

The Fraudster, the Fantasist and the Fiction writer

The DA VINCI CON or the Abbé Saunière's 'Treasure'

by Stuart Christie

SINCE THE BIRTH OF SPECULATIVE FREEMASONRY IN THE EARLY 17TH CENTURY, LARGE NUMBERS OF INTELLIGENT AND OTHERWISE WELL-INFORMED, SANE AND SENSIBLE PEOPLE HAVE BELIEVED THAT MUCH OF WHAT WAS HAPPENING AROUND THEM ONLY OCCURRED BECAUSE IT WAS SET IN MOTION BY SECRET SOCIETIES, THE MOTORS OF HISTORY. MANY STILL BELIEVE THAT VIRTUALLY EVERYTHING UNPLEASANT THAT HAPPENS CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO THEM AND THAT THERE IS AN OCCULT FORCE OPERATING BEHIND THE SEEMINGLY REAL FAÇADE OF PUBLIC AND POLITICAL LIFE. WHAT HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THE PRIORY OF SION IS A MONUMENTAL EXAMPLE OF A VIEW OF THE WORLD SHAPED BY HOKUM-POKUM AND IRRATIONALITY, AND EVEN THOUGH IT IS SOMETIMES AMUSING, IT IS ALWAYS DISTURBING WHEN INTELLIGENT PEOPLE SERIOUSLY TALK NONSENSE, TAKING FICTION FOR REALITY. AS MANY OF THESE AUTHORS HAVE FOUND OUT TO THEIR ADVANTAGE, IT NEVER PAYS TO UNDERESTIMATE PEOPLE'S CREDULITY. THE DA VINCI CODE HAS BEEN TRANSLATED INTO 44 LANGUAGES AND SOLD OVER 44 MILLION COPIES WORLDWIDE SINCE ITS PUBLICATION IN 2003. BRITISH SALES RECENTLY PASSED THE FOUR MILLION MARK, 1200 OF THESE BY OTTAKAR'S IN HASTINGS AND AROUND 500 BY OLIO BOOKS. IT HAS ALSO BEEN ADAPTED INTO A HOLLYWOOD BLOCKBUSTER FILM SCHEDULED TO OPEN AT THE CANNES FILM FESTIVAL IN MAY. NOW READ ON...

Christ did not die on the cross. He was taken down alive and then quietly shipped out with his wife or partner, Mary Magdalene, to begin a new life in the south of France, hence the empty tomb. It was their children's bloodline that four centuries later launched the Merovingian dynasty, which ruled in early Medieval France from 476 to 750 AD. This is the central hypothesis of the authors of the 1982 book *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln. According to their account, itself repeated from embellished secondary sources, the 'secret' of this 'bloodline of Christ' and the House of David — the 'Holy Grail' — lay hidden for centuries, until one day in 1891 four 'ancient' parchments referring to an 800-year old secret

association, the Prieuré de Sion, were allegedly 'discovered' by a village priest inside a hollowed-out Visigothic pillar. The priest subsequently became inexplicably wealthy, spending money extravagantly and conspicuously. In 2003 this story was presented as fact by novelist Dan Brown and provided the basic storyline in his novel *The Da Vinci Code*.

THE FRAUDSTER...

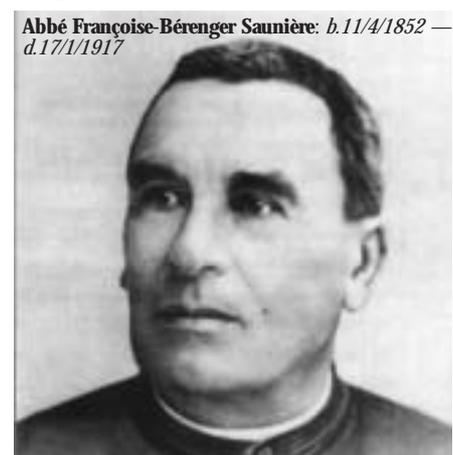
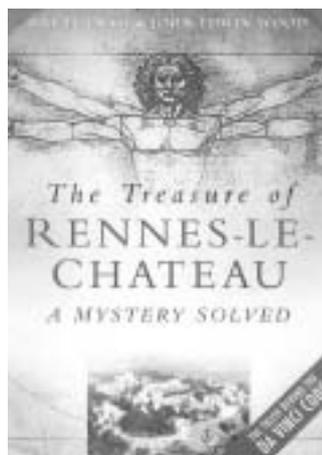
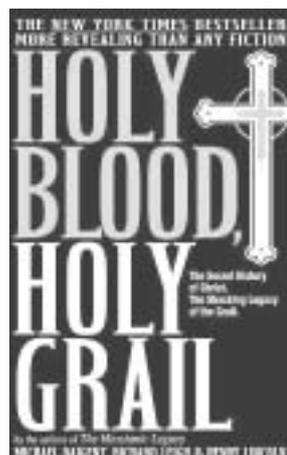
Almost nineteen-hundred years after the crucifixion, in July 1885, a 33-year old, right-wing, Royalist priest, François Bérenger Saunière, a Catholic Integrist¹, was appointed as the incumbent of Rennes-le-Château, a small hill-top village within the

'FACT: The Priory of Sion — a European secret society founded in 1099 — is a real organisation. In 1975 Paris's Bibliothèque Nationale discovered parchments known as Les Dossiers Secrets, identifying numerous members of the Priory of Sion, including Sir Isaac Newton, Sandro Botticelli, Victor Hugo and Leonardo da Vinci'

Dan Brown *The Da Vinci Code*

bishopric of Carcassonne in south-western France. His salary was 75 F a month.

The church was in an area in Provence of considerable historical and archeological interest. Originally consecrated to Mary Magdalene in 1059, thirty-six years before the First Crusade, it was rumoured to have been built on foundations which dated back to the sixth century, the end of the Visigothic period.



This part of the Languedoc, in the foothills of the Pyrenees had been, in the 13th century, a stronghold of the Cathar or Albigensian heresy (don't ask!), but by the end of the 19th century, it was the Integrist heartland of self-righteous, 'fortress' Catholicism.

Shaken by the French Revolution and subsequent upheavals, these were dogmatic believers who rejected everything modern and democratic in French history since the Revolution of 1789; they were Catholic fundamentalists for whom reality and history were simply too complex; Dostoyevskian characters obsessed with organisation, hierarchy and ritual, who

rejected, as a matter of principle, everything that was not Traditionalist Roman Catholic.

Impermeable to the reality of the post-Medieval world in which the Eucharist was not cloaked in their anachronistic, Gothic, Baroque, Tridentine day-dreams, they ignored it. Like the Essenes, they distinguished clearly between the saved and the unsaved; their world view was that God was indifferent to righteousness and justice among those outside the literal walls of the temple; only the traditional Catholic Church, with all its rites, liturgy, sacraments, mysteries and culture, had the power to prevent the

corrosive metaphysical and physical corruption sapping the social and spiritual order. They longed for an imaginary pre-Enlightenment world in which virtuous, peaceful, happy and devout workers and peasants belonged to a guild, attended religious processions — and deferred, unquestioningly, to their betters.

TROUBLESOME PRIESTS

Bérenger Saunière's anti-Republican activities soon landed him in trouble with the government. In January 1886, after only five months in his parish, he was suspended by the Prefet de l'Aude and ordered to leave Rennes-le-Château. The suspension of troublesome priests such as Saunière was not an unusual government-imposed punishment for the dissenting anti-Republican sermons priests were delivering from pulpits during the run-up to the general election of October 1885.

Saunière's crime had been to read to his parishioners at least one in a series of editorials on 'the enemies of the church' from the local religious paper, *La Semaine Religieuse de Carcassonne*. These urged Roman Catholics to vote for the Union of the Right — a coalition of conservatives, Bonapartists and Royalists whose policy aims included the reversal of Republican anticlerical legislation and the restoration of the French monarchy.

The editorial in question was probably the one published the week before the elections:

*'Victory is not yet complete. Next Sunday's ballot (October 18) must either ensure our triumph, or deliver us into the hands of the bitter enemies of Religion and the Fatherland. This is a solemn moment and we must deploy all our forces against our enemies. That must be our main objective... Let us act, pray, improve ourselves, be penitent... and perhaps October 18 will become a day of deliverance.'*²

The secular authorities were not amused. France's Minister of Religion,



Rennes-le-Château, Département de Aude

(© Puttnam & Wood)



THE HIÉRON DU VAL D'OR

The *Hiéron du Val d'Or* was founded in 1873 at Paray-le-Monial, a small town in the Saône-Loire, by a Jesuit priest, Father Victor Drevon (1820-1880), and a well-connected Spanish nobleman with esoteric interests, Baron Alexis de Sarachaga (1840-1918). Sarachaga, who claimed to be a descendant of the Carmelite nun known as St Theresa, had been a close friend of Pope Pius IX and his successor, Leo XIII; he was also a Royalist conspirator and was under regular close surveillance by the French police for his alleged involvement in plots to restore the House of Bourbon to the French throne.

The choice of location at the Convent at Paray-le-Monial was because that was where, in 1673 and 1674, Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque, a nun, claimed to have had visions of Christ and the blazing Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The *Hiéron* was not just a group, it had a complex of buildings at Paray-le-Monial — a museum and research centre — which specialised in Eucharistic symbolism. The centre was located in a pentagonal building, which reflected the *Hiéron's* obsession with geometry and sacred architecture. In addition to promoting the Kingship of Christ, subjects studied included the history of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Kabala, mystical chivalry, Freemasonry and its associated symbolism.

Members of the *Hiéron* — a body which was personally approved by Pope Leo XIII — included bishops, cardinals, writers, historians and archeologists, as well as aristocrats such as the Chambords, the Bourbons and the Habsburgs, the would-be Holy Roman emperors. One well-known member was the writer and former priest Louis Charbonneau-Lassy (1871-1946), the author of *The Bestiary of Christ*. Among his obsessions was the belief that the Templars had been in possession of secret knowledge

The museum at the shrine of St Mary Marget provided the *Hiéron* with a highly effective recruitment

centre, which allowed them to target the many pilgrims who began arriving in droves in 1873, after Saint Mary Margaret's first visitation. The *Hiéron's* invigorating interpretation of militant Catholicism, with its occult and monarchical overtones, appealed to the gullible and superstitious pilgrims seeking to halt the democratic changes that were affecting all aspects of everyday life at that point in history

Apart from the quasi-masonic rituals and hermetic mysticism associated with it, the *Hiéron's* mainly political aims were much the same as all the other proselytizing Catholic pressure groups: Catholic Action ('Mobilising true faith into action!') and Opus Dei (a strictly hierarchical and 'discreet' sect of lay Catholics who aspire to acquire and hold positions of influence in public life, thereby securing and maintaining Catholic spiritual and temporal hegemony over society). It propagated a Catholic-centric worldview at a time when the Church's spiritual influence and temporal wealth and power was visibly crumbling — hence the contemporary doctrine of Papal Infallibility, announced at the First Vatican Council in 1870. Everywhere you turned, academics, writers and village Hamdens were challenging the very foundations of belief on which the Papacy had been built. In effect, the *Hiéron* was playing the same role within the Catholic Church as did the supporters of the Trotskyist 4th International within the twentieth century labour movement.

The main ambition of this well-funded and influential cabal, was the creation of a united Europe under the twin hegemony of the Papacy and the Habsburgs — the Merovingian bloodline. This all fell apart, of course, in 1914 with the assassination in Serbia of Habsburg heir Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, and the forced departure of most of Europe's Captains and Kings in 1918.

At the core of *Hiéron* ideology was the belief that Christianity was a primordial revelation, traceable to an antediluvian Atlantis, via the Celts, Judaism and Egypt. Christianity, according to them, had its origins in Atlantis — the

legendary lost civilisation at the root of humanity. They spent a considerable amount of time, effort and money searching for proof to support this thesis through archeological excavations, the study of sacred symbolism, astrology and ancient texts (which is where the Abbé Saunière saw his opportunity to make a few bob).

The *Hiéron* was virulently anti-Masonic, believing that French Grand Orient freemasonry was anti-Christian, having been corrupted by Protestantism and the 'Jewish-led' Bavarian Illuminati. To restore its original nobility of purpose and the spiritual primacy of Catholic Christianity, Grand Orient Freemasonry had to be infiltrated in order to win control and reform it (again, shades of Militant and other Trotskyist groupings). From this process a new Christian Freemasonry would emerge, the Grand Occident Lodge, which would defeat the Godless 'Grand Orient' and reform the brotherhood' in line with Ultra-Traditionalist Catholic principles. It would also mean the Church could use Freemasonry's presumed benign influence to prepare for the coming of Christ's kingdom in the year 2000. This was another of its core beliefs — the need to prepare the world for the second millennium, when the religious and political reign of Christ the King would be ushered in by an absolutist pan-European Roman Catholic sovereign with global ambitions.

The French authorities were also concerned by the double-meaning of the name *Hiéron*. In Greek it means 'sanctuary', but it also refers to *Hiéron*, the Tyrant of Syracuse (478-476 BC), whose use of mercenaries to build and sustain his vast pan-European empire caused the death of thousands. It also brings to mind the twentieth century Mexican and Spanish terrorist groups calling themselves the Guerrillas of Christ the King, Catholic-Carlist-Fascist terrorists, whose battle cry was '*Viva Christo Rey!*'

As for the *Hiéron du Val d'Or*, the deaths of its three administrators in 1926 led to the closure of its study centre at Paray-le-Monial. This meant the end for the group as both a religious and a political movement. Another factor in the *Hiéron's* demise was the Latern

René Goblet, complained to Monseigneur Paul-Félix Billard, the bishop of Carcassonne concerning the 'reprehensible behaviour' of four of his priests — one of whom was Bérenger Saunière — and demanded their immediate suspension. If the bishop did nothing, the minister threatened to use his powers under the terms of the Concordat of 1802. This gave the French government the power to divest priests of their duties and to order bishops and cardinals to impose punishments on recalcitrant clerics.

Billard defended his priests vigorously, arguing that they had the right to advise their parishioners, but he was over-ruled and the four priests were suspended, with Saunière being sent to teach at the nearby Petit Séminaire de Narbonne.

THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS



Like so much else in this story, it is conjecture as to when Saunière first came into contact with the cult of the Sacred Heart (*Sacré-Coeur* — the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Sacred Heart of Mary),³ which was strong in Narbonne. One group Saunière would have been aware of, given his ardently-held anti-Republican beliefs, was the right-wing Integrist *Cercle Catholique de Narbonne* whose motto, according to Carcassonne police files, was *In hoc signo vinces*, ('By this sign you will conquer him' — the 'sign' being the cross and 'him' being the devil), the motto of Constantine the Great and later adopted by all manner of Catholic sects, both fringe and official, including the devotees of the cult of the influential and secretive Sacred Heart. There were two strands to the Sacred Heart: one was mainstream

devotional Catholic; the other an esoteric ultra-Traditional right-wing group that believed Christianity originated in Atlantis — the *Hiéron du Val d'Or* ('The Sanctuary of the Golden Valley') [see box, page 16], a cabal of right-wing esoteric Roman Catholic theocrats intimately associated with the cult of the Sacred Heart. The *Hiéron's* objectives were, among other things, to promote the kingship of Christ (*Christus Rex*), the overthrow of the Republic and the restoration of Bourbon France under a Habsburg-led, Holy Roman Empire of Europe. Saunière's colleagues and close friends, the Abbé Boudet, an 'antiquarian and Celtist', and the bishop of Carcassonne were possibly members.

Bérenger Saunière's stay in Narbonne was short, and by July 1886 his suspension was lifted and he returned to Rennes-le-Château. Within months of his reinstatement, between the autumn of 1886 and the summer of 1887, the lifestyle of the 'poor' parish priest began to improve. These improvements were small to begin with, but increased steadily, year-on-year. Over the next twenty years he was to spend a substantial amount of money, refurbishing his church and, between 1901 and 1905, extravagant personal building projects such as the Tour Magdala (a Gothic folly named after the town of Magdala, a well-to-do fishing village of the Sea of Galilee, and the birthplace of Mary Magdalene), and on his house, the Villa Béthanie with its beautifully laid-out gardens and terraces.

Saunière was not particularly 'rich' between 1886-1898, although by 1894 he had built a very modest house for



Church of St Mary Magdalene:
Rennes-le-Château (© Puttnam & Wood)

himself by the cemetery, over a water tank (the gutters on the roof collected the rainwater with which Saunière watered his plants, flowers and vegetables).

The stories about Saunière paying for a new road up to the village and the provision of running water were pure invention. These improvements date from after Saunière's death in 1917.

Initially, however, Saunière focused his attention on the restoration and refurbishment of his dilapidated church, which began in earnest in July 1887 with the installation of new stained glass windows at a cost of 1,350 Francs (the bill for which was not finally settled until 1900). At the same time he also had the windows of his villa decorated with what was to become the recurring iconic theme of his ministry — the Sacred Heart. A new altar was also commissioned and installed on 27 July 1887, for which he paid 700 Francs.⁴ There was nothing mysterious about *where* this money came from: it

The *Hiéron du Val d'Or* (continued)

Accord of 1929, signed by Pope Pius XII and Mussolini, which signalled the Church's complicity with the political agenda of Italian fascism and, later, German Nazism. It also ended the group's hopes for the restoration of the Habsburg dynasty. The *Hiéron* fell into a steady decline until 1938, by

which time it had effectively ceased to exist. But it didn't disappear completely; its ideas continued through the writings of surviving hard-line Sarachaganites, particularly Paul Le Cour, seen by many as the Baron's spiritual heir. Le Cour, an important figure in twentieth century French astrology, had founded a successor

group to the *Hiéron* as early as 1926 — the *Société d'Etudes Atlanteennes* — whose publication, *Atlantis* in 1927 continued the work of the *Hiéron*. Le Cour's last book was published in 1955, the year before the formation of the Priory of Sion, and dealt with the recurring *Hiéron* and Sarachaga theme of Atlantis.



Our Lady of Lourdes: erected by Béranger Saunière in 1891
(© Putnam & Wood)

was from Mme Marie Cavailhé, one of the first of the priest's many wealthy patrons.

PILLAR OF THE COMMUNITY

The crucial date in the story is June 1891, when Saunière unveiled a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes⁵ at Rennes-le-Château. Among the guests at the ceremony was Saunière's ecclesiastical superior, Monseigneur Billard, the bishop of Carcassonne, who is reported to have looked upon him as a son. The bishop had recently inherited 1,200,000 Francs from a wealthy widow, Madame Rose Denise Marguerite Victorine Sabatier de Coursan, so it may be that he contributed towards the cost of this statue. The wealthy bishop was also in the process of purchasing the nearby church of Notre-Dame de Marceille, near Limoux (purchased 1893), and had brought with him to the unveiling a Lazarist⁶ priest from that church.

This is where the facts of the story begin to mingle with the total fictions fabricated sixty years later, in the mid-1950s, by a Baron Munchausen character by the name of Noël Corbu. Corbu, had been bequeathed Saunière's estate by his housekeeper,

Marie Dénarnaud, in exchange for looking after her in her old age. A small amount of money may have changed hands, but any price paid no doubt reflected the Corbu's undertaking to provide accommodation for Marie for the rest of her life. Their agreement is signed and dated 22 July 1946.

When the old lady died in 1953, Corbu turned the Villa Béthanie into a hotel/restaurant called the Hôtel de la Tour. All the stories relating to Saunière's treasure originate from this one source; they were tales spun by Corbu aimed at attracting customers to his restaurant. It is possible, however, that Saunière may have discovered some precious objects in his church, but certainly by 1891 he had run out of money and was in debt, allegedly borrowing money from villagers, including his housekeeper; the alternative possibility, however, is that Marie Dénarnaud was acting as his banker, a conduit for monies from wealthy sponsors. Certainly, all the land and buildings were in Marie's name and when he made his will in 1906 she was the sole beneficiary.

It was Pierre Plantard in the 1960s who invented the fiction that Saunière had discovered four 'ancient' parchments inside a hollowed-out church pillar in 1891. These parchments were genealogies and documents which appeared to be linked with a previous incumbent of the Church of Mary Magdalene, Abbé Bigou.

There has been much controversy as to whether or not the pillar inside which the documents were allegedly found was genuine. Paul Smith, who runs the *priory-of-sion.com* web site, believes it is an 1891 copy of an original Carolingian pillar in Narbonne museum with similar sculpted artwork, and commissioned as part of Saunière's shrine to Our Lady of Lourdes. He points out that there is no evidence that the pillar existed prior to that date. However, most professional and university archeologists who have

studied the pillar, including Bill Putnam, a former principal lecturer in archaeology and Professor Charles Thomas, the world expert on the subject, all agree it is Carolingian, not Visigothic. Rennes authority Bill Putnam states the pillar survived from a church of that date, though nothing in the structure of the present church is earlier than the 11th century.

The example in Narbonne Museum is a different thing altogether; it is a flat panel from a different architectural context, but sharing the style and the use of a processional cross in the design. Whoever rebuilt the church last before Béranger Saunière, found it lying around and used it to support the altar table. Saunière used the pillar for his statue, but was so ignorant about its meaning that he used it upside down. The alpha and omega are the wrong way up. The Narbonne stone, on the other hand, is a complete design; the Rennes example is incomplete as Saunière sawed it off at the bottom. In its original use it was part of a column, with several other sections fitted together by mortise and tenon. It is possible that Saunière employed a stone mason to sharpen up the weathered design, but to the experts there is absolutely no doubt that the pillar is genuine. It has been on display in the Saunière museum in Rennes-le-Château since 1993, and has a mortise



Mlle Marie Dénarnaud: Saunière's housekeeper
b.1868 — d.23/1/1953

hole in the top, but this is nowhere near big enough to have contained documents.

Of the four parchments allegedly found inside the pillar, two were genealogies: one supposedly dating from 1244 and the other from 1644; the other two documents supposedly dated from the 1780s and written by a previous incumbent of Rennes-le-Château, the Abbé Antoine Bigou. They were in fact artefacts fabricated in the mid-1960s by Philippe de Chérisey in collaboration with the previously mentioned Pierre Athanase Marie Plantard, a self-deluding fantasist who had known Corbu and who claimed to be directly descended from the Merovingian king Dagobert II (although it must be stressed that at no time did Plantard claim to be descended from Christ; this leap of the imagination was entirely the work of the three authors of *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail*).

Although alluded to in a previous Priory of Sion document in 1965, the parchments appeared for the first time in Gérard de Sède's book *L'Or de Rennes*, published in 1967. Neither the parchments nor copies of them are in the Bibliothèque Nationale, as claimed by Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code*. They are listed among *Les Dossiers*

Secrets in the Bibliothèque Nationale, information which was lodged by the perpetrators of the fraud themselves, Plantard and de Chérisey. The originals were acquired by author Jean-Luc Chaumeil in the late 1970s when he was writing his book, *Le Trésor du Triangle d'Or*. Written in Latin, they contained obvious coded references to the resting place of the Merovingian king 'Dagobert the Second', 'Sion', and 'Treasure', intended to serve the self-seeking ends of the author and his associates.

According to Noël Corbu, the only source on the matter, Saunière took the parchments to Paris to have them examined by experts. There is no independent evidence, however, that Saunière ever visited Paris, with or without parchments; nor was there ever any alleged written report by these experts as to the authenticity or meaning of any parchments.

THE TREASURE OF RENNES

The story of the 'treasure of Rennes-le-Château' spread after Saunière's death. There is no evidence that this was a belief during his lifetime; it only acquired currency after he died. The priest's wealthy lifestyle, coupled with reports of excavations of crypts in

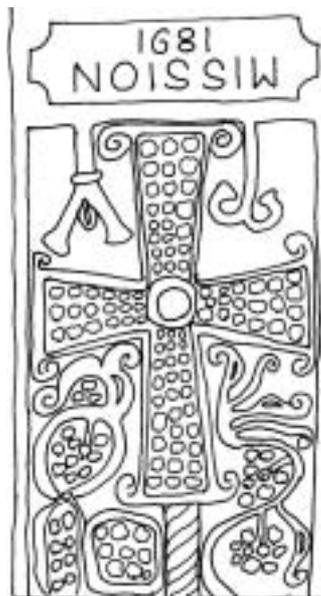
the church and in the graveyard, added credibility to the rumours. No doubt about it, 'the priest had discovered buried treasure' — Visigothic, Templar, or Cathar — in or near the church'. Consequently, the village was invaded by gangs of shovel-wielding treasure-seekers from all over the country, digging holes everywhere, including in the graveyard. Rennes-le-Château became the French Klondike. The problem became so serious that the local council was forced to pass a by-law forbidding such activity.

Adding fuel to the gossip was the fact that Saunière's refurbished church was a place of pilgrimage, especially for wealthy visitors. Illustrious strangers were allegedly arriving in the village from across France and elsewhere in Europe. It was later claimed that at least one member of the Habsburg family, Archduke Johann von Habsburg, a cousin of Franz-Joseph, the Austro-Hungarian Emperor visited Rennes, but the claims that evidence for this exist in Couiza police files are total nonsense.

The real source of Saunière's wealth, the illicit sale of masses (the overwhelming majority of which were never celebrated) and donations extracted from credulous and generous supporters of the cult of the Sacred Heart, the *Hiéron du Val d'Or* and all



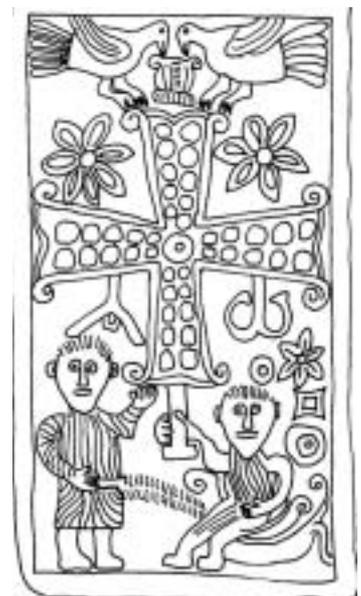
Altar support: The 'pillar' in which Saunière allegedly discovered the four parchments while restoring the church. It was originally the main altar support. Saunière used it, upside down, to support his statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, and gave it a new base with the carved inscription MISSION 1891.



Parallel: Panel with similar carvings (note the suspended Greek letters alpha and omega) in Narbonne Archeological Museum.



Parallel: Panel with similar carvings (note the suspended Greek letters alpha and omega) in Narbonne Archeological Museum.



Parallel: Panel with similar carvings (note the suspended Greek letters alpha and omega) in Narbonne Archeological Museum.

manner of other anti-Republican Catholic bodies.

Bérenger Saunière by this time had become well-skilled in soliciting donations; it was, after all, considered a sacred duty to give to the Church. Apart from refurbishing his church, Saunière claimed he intended to create a community for the elderly and infirm priests of the diocese

MASS HYSTERIA

Meanwhile, all was not well within the Parish Board of the Church of Mary Magdalene. In 1892 the treasurer resigned from the *Conseil*, claiming that the duties of his post were 'contrary to his beliefs'. What could he have meant?

The probable explanation is that he had discovered and objected to Saunière's increasingly lucrative sideline — trafficking⁸ in masses. This consisted in writing personal letters to anyone who might be interested in having a mass said for the bereaved, the ill, or simply prayers for a special event or a loved one. He also placed small adverts in the national and international Catholic press. In other words — simony!⁹

The book-keeper's job was given to Guillaume Dénarnaud, probably a much more biddable relation of Marie



Terribilis est locus iste: Church porch of St Mary Magdalene, Rennes-le-Château. (© Puttnam & Wood)

Dénarnaud, the priest's young housekeeper, confidante, and conduit for payments.

This then was the source of Saunière's unexplained wealth. Although he may have found some valuable objects in 1886, the key to Saunière's fortune, from 1898 onwards was, firstly, soliciting masses among the gullible and vulnerable through advertisements and, secondly, requesting donations from equally ingenuous wealthy donors possibly hooked on the stories of Rennes' possible antediluvian connections and the Royalist movement to restore the Habsburgs and the Bourbons to the thrones of Europe.

From 1892 onwards, hardly a day passed when Saunière did not receive large numbers of postal orders. Some were sent to him directly in Renne while others, made out in the name of his housekeeper, Marie Dénarnaud, went to a post box in nearby Couiza. The priest's records discovered by Rene Descadeillas show these postal orders came not only from France, but from Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. Many of these requests came from religious communities as well as individuals.¹⁰

The priest's mass books between July 1892 and September 1896 show he received payment, on average, for around 450 masses a month, for which he charged between 1.50 Francs and 2.00 Francs a time. Between October 1896 and 1906 the average rose to well over 500 a month, which meant he was supposed to saying 6,000 masses per year. These later ones he charged at a rate of between 3 Francs and 5 Francs. The total figure, between 1892 and 1915 has been estimated at a minimum of 100,000 masses. The figures peaked in 1898, and it was subsequently that Saunière made major contributions to the refurbishing of the Church.

This is both a physical and liturgical impossibility. He would have had to have spent 24 hours a day saying mass. Priests only have the right to say mass an absolute maximum of three times a day, that is, around 90 masses a month, so



Altar of the Church of St. Mary Magdalene

(© Puttnam & Wood)

there is no way he could ever have met even a fraction of his obligations. He admits this in his diary entry of 9 January 1894 by drawing a line through the fifth column in his mass book indicating that the mass had been said with a dramatic note: 'Stopped there'. He was then ten months behind in the masses for which he had been paid. The line he drew in his mass book was a line drawn under his own integrity as a man and a priest.

THIS PLACE IS TERRIBLE?

By the late 1890s, with most of the refurbishment completed, the church of Mary Magdalene was now



Station of the Cross VI: Christ allegedly being smuggled away by moonlight (© Puttnam & Wood)

(and is¹¹) an impressive building. Above the entrance was carved the sinister-sounding motto *Terribilis est locus iste* ('This place is venerable') — a quotation from the mass for the dedication of a church (Genesis 28.17). In the porch stood an unusual holy water stoup, unusual in that it is borne by a figure of the devil, supposedly representing the vanquishing of the French Republic. The demonic stoup bears the initials BS, the man who bought it in 1898, Bérenger Saunière, and the Sacred Heart inscription *Par ce signe tu le vaincras* (*In hoc signo vinces* — 'by this sign you will conquer him'). The baptismal font depicts the baptism of Christ and, supposedly, symbolises the restoration of the French monarchy.

According to the Rennes mythmakers of the 1960s and 1970s, Station XIV of the Stations of the Cross in the Church depicts Christ's body being smuggled out of the tomb under a full moon.

In fact, Saunière purchased all the Stations of the Cross and most of his other religious gewgaws for his church from the Giscard Company of Toulouse, who were reputable suppliers of religious statuary. These objects are



He stoups to conquer: Holy Water font purchased by Saunier in 1898. (© Puttnam & Wood)

listed in their catalogue of the time and are not unique.

On the base of the high altar is a vividly colourful painting of Saint Mary Magdalene at prayer in a cave. The Magdalene was Christ's alleged partner and the one who 'discovered' his tomb was empty. The image was inspired by the 11th century legends of Mary Magdalene in the Burgundian town of Vezelay, whose church claimed to have her relics, and Les Saintes Maries sur Mer.

The imagery of the Sacred Heart is everywhere in the church and grounds of Rennes-le-Château. A statue of the Sacred Heart dominates the front of Saunière's architect-designed house, the Villa Béthanie, while another stood in his private oratory. The stained glass fanlight above his front door also carried a Sacred Heart image. In front of the church a stone cross — a Calvary — commemorates its reconsecration in 1897 by Monseigneur Billard, bishop of Carcassonne. Carved on its pedestal is the inscription: *Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat, Christus AOMPS defendit* ('Christ victorious, Christ reigns, Christ rules, Christ defends'). This inscription is also carved on the obelisk of Pope Sixtus the 5th in front of St. Peter's in Rome. AOMPS is the acronym for *Ab Omni Malo Plebem Suam defendat* ('defends his people from all evil'). It actually has the Latin subjunctive *defendat* — 'may he defend'. Henry Lincoln claimed it stood for *Antiquus Ordo Mysticuseque Prioritatus Sionis*). The phrase '*Christus vincit...*' was also a popular 19th century motet in praise of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the first line of the French coronation anthem.

Interestingly, at the ceremony of reconsecration, Saunière ended his speech explaining where he got his money — he'd already spent 27,000 Francs on the church and the presbytery (manse): 'For all this, *Monseigneur*, I owe a little to my parishioners, much to my economies, and much to the dedication and generosity of certain souls who are strangers to this parish.'



La Tour Magdala (1901-1902): Saunière's library.



GOD'S FRAUD SQUAD

Saunière's fraud began to catch up with him in 1902. The trigger was the death of his mentor, friend, benefactor and protector, the old Bishop of Carcassonne, Monseigneur Paul-Félix Billard. Before he died, Billard had been investigated and suspended from his ecclesiastical duties for trafficking in masses, malfeasance and other financial irregularities. He was replaced by Monseigneur Paul Félix Beuvain de Beauséjour, a less pliant and more pro-Republican cleric who summoned Saunière repeatedly to appear before a bishop's court at Carcassonne to explain his financial affairs and answer the charge of mass trafficking. Thus began a long drawn-out legal battle between Saunière and his superiors.

Ecclesiastical scrutiny and the costs of his extravagant lifestyle and estate building activities meant Saunière began to feel the pinch financially. The market for masses had collapsed, and his legal battle with his new ecclesiastical superiors was fast using up what little savings remained.

This turn in his fortunes coincided with a change in the leadership of the *Hiéron du Val d'Or*, which was taken over in 1902 by the more sensible Georges and Marthe de Noillat, on the death of the movement's colourful founder, Baron Alexis de Sarachaga. The Noillats shifted the focus of the *Hiéron's* activities away from the political to the more spiritual. The pilgrimage business did, however, continue, albeit on a reduced scale, up to Saunière's death in 1917.

I'VE GOT A LITTLE LIST...

By 1909 Bishop Beuvain de Beauséjour had had enough and replaced Saunière as priest at Rennes-le-Château, transferring him to Coustouges. Saunière, however, refused to leave Rennes and was supported by the mayor and the Parish Council, who wrote to the bishop saying that no other priest would be welcome, and that should anyone other than Saunière be sent to the parish they would be denied access to the presbytery.

In May 1910, the ecclesiastical court began investigating Saunière's financial affairs during his 25 years at Rennes-le-Château. The charges against him were: trafficking in masses; disobeying his bishop by soliciting fees for masses beyond the diocese, in spite of the bishop's orders to the contrary; and submitting exaggerated and unjustified claims for unsaid masses.*

Saunière was summoned to appear before the ecclesiastical court on 16 July, but failed to attend and was suspended from the priesthood for a month. He was also ordered to return all the money he had received for the unsaid masses. This was an impossible task, especially as he had stopped

keeping records 16-years earlier, in January 1894.

He was summoned again on 23 August, but this time he managed to have the hearing deferred until 15 October, when he was represented by his lawyer, Canon Huguet. Saunière finally presented himself at court on 5 November and was ordered to undertake spiritual exercises in a monastery for 10 days, and to return to appear before the bishop within a month, this time with the appropriate documents and records relating to his financial activities over the years.

Saunière did confess to 'trafficking in masses' and also provided the court with a list of names of people he claimed were his benefactors.¹² These included his former mentor, the late bishop of Carcassonne, a community of Carthusian monks and the Comtesse de Chambord, the widow of Henri Comte de Chambord, the Bourbon pretender to the French throne and a senior member of the *Hiéron*. The Comtesse, incidentally, who lived in Narbonne, died in 1886, while Saunière was in exile there. The total sum came to 193,000 Francs. This figure may have been exaggerated by Saunière to divert attention away from the money he earned from selling masses. In fact, there had been an earlier governmental investigation in 1905 into the financial affairs of the bishopric of Carcassonne, following the previous bishop's suspension in 1898. The charges against Monseigneur Billard were that he had administered his diocesan assets 'in the most irregular fashion', and had 'contracted staggering and completely unjustified debts'. Saunière was unable to provide the court with all the invoices and receipts for all the work done at Rennes-le-Château. According to the *Report of the Commission charged by His Lordship the Bishop of Carcassonne with the investigation of Monsieur Saunière's accounts*, dated 4 October 1911, the priest was only able to account for a mere 36,000 Francs.

DEFROCKED

On 5 December 1910 a report appeared in *La semaine Religieuse de Carcassonne* that Bérenger Saunière, having been suspended from the priesthood, was no longer permitted to say masses. But the priest couldn't help himself. Less than two months later, on 1 February 1911, the bishop of Carcassonne publicly rebuked Saunière for continuing to advertise masses for sale, and forbade him from administering further sacraments. Again, Saunière ignored the bishop and continued to sell masses at 1 Franc a time.

On 5 December 1911, the Carcassonne bishopric finally ran out of patience and delivered a third and final judgment on Saunière, citing a long list of indictments against the priest, including disobeying his bishop. He was suspended for three months pending the repayment of the money he had taken for unsaid masses. Broke and unable to repay his debts, the suspension became effectively permanent.

By 1913, having spent a small fortune on legal fees and overspending on the Villa Béthanie and the Tour Magdala (for which we have no detailed accounts), any savings Saunière had appears to have run out. Heavily in debt he applied to the *Crédit Foncier de France* for a loan; all they were prepared to offer him was a mere 6,000 Francs against his properties, which they valued at 18,000 Francs.

The First World War dramatically improved the market for Masses and in spite of his suspension (*suspens a divinis*), Saunière continued selling these until his death in 1917; it was his only source of income and this was now severely restricted as a result of the war. Although his priestly suspension was lifted at the moment of his death in January 1917, his obituary in the *Semaine Religieuse de Carcassonne* (27 January 1917) makes no reference to his calling. His estate was so cash-poor that it took six months for his housekeeper, Marie Dénarnaud — to whom he bequeathed everything —

to pay for his funeral expenses.

Marie Dénarnaud died 36 years later, in 1953, at the age of 85, having earlier bequeathed her entire estate, including Saunière's archives, to the Corbu who had looked after her since 1946.

Two years later, at Easter 1955, Corbu opened the Villa Béthanie as a restaurant and sought to attract clients by exploiting the tales of Saunière's mysterious treasure, and giving talks on the priest to fascinated customers, stating as fact the rumours of the priest having discovered treasure. These talks formed the basis for Corbu's five-page unpublished manuscript deposited in the Archives de l'Aude in Carcassonne entitled *Essai Historique sur Rennes-le-Château*. This is possibly a transcript of a tape recording he made for guests at his restaurant

...THE FANTASIST...

The myth of Rennes-le-Château began properly in January 1956 with the publication of an interview with Noël Corbu in *La Dépêche du Midi*. Under a banner headline worthy of today's *Sun* or *Daily Sport*, '*La Fableuse Découverte du Curé aux Milliards de Rennes-le-Château*', journalist Albert Salamon reported that according to Corbu, Saunière had indeed discovered treasure in the church. The story ran for three days (12, 13 and 14 January 1956) and was picked up by the national press. It also led to the first official archeological dig, in 1959, by Professor Jacques Cholet — who found nothing.

One of those who read Corbu's account of the mysterious Bérenger Saunière was a fantasist, 'psychic' and confidence trickster by the name of Pierre Athanase Marie Plantard, a 36-year Parisian — a former Petainist and an ultra-Traditional Catholic obsessed with Freemasonry and Jewish world conspiracy. Plantard had spent four months in jail after the Liberation; six months between 1953 and 1954 for 'breach of trust' in relation to some property crime, and 12 months between

1956 and 1957 for 'corruption of minors'.

Fascinated by the priest's story, Plantard contrived to build a relationship with Corbu and they soon became friends, with Plantard absorbing everything he could from Corbu about the priest's story.

Five months after Salamon's newspaper articles, Pierre Plantard, then living in the Annemasse in the French Haute Savoie, registered an association called the *Prieuré de Sion* (the Priory of Sion). Article 3 of the association's statutes, as submitted to the authorities on 5 May 1956, declared the Priory to be a Roman Catholic benevolent organisation, inspired by medieval orders of chivalry. Its aims included the establishment of a centre for study, prayer and contemplation on the Montagne de Sion, a local mountain in the French Alps from which the Priory took its name. There was, in fact, an enormous gulf between the published aims of the Priory and its actual practice.

The Priory, or rather Plantard, published a magazine called *Circuit* (an acronym for Chivalry of Catholic Rules and Institution of Independent Traditionalist Union). In essence it was a Traditionalist Catholic pressure group, and much of its activity focused on denouncing local property developers. It ceased to function five months later when Plantard was convicted in 1956 for 'child corruption'.

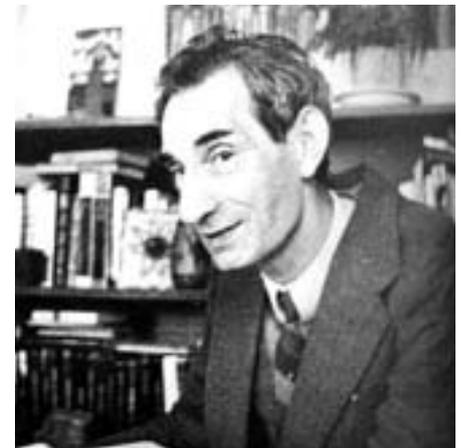
In 1960 Plantard re-emerged onto the public stage at the height of the European settler uprising in Algeria, (between Barricades Week in January 1960 and the trial of 16 of its leaders in December that same year), relaunching *Circuit*⁴³ as its mouthpiece, this time targeting the military with the sub-title: *The Cultural Periodical of the French Forces Federation*.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

By 1964 Plantard had taken Corbu's history of Rennes-le-Château and tales of Bérenger Saunière and woven them with other myths and

legends into a storyline worthy of J R Tolkien, or at least J K Rowling. The eight-year old Priory of Sion had suddenly acquired a pedigree dating back at least 900 years to Godfrey de Bouillon, the Duke of Lower Lorraine, the first King of Jerusalem. Its implicit aims appear to be the establishment of a theocratic United States of Europe with a descendant of Jesus as its priest-king, and with the actual business of government being managed by the Priory of Sion.

Plantard, now secretary-general of the Priory of Sion, had reinvented himself as Pierre Plantard de St. Clair, a direct descendent of the Merovingian King Dagobert II (although he never claimed any connection with Jesus. This strand was introduced by Lincoln, Baigent and Leigh in *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail*). His adoption of the St. Clair⁴⁴ name took place in 1975 following an interview with writer Jean-Luc Chaumeil in the magazine *L'Eyre d'Aquarius*. The St. Clair connection derived from the fact that the St. Clairs of Rosslyn, near Edinburgh in Scotland, were descendants of Baron Henri St.



Pierre Athanase Marie Plantard:
b.18/3/1920 — d.3/2/2000

In 1993 Judge Thierry, the French Examining Magistrate investigating the financial scandals surrounding President Mitterand and his connections with Roger Patrice Pelat,* questioned Pierre Plantard under oath about Pelat's alleged connection with the Priory of Sion (Plantard had claimed he was the current Grand Master. Apparently nearly everyone in modern French and European politics has some connection or other with people supposedly linked with the Priory of Sion). Plantard confessed to the judge that the Priory of Sion was a total fantasy, and was dismissed with a warning. He subsequently disappeared from view and never again attempted to revive the Priory of Sion. Plantard spent the remaining seven years of his life in seclusion in Perpignan, Barcelona and Paris, where he died on 3 February 2000.

Clair of Roslin, one of the original Knights Templar and, allegedly, of Merovingian descent. They are also reputed to be the 'hereditary grand masters of Scottish Freemasonry', not that such a title ever existed in Scottish Rite Freemasonry.

With his artist friend Philippe de Chérisey, a surrealist with a sense of the absurd and an eye for the main chance, Plantard wrote up his research on Rennes-le-Château and Bérenger Sunière in 1964, but his manuscript was rejected by all the main French publishing houses

Not one to give up easily, Plantard next approached another conspiracy aficionado by the name of Gérard de Sède, a successful author in the field of esoterica with whom he had collaborated in 1962 on the historical potboiler entitled *Les Templiers sont parmi nous* ('The Templars are among us'), and asked if he would collaborate with him in writing a book on Rennes-le-Château and Saunière.

As a published author with a track record in the field, de Sède had considerably more credibility in the publishing world and among the book-buying public than Plantard.

This time there would be clear evidence to support his story. Plantard commissioned Philippe de Chérisey to manufacture various pieces of evidence to support his fabrication about Saunière's treasure and his claim to be a direct descendant of Dagobert II. These artefacts included a gravestone, and the four forged documents which the priest had allegedly found inside the 'hollow Visigothic pillar', including the fictitious genealogies supporting Plantard's claim to the French throne.

The book finally appeared in 1967 under de Sède's name, entitled *L'Or de Rennes*. Their gamble paid off and the book became an enormous best-seller in France, selling hundreds of thousands of copies.

But, unfortunately for Plantard and Philippe de Chérisey there is no honour among pseudo-historians and, after the book appeared, Gérard de Sède reneged

on his contractual agreement to share the royalties with his two collaborators, who responded by denouncing the parchments — the unique selling point of de Sède's book — as forgeries.

...THE FICTION WRITER...

Plantard's fiction of Rennes-le-Château, the Abbé Saunière, was now heavily embellished with the addition of the mysterious Priory of Sion and its fantasy list of illustrious past Grand Masters, from the crusader Godfrey de Bouillon in 1099 through Leonardo de Vinci to Jean Cocteau in 1963. It was next picked up by a writer called Henry Lincoln.

Lincoln's real name was Henry Soskin, a television scriptwriter who had worked on *Dr Who* and *Emergency Ward 10*. He had also appeared in *The Avengers* and *Man in a Suitcase*, and had co-scripted the screenplay to the 1968 Boris Karloff film *The Curse of the Crimson Altar*, so he recognised a good storyline when one came along.

On Good Friday, 3 March 1971, BBC2's Chronicle programme broadcast a documentary, *The Lost Treasure of Jerusalem*, which drew heavily on Gérard de Sède's book *Le Trésor Maudit de Rennes-le-Château*. It was the first of three Chronicle documentaries: *The Priest, the Painter and the Devil* (1974) and *The Shadow of the Templars* (1979). In 1971 Lincoln ended his first film with the words: 'Something extraordinary is waiting to be found... and in the not too distant future it will be.'

DE SÈDE DEBUNKED

Something was discovered, but Lincoln chose to ignore it. In 1974 French writer René Descadeillas published his book on Rennes-le-Château, *Mythologie du trésor de Rennes: Histoire Véritable de L'Abbé Saunière, Curé de Rennes-le-Château* (The Mythology of the Treasure of Rennes), which debunked de Sède's thesis, providing irrefutable documentary



Dr Who?: Henry Soskin, aka Henry Lincoln

proof of the source of Saunière's conspicuous expenditure. It exposed the conspiracy theories surrounding Rennes-le-Château as a nonsense, ranking alongside mysteries such as the Bermuda Triangle, Atlantis, Erich von Daniken's ancient astronauts and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Drawing on Saunière's diaries, mass books and personal notebooks, Descadeillas showed beyond doubt that the priest had amassed his wealth entirely from the sale of masses and donations.

In spite of this evidence, in 1982 Henry Lincoln co-authored *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* with novelist Richard Leigh and esotericist Michael Baigent. It was Baigent, apparently, who pushed the thesis that Christ's bloodline had survived in the Rennes-le-Château region and was linked to the Priory of Sion. The implication was that this was the 'secret treasure' upon which Saunière had stumbled.

The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail was an enormous publishing success, selling hundreds of thousands of copies, and spawning a massive literature of pseudo-historical works of 'non-fiction' and fiction in every major language, all reinforcing each other's myths. The authors followed it up four years later in 1986 with a sequel, *The Messianic Legacy*, which also became a best-seller. The best-known of these spin-offs, however, is Dan Brown's ubiquitous *The Da Vinci Code* which has been on the *Times* best-seller list for three years, and has sold around 4 million copies in the UK to date, at least 1700 of these in Hastings alone: 1200 in Ottakars and

500 in Olio Books. This, in turn, has spawned a publishing frenzy of fictional and factional spin-offs, including at least a couple of computer games and a Hollywood movie to be released on 19 May starring Tom Hanks and Sir Ian McKellan, with at least 5 film tie-ins. Another is Kate Morse's *Labyrinth*, which has won Richard and Judy's 'Best Read' award and has sold over 70,000 copies since last summer.

The only discordant note in the saga is the plagiarism case recently brought (an rejected by the High Court) against *The Da Vinci Code's* publisher by Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, two of the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, for alleged breach of copyright. If successful, a slice of the pie from the film's profits would have been quite substantial. Henry Lincoln is reportedly 'very ill' and was not involved in this legal action (but not too ill to lead another group to Rennes-le-Château from 19 to 27 September 2006 at £1,400 per head).

Why, then, are such irrational ideas effective — and why do they attract such a massive audience? Isn't this, after all, just another story? Perhaps there is a Gresham's Law of the Brain which explains why irrational ideas always drive out rational ones. One thing is certain however, the acceptability of these paranoid and nonsensical ramblings to the public is reflected in the sheer volume of sales of these books. 🍷

Stuart Christie

I would like to thank Paul Smith and Bill Putnam for providing me with the benefit of their comprehensive research on Rennes-le-Château and the Abbé Saunière. Paul Smith's web site www.priory-of-sion.com is the essential starting point for anyone interested in pursuing the subject further. I must also highly recommend 'The Treasure of Rennes-le-Château: a mystery solved' (ISBN 0-7509-4216-9) by Bill Putnam and John Edwin Wood (Sutton Publishing — sales@sutton-publishing.co.uk — www.sutton-publishing.co.uk)

Stuart Christie is the author of: 'Granny Made Me An Anarchist' (ISBN 0743263561), Scribner - Simon & Schuster, paperback, £7.99 and 'Stefano delle Chiaie; Portrait of a 'Black Terrorist' (ISBN 0946222096), dealing with NATO's Gladio 'stay-behind' network and the role of neo-fascists and the Italian Confidential Affairs Bureau in the 'Strategy of Tension' which dominated Italian politics between 1960 and 1983' 'We, the anarchists! A study of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) 1927-1937' (ISBN 1901172066).

NOTES:

1) Integrists hold that only a belief in God and submission to the Vicar of Christ can restrain mankind and secure the social order. Everything that undermines faith, such as science, reason, and a belief in the goodness of man, is the enemy. Their demonic spokesmen include: Descartes, Bacon, Hobbes, Kant, Leibniz, Rousseau, Hegel, Adam Smith, Proudhon, Bakunin and Karl Marx. Science and rationalist philosophy lead only to grief. They are the scourge of everything non-Catholic since the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution. Republicanism, Freemasonry and Protestantism are their particular bugbears, as is anything that denies the authority of Rome. The spectre of revolutionary socialism haunting Europe at the end of the 19th century was part of the same gigantic conspiracy of the dark directorate targeting Christian civilization.

2) Although the Republicans won by a majority of 182 seats in this election, the 73 seats won by the Royalist party within the Union of the Right panicked Republican politicians into introducing the Law of Exile, legislation expelling all senior members of the French Royal family from France. Intervention by the Roman Catholic Church was so flagrant in the 1885 elections that it marked the beginning of a bitter 25-year conflict that led, in 1905, to the separation of the Church and State in France.

3) The Sacred Heart of Jesus is the paramount devotional symbol for the Jesuit Order, which was consecrated to the Sacred Heart in 1872.

4) To put the amount of 700 Francs into some sort of context, the *Conseil de Fabriques* accounts for the previous financial year, April 1886 to April 1887, show that the Church's revenue rose by 145.40 Francs, from 239.60 to 385 Francs. But by 1888 the Church of Mary Magdalene's income had risen almost five-fold to 1914.80 Francs, before returning to slightly below its original level by 1893.

5) Our Lady of Lourdes was at the time a symbol of anti-Republicanism, the annual pilgrimage to Lourdes having become an overt militant Catholic protest against godless Republicanism. She was also seen by Catholics such as Pere Emmanuel d'Alzon, the founder of the Assumptionist Order, as symbolising the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy.

6) Possibly RP Mercier. The Lazarists, founded by St Vincent de Paul in 1625 and modelled on the Jesuits, are a congregation of proselytising secular priests who have taken religious vows. They are similar in many ways to *Opus Dei*, and have been suppressed and expelled from a number of countries because of their zealotry.

7) After Saunière's death in 1917, speculation grew even more fantastic, with the source of the priest's wealth ranging from trafficking in Spanish gold ingots to spying for Germany. A theory also circulated that he had been paid vast sums of money by the Roman Catholic Church to buy his silence on a secret that would have seriously damaged the church. The most imaginative claim, however, was that he had located the grave of the 'exiled' Christ. (See also Note 10)

8) Trafficking is defined as a form of spiritual fraud in which requests to say mass are solicited for payment — but without honouring the requests. Parish priests living in poor communities were badly paid and, in order to survive, would petition the secretariat of their local diocese to permit them to say a certain number of masses. These masses were requested either by religious congregations or by private individuals who sent money in return. Béranger Saunière felt that the secretariat of the Diocese of Carcassonne was favouring other priests at his expense and decided to go it alone. In effect, he turned it into a major confidence trick, one in which he proved himself to be a real master.

9) Simony is the ecclesiastical crime and personal sin of paying for offices or positions in the hierarchy of a church. It is named after Simon Magus, who appears in the Acts of the Apostles 8:18-24, offering the disciples payment for the power to perform miracles.

The linking of temporal and spiritual authority in the middle ages caused endless problems with simony and accusations of simony. Secular rulers headhunted the educated and centrally-organised clergy to play central roles in their administrations, and often treated their spiritual positions as adjuncts to their secular administrative roles.

Canon law outlawed as simony not only the sale of offices, but the sale of spiritual authority: tithes, taking fees for confession, absolution, marriage or burial, and the concealment of mortal sin or the reconciliation of an impenitent for the sake of gain. Exactly what was or was not simony was strenuously litigated. As one commentator notes, the widespread practice of simony is best illustrated by the number of reported ecclesiastical decisions as to what is, or is not, simony.

Simony did serious harm to the moral standing of the Roman Catholic Church. In his *Inferno*, Dante Alighieri condemns simonists to the eighth circle of hell, where he encounters Pope Nicholas III (1277-1280) buried upside down, the soles of his feet burning with some oily substance. Nicholas goes on to predict the damnation of both Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1305), the Pope in office at the time the Divine Comedy is set, and Pope Clement V (1342-1352), his successor, for simony. Centuries later, less devout writers, such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Erasmus, condemned the practice, while Blaise Pascal attacked the casuistic defences offered by those accused of simony in his *Lettres Provinciales*.

The Church of England also struggled with the practice after its separation from the Catholic Church. English law recognized simony as an offence, but treated it as merely an ecclesiastical matter, rather than a crime, for which the punishment was forfeiture of the office or any advantage from the offence and severance of any patronage relationship with the person who bestowed the office.

10) The source of Saunière's wealth was confirmed in 1925, eight years after the priest's death, in a deposition by a Mr Espeut from Perpignan: 'I wish to state that at no time did the Abbé Saunière find any treasure. You see, I was born in Espérasa and my family was friendly with the Denarnauds. In 1925, when I was 14 years old, I was a regular visitor to Marie Dénarnaud who was then living in pitiable circumstances. I did my harmony lessons on the organ in her parlour... More importantly, while I was there, I read all the priest's correspondence with his ecclesiastical lawyer at the time of the trial and it was clear to me that the Abbé Saunière's entire estate was built on the illicit sale of masses. He placed countless small ads in the international Catholic press, many of which I read. I also read some of the thousands of replies he received. I should also add that I too believed in the treasure. Between the age of 15 and 20, I searched everywhere within a 500 metre radius of the Villa and the Tour Magdala and not once did I find the slightest evidence of any hidden treasure. I am making this statement out of a respect for the truth.'

11) My interest in Rennes-le-Château began during a visit to Carcassonne, and Perpignan in the mid-1970s. I had been researching the WWII escape and evasion networks and seeing friends, members of the Ponzan Group (part of which was the Pat O'Leary network) — veterans of the 26th Division (formerly the Durruti Column) of the Spanish Republican Army, the Spanish Maquis and anti-Francoist Resistance networks, and the Ninth Company of General Leclerc's Second French Armoured Division, the fighters who liberated south-western France — including Paris. They took me on a



'Lightning at Hastings : 9.30 pm, June 6, 1904: (Judges)

Notes: continued from page

tour of the area where they operated during the occupation, and border crossing points used by the anti-Francoist guerrillas until 1963. One of the places we visited was Rennes-le-Château, not because it had anything to do with the Liberation, but because it was a pretty Provençal village with an interesting parish church decorated in rather questionable Baroque taste. What fascinated me most were the devices at the head of some of the graves. These were not simple crosses or images depicting the crucifixion, as you would find in most cemeteries, they were ornately painted statuettes of the Immaculate Heart of the Virgin Mary (Mary with a blazing heart surrounded by a crown of thorns) holding the Christ Child, standing before a cross. Others depicted Christ the King standing before the cross.

12) The minutes of Saunière's 1910-1911 ecclesiastical trial before the Bishopric of Carcassonne are published in Jacques Rivière's 1983 book, *Le Fabuleux Trésor de Rennes-le-Château*: 'On Saturday 5 November, at 10.00 am, the Bishop's Court assembled at its habitual place of meeting. Abbé Béranger Saunière was present before the court, accompanied by Dr Huguet, his attorney and counsel. Having asked this latter and the Official Prosecutor if had anything to add to their conclusions,

the Judge read out the sentence handed down by the Court...The Judge read out a list of indictments against Saunière, one of which stated the following: "CONSIDERING that Abbé Béranger Saunière admits to having requested and obtained a considerable number of Masses, without contesting the figures given by the Official Prosecutor."

13) There is no connection here that I am aware of, but the extreme right-wing Roman Catholic organisation *La Cité Catholique* was particularly strong among French army officers of the Fifth Bureau of the General Staff, the psychological warfare unit which in January 1961 formed the core of the French terrorist settler organisation, the *Organisation de l'armée secrète (OAS)*. During 'Barricades Week' (24-31 January, 1960)24 people were killed and almost 300 seriously injured..

14) Between 1976 and 1983 I lived on the island of Sanday in Orkney, during which time I became friendly with Alisdair Rosslyn St. Clair, the younger brother of the heir to the St. Clair Baronetcy, a descendant of Prince Henry of Orkney — and a 'remittance man' (the 'black sheep' of the family). We played poker once a week. Alisdair, was a charming and intelligent companion, and a bit of a bohemian, slightly flaky with a surreal sense of humour, and clearly unaware of his

'divine' (as opposed to his 'royal') ancestry'. He dressed in black, with a long Dracula-style cape, and told everyone he was a satanist. I should add that this was basically to wind up some of the more staid islanders. I lost contact with Alisdair after we left Orkney in 1983 and I didn't hear anything more until April 1998, when he was found dead in his cell in the detention centre at Jerusalem's Ben Gurion airport. He had been 'strangled' with his own shoelaces. Arrested on leaving the country, Israeli Customs officials had found 9,000 Deutschmarks in a false bottom of his briefcase and accused him of drug dealing. Apparently Alisdair 'admitted' to having smuggled in thousands of Ecstasy pills. This is not impossible as he was always short of money and had been living in Amsterdam since leaving Orkney. However, when his body was returned to his family in Scotland, it was discovered that his heart had been removed by the coroner (and not replaced), as was the hyoid bone at the base of his tongue, which could have revealed whether or not he had hanged himself or had been strangled. According to the Priory of Sion buffs, Alisdair, the 'Merovingian claimant', was killed in order to allow Thomas Plantard de St. Clair (Pierre Plantard's son) to assume the throne of Jerusalem and the United States of Europe as the 'priest-king in waiting'. 