. Also in the 1960s, Plantard began writing a manuscript and had a series of "medieval parchments" forged by de Cherisey which contained encrypted messages that referred to the Priory of Sion. The story that they concocted claimed that Father Bérenger Saunière had supposedly discovered these seemingly ancient parchments inside of a pillar while renovating his church in Rennes-le-Château in 1891. The story and existence of the parchments was intended to prove Plantard's claims about the Priory of Sion being a medieval society.

Plantard then enlisted the aid of author Gérard de Sède to write a book based on Plantard's manuscript and forged parchments, alleging that Saunière had discovered a link to a hidden treasure. The 1967 book, entitled *L'Or de Rennes* (The Gold of Rennes) and *Le Tresor Maudit de Rennes-le-Chateau* (The Accursed Treasure of Rennes Castle), became a popular read in France. It included copies of the "found" documents (the originals were of course never produced), though it provided them without any kind of translation. One of the documents was discovered to have been a reproduction of a Latin version of the *Novum Testamentum* (New Testament), known as the Vulgate. These versions can be precisely dated based on the wording being used, which show that the version in the book was from an edition published in 1889 -- problematic considering that the book was trying to make a case that these documents were centuries old.

Expansion of the story

In 1969, an English actor and science-fiction script-writer Henry Lincoln read *Le Tresor Maudit*, and became intrigued. He discovered one of the encrypted messages, which read *A Dagobert II Roi et a Sion est ce tresor, et il est là mort.* (Trans: "To King Dagobert II and to Sion does this treasure belong, and he died there."). This was an allusion to a treasure belonging to the Merovingian king Dagobert II, who had been assassinated in the 7th century. Lincoln expanded on the conspiracy theories, writing his own books on the subject, and creating a series of BBC Two documentaries in the 1970s about the mysteries of the Rennes-le-Chateau area. In response to a tip from Gérard de Sède, Lincoln claims he was also the one who "discovered" the *Dossiers Secrets*, a series of (planted) genealogies which appeared to further confirm the link with the line of Merovingians. The documents claimed that the Priory had been founded in 1099, and had founded the organization of the Knights Templar.

Proof of the conspiracy

Letters in existence dating from the 1960s written by Plantard, de Cherisey and de Sède to each other confirm that the three were engaging in an out-and-out confidence trick, describing schemes on how to combat criticisms of their various allegations and how they would make up new allegations to try and keep the whole thing going. These letters (totalling over 100) are in the possession of French researcher Jean-Luc Chaumeil, who has also retained the original envelopes. Jean-Luc Chaumeil during the 1970s was part of the Priory of Sion cabal, and wrote books and articles about Plantard and the Priory of Sion before splitting from it during the late 1970s and exposing Plantard's past in French books.

A letter later discovered at the Sub-Prefecture of St. Julien-en-Genevois also indicated that Plantard had a criminal conviction as a con man.

The disposition of the "real" Priory

The formally registered association was dissolved sometime after October 1956 but intermittently revived for different reasons by Plantard between 1962 and 1993, though in name and on paper only. The Priory of Sion is considered "dormant" by the Sub-Prefecture because it has indicated no activities since 1956. According to French law, subsequent references to the Priory bear no legal relation to that of 1956 and no one other than the original signatories are entitled to use its name in an official capacity. André Bonhomme played no part since 1956. He officially resigned in 1973 when he heard that Plantard was linking his name with the association, so as of last report, there is no one who is currently around who has official permission to use the name.

The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail

After reading *Le Tresor Maudit*, Henry Lincoln persuaded BBC Two's factual program *Chronicle* to make a series of documentaries, which became quite popular and generated thousands of responses. Lincoln then joined forces with Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh for further research. This led them to the pseudohistorical *Secret Dossiers of Henri Lobeineau* at the Bibliothèque nationale, which though alleging to portray hundreds of years of medieval history, were actually all written by Plantard and de Cherisey under the pseudonym of "Philippe Toscan du Plantier". Unaware that the documents had been forged, Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln used them as a major source for their book, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, in which they declared as "fact" that:

The Priory of Sion has a long history starting in AD 1099, and had illustrious Grand Masters including Isaac Newton and Leonardo da Vinci (see full list below);
 the Knights Templar were created as the military and financial front of the Priory;
 it is sworn to returning the Merovingian dynasty, that ruled the Franks until 751 AD, to the thrones of Europe and Jerusalem;
 the order protects these royal claimants because they believe them to be the literal descendants of Jesus and his alleged wife Mary Magdalene or, at the very least, of king David;
 the Roman Catholic Church tried to kill off all remnants of this dynasty and their guardians, the Cathars and the Templars, in order to maintain power through the apostolic succession of Peter instead of the hereditary succession of Mary Magdalene.
 The authors further asserted that the ultimate goals of the Priory of Sion are:

the founding of a "Holy European Empire" that would become the next hyperpower and usher in a new world order of peace and prosperity;
 the establishment of a messianic mystery state religion by revealing the Holy Grail;
 the grooming and installing of a "Rex Deus" pretender on the throne of a Greater Israel.
 Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln even incorporated the infamous anti-semitic tract known as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* into their story, concluding that it actually referred to the activities of the Priory. This they viewed as the most persuasive pieces of evidence for the existence and activities of the Priory of Sion:

The original version emanated from an irregular Masonic organization that used the name "Sion" but had nothing to do with an international Jewish conspiracy.

The original version was not intended to be inflammatory or released publicly, but was a program for gaining control of Freemasonry.

The person responsible for changing the text in about 1903 was Sergei Nilus in the course of his attempt to gain influence in the Court of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. The presence of esoteric cliques in the royal court led to considerable intrigue. Nilus' publication of the text resulted from his failure to succeed in wresting influence away from Papus and an otherwise unidentified "Monsieur Philippe".

Since Nilus did not recognize a number of references in the text that reflected a background in a Christian cultural context, he did not change them. This fact established that the original version could not possibly have come from the first Zionist Congress in Basel (1897).

Accepting these factoids as the truth, some fringe Christian eschatologists viewed the Priory of Sion as a fulfillment of prophecies found in the Book of Revelation and further proof of an anti-Christian conspiracy of epic proportions.[3]

However, modern historians do not accept *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* as a serious contribution to scholarship and regard all these claims as being part of a dubious conspiracy theory. French authors like Franck Marie (1978), Jean-Luc Chaumeil (1979, 1984, 1992) and Pierre Jarnac (1985, 1988) have never taken Pierre Plantard and the Priory of Sion as seriously as Baigent, Lincoln and Leigh. They eventually concluded that it was all a hoax, outlining in detail the reasons for their verdict, and giving detailed evidence that the Holy Blood authors had not reported comprehensively. They imply that this evidence had been ignored by Baigent, Lincoln and Leigh in order to bolster the mythic version of the Priory's history.

In 1989, Pierre Plantard tried but failed to salvage his reputation and agenda by claiming that the Priory of Sion had actually been founded in 1681 at Rennes-le-Château.

The Pelat affair

In September 1993, Plantard approached of his own volition an investigative judge, Thierry Jean-Pierre who, at the time, was investigating the activities of multi-millionaire Roger-Patrice Pelat. Plantard communicated to the judge that the man he was investigating had once been grandmaster of the Priory of Sion. Indeed, Pelat's name had been on Plantard's list of grandmasters since 1989. In fact, Pelat had died in 1989, while he was being indicted for insider trading - or *délit d'initié* in French. Plantard was not only naive about French law but also of financial terms and he interpreted the word "initié" esoterically, to mean "initiate". Following a long established pattern, Plantard "recruited" the "initiate" Pelat soon after his death and included him as the most recent Priory of Sion grandmaster.

But in 1993, Plantard failed once more to realise the severity of interfering with the law; he had made his most important mistake and it led to his eventual isolation. Pelat had been a friend of François Mitterrand, then President of France, and at the centre of a scandal involving French Prime Minister Pierre Bérégovoy. As an investigative judge, Thierry Jean-Pierre could not dismiss any information pertaining to his case that was brought to his attention, but since he never considered it worthwhile meeting Plantard, he ordered the search of Plantard's home by his officers.

This turned up what has been described as a fantasy-land of harmless, forged documents, including some proclaiming Plantard the true king of France. Under oath, Plantard had to admit that he had fabricated everything, including Pelat's involvement with the Priory of Sion.[4] Plantard was ordered to cease and desist all activities related to the promotion of the Priory of Sion and lived in obscurity until his death on 3 February 2000, in Paris.

The alleged "relaunch" of the Priory

On 27 December 2002, a letter was released on "official" Priory stationery announcing a public relaunch of the fraternity. It was signed by someone claiming to be Plantard's former private secretary, Gino Sandri under the title of General Secretary, and an unnamed woman as "President" («Nautonnier» - an Old French word for a navigator and which means Grand Master in the Priory esoteric nomenclature).

The Da Vinci Code

Recently, as a result of Dan Brown's best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code* and the movie made from it, there has been a new level of public interest in the Priory of Sion. Brown's novel promotes the mythical version of the Priory: it was founded in 1099, Leonardo da Vinci, Victor Hugo, Robert Boyle, and Sir Isaac Newton were among its Grand Masters, etc. The author has presented this as fact in a non-fiction preface, public appearances, and interviews.

The Sion Revelation

Further conspiracies are alleged in *The Sion Revelation: The Truth About the Guardians of Christ's Sacred Bloodline* (2006) by Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince (authors of 1997 book *The Templar Revelation*, the principal source for Dan Brown's claims about hidden messages in the work of Leonardo da Vinci). They accept the evidence that the Priory was created by Plantard, and that its pre-1956 history is fraudulent, but they insist that this was a part of a complex double-bluff designed to discredit the story of the "divine bloodline" and the secret organisations that support it. They argue that these plotters are attempting to create a United States of Europe.

Et in Arcadia ego...

Poussin's *Arcadian Shepherds* *Et in Arcadia ego...* is supposedly the official motto of both the Plantard family and the Priory of Sion, according to a claim that first appeared in 1964. *Et in Arcadia ego* is a Latin phrase, that most famously appears as a tomb inscription on the ca. 1640 classical painting, *The Arcadian Shepherds*, by French painter Nicolas Poussin. It literally means, "I [am] also in Arcadia". It has been suggested that the cryptic phrase could be an anagram for "I Tego Arcana Dei" which translated into English means "Go! I Conceal the Secrets of God".

However, the addition of the ellipsis (which was not there in the Poussin painting), suggests a missing word. Sum has been proposed as the completion of the phrase, which could then read "And in Arcadia, I am." Richard Andrews and Paul Schellenberger in their book *The Tomb of God* have theorized that the extrapolated phrase *Et in Arcadia ego sum* could be an anagram for *Arcam Dei Tango Iesu*, which would mean "I touch the tomb of God – Jesus". Their argument assumes that:

- a) the Latin phrase is incomplete
- b) the extrapolation as to the missing words is correct
- c) the sentence, once completed, is intended to be an anagram

d) Andrews and Schellenberger selected the proper anagram out of the thousands of possibilities.

Poussin's earlier version of the "Arcadian Shepherds", depicting a different tomb with the same inscription. They then concluded that the tomb contains the ossuary of the historical Jesus. Andrews and Schellenberger also claim that the tomb portrayed is one at Les Pontils, near Rennes le Chateau[5]. Regardless of the veracity of this first claim, it is not considered part of the official history of the painting by Poussin that contains the phrase, which is well-documented. Furthermore, the phrase was not created by Poussin, but was first used in a painting by Guercino, which Poussin had already imitated in an earlier work, portraying an entirely different tomb, before he created the more famous Louvre painting.

The claim that Poussin could have depicted the Les Pontils tomb was severely discredited in the 1996 BBC2 Timewatch documentary "The History of a Mystery" – which also showed film footage of the two authors unable to correctly answer basic questions about the Priory of Sion. Other research published by Franck Marie in 1974 and Michel Vallet (Pierre Jarnac) in 1985 had already shown that the tomb was created in 1903 by the owner of the land, Jean Galibert, as a simple grave in which he buried his wife and grandmother. The stone sepulchre was built in the 1930s, and was demolished in 1988 by its then-owner, with the full permission of the local government authority, because the land around it was being repeatedly trespassed upon and damaged by Priory "researchers" and treasure hunters.[6]

Cultural influences

The Priory of Sion has had several influences on popular culture, not all of them entirely accurate or serious:

The Priory was the template for the Grail order in the Preacher comic book series and, more loosely, the Millennium Group in the Millennium television series.

The Priory also makes an appearance in the third installment of the popular Gabriel Knight adventure game series by author Jane Jensen, Gabriel Knight III: "Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned".

The band Priory of Brion formed by Led Zeppelin's Robert Plant in 1999 is an amalgamation of the name "Priory of Sion" and "Life of Brian" (after the Monty Python film).

The novel Foucault's Pendulum by Umberto Eco, which weaves many historical conspiracy elements together into one story, begins with the discovery of an antique encrypted French document, similar to the ones featured in the Priory hoax.

Alleged Grand Masters of the Priory of Sion

The Priory of Sion was supposedly led by a Grand Master or Nautonnier. The following list of Grand Masters is derived from the Secret Dossiers of Henri Lobineau compiled by Pierre Plantard under the pseudonym of "Philippe Toscan du Plantier" in 1967:

Leonardo da Vinci, alleged to be the Priory of Sion's 12th Grand Master. All the Grand Master names were selected after the people in question had died. Many of the names chosen seem to have a common thread of being known for an interest in alchemy or heresy.

Jean de Gisors (1188-1220)
 Marie de Saint-Clair (1220-1266)
 Guillaume de Gisors (1266-1307)
 Edouard de Bar (1307-1336)
 Jeanne de Bar (1336-1351)
 Jean de Saint-Clair (1351-1366)
 Blanche d'Evreux (1366-1398)
 Nicolas Flamel (1398-1418)
 Rene d'Anjou (1418-1480)
 Yolande de Bar (1480-1483)
 Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi a.k.a. Sandro Botticelli (1483-1510)
 Leonardo da Vinci (1510-1519)
 Connetable de Bourbon (Charles, Duke of Bourbon) (1519-1527)
 Ferdinand de Gonzague (1527-1575)
 Louis de Nevers (1575-1595)
 Robert Fludd (1595-1637)
 Johann Valentin Andrea (1637-1654)
 Robert Boyle (1654-1691)
 Isaac Newton (1691-1727)
 Charles Radclyffe (1727-1746)
 Prince Charles Alexander of Lorraine (1746-1780)
 Archduke Maximilian Franz of Austria (1780-1801)

Charles Nodier (1801-1844)
 Victor Hugo (1844-1885)
 Claude Debussy (1885-1918)
 Jean Cocteau (1918-1963)

A later document, *Le Cercle d'Ulysse*, identifies Francois Ducaud-Bourget, a prominent Traditionalist Catholic, as the Grand Master following Cocteau's death. Plantard himself is later identified as Grand Master.

When the Secret Dossiers were exposed as a forgery by French researchers and authors, Plantard kept quiet but had to acknowledge that the above list was a fraud when investigated by the police for giving false evidence (see above). In 1989, he tried to make a comeback and revive the Priory of Sion by publishing a second list of Priory Grand Masters. This second list, which included the names of the deceased Roger Patrice Pelat and his own young son Thomas Plantard, should not be confused with the first. Post-1989, Plantard sought to distance himself from the first list, which belonged to an older, discredited version of the Priory.

Victor Hugo, alleged to be the Priory of Sion's 24th Grand Master
 The second List of the Grand Masters of the Priory of Sion appeared in *Vaincre* No. 3, September 1989, page 22.

Jean-Tim Negri d'Albes (1681-1703)
 François d'Hautpoul (1703-1726)
 André Hercule de Rosset (1726-1766)
 Prince Charles Alexander of Lorraine (1766-1780)
 Archduke Maximilian Franz of Austria (1780-1801)
 Charles Nodier (1801-1844)
 Victor Hugo (1844-1885)
 Claude Debussy (1885-1918)
 Jean Cocteau (1918-1963)
 François Balphangon (1963-1969)
 John Drick (1969-1981)
 Pierre Plantard de Saint-Clair (1981)
 Philippe de Chérisey (1984-1985)
 Patrice Pelat (1985-1989)
 Pierre Plantard de Saint-Clair (1989)
 Thomas Plantard de Saint-Clair (1989)

Notes

- ^ Rennes-le-Château: Alternative Religions Resource Guides
- ^ http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/04/27/60minutes/main1552009_page2.shtml Transcription of 60 minutes program
- ^ The Merovingian Dynasty: Satanic bloodline of the Antichrist and False Prophet
- ^ Priory-of-Sion.com - Discussion of the Pelat affair
- ^ Images of the Les Pontile tomb
- ^ History of the Galibert tomb

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