

At The Tomb of King Arthur¹

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The ruins of Glastonbury Abbey lie in Somerset about 30 miles south of Bath, 14 miles south of Wells. It is a lovely and magical spot, but in the Middle Ages its grandeur must have been truly impressive. Although far removed from the wealth of urban centers, Glastonbury enjoyed the revenues of extensive land holdings while its church, dedicated to the Virgin, was arguably the second largest in Western Christendom. Indeed, by the start of the fifteenth century the abbey had achieved such stature that one of its abbots, John Chinnock, was selected to head the English delegation at the Council of Constance. Nor, in medieval terms, were these successes difficult to explain, for Glastonbury traced its origins back to a foundation by Joseph of Arimathea, guardian of the Holy Grail, uncle of the Blessed Virgin, and, in the Bible, that noble decurion who had so freely loaned Christ the use of his tomb, albeit temporarily. Moreover, in 1191 the monks had also discovered the bones of King Arthur in their graveyard, a discovery that was eventually to lead to the realization that Arthur had been the direct descendant of Joseph, though only on his mother's side.

Compelling in the Middle Ages, these claims are typically viewed with less favor today. In most accounts they emerge as little more than charming legends that give an added air of enchantment to an enchanting place. Still, if the associations of Joseph and Arthur with Glastonbury are purely legendary, one should ask just why these claims were ever made, just why a Benedictine monastery should have found it desirable to link its fortunes to those of Britain's most famous king--and then to those of a man who became Britain's foremost apostle largely as a result of Glastonbury's high claims for him.

The evidence demonstrates that Glastonbury became aware of its Arthurian legacy long before it recognized that Joseph of Arimathea had been its founder and Arthur's ancestor. Nevertheless, because that awareness came only in 1191, with the discovery of the royal bones, it may prove instructive to review the most contemporaneous account of the dig, Giraldus Cambrensis's *De instructione principis*, a work probably written in 1193. Giraldus is not always the most accurate of chroniclers, but because he had himself visited the site, what he reports

page 2

in this instance seems most likely to reflect the explanations offered by the monks themselves:

Now the body of King Arthur, which legend asserts was exempt from death and hence was transferred by spirits to a distant place, was found in our own days at Glastonbury, deep in the earth and placed in a hollow oak log between two stone pyramids erected long ago in the consecrated graveyard, the site being revealed by strange and almost miraculous signs; and it was afterwards transported with honor to the church and decently consigned to a marble tomb.

To the modern mind, a "site . . . revealed by strange and almost miraculous signs" will inevitably have certain doubts attached to it, and that some medieval minds may have shared these doubts, at least initially, is suggested by other parts of this account, ones in which Giraldus offers somewhat more substantial explanations for why the monks began their dig and for how they came to know just whose bones they had found:

Now although there were certain indications in their writings that the body would be found there...it was above all King Henry II of England who most clearly informed the monks, as he himself had heard from an ancient Welsh bard, a singer of the past, that they would find the body at least sixteen feet beneath the earth, not in a

tomb of stone, but in a hollow oak Now in the grave was found a cross of lead, placed on a stone [about eight feet above the log] and . . . fixed on the under side. This cross I myself have seen, for I have felt the letters engraved thereon They run as follows:

Here lies the famous King Arthur,
Buried with Guinevere his second wife,
In the Isle of Avalon.

In spite of the assurances that Giraldus himself has seen and touched the cross, its reported words fail to inspire confidence. Moreover, even though the passage goes on to explain that Arthur's body was placed so deep, with the cross fixed letter-side-in to the bottom of the stone, so that they "might not by any means be discovered by the Saxons, who occupied the island after his death," it remains difficult to understand why the stone and its inscription should have been found so far above the oaken sepulchre--or why the stone itself should have been so deeply buried.

Even so, though, probably the most suspicious aspect of the whole affair **is** the simple fact that this discovery was no more than the last in a series of similar discoveries that had been taking place with remarkable regularity since 1184. Among them, for example, were the bones of Sts.

page 3

Patrick, Indract, Brigit, Gildas, and Dunstan, the last of which would give rise to vigorous disputes with Christchurch, Canterbury, where, as archbishop, Dunstan had indisputably been buried, former abbot of Glastonbury though he had been. Moreover, if one asks why 1184 should have marked the start of these archeological triumphs, the answer appears to be that on St. Urban's Day, May 25, of that year, fire had almost totally destroyed the abbey, thereby necessitating its reconstruction. That being the case, it seems reasonable to assume that these new-found relics were no more than one aspect of the complex capital fund drive needed to support the monks in their rebuilding efforts.

Nevertheless, logically satisfying though this hypothesis may be, it raises further questions. Why, for example, was Arthur somewhat tardily added to what was otherwise a group purely of saints? And why was it alleged that it had been specifically Henry II who had informed the monks about the bones' precise location? Lastly, though most puzzling of all, if Henry had indeed been responsible, why had the monks waited for almost two years after his death before beginning their search? This delay seems incomprehensible unless it be granted that Arthur's discovery was somehow related to a crisis in fundraising, a crisis closely related to Henry II, and yet one the severity of which was not fully felt--or the solution to which was not fully found--until long after Henry, too, had been placed in his grave.

The known facts surely support this further hypothesis, though not always directly. In the aftermath of the fire of St. Urban's Day, Abbot Robert of Winchester turned almost immediately to the challenge of reconstruction. Funds generated by the saintly relics so miraculously discovered were doubtless a part of his plan from the very beginning, but of much greater importance was the pledged generosity of Henry II. Still laboring under the cloud created by Becket's unfortunate fate, his fear of the wrath of God intensified in 1183 by the death of his eldest son and heir, this first of the Plantagenet kings was in no position to turn a deaf ear to ecclesiastical appeals for assistance. As a result, after 1183 he responded willingly to clerical requests for aid, and this for projects ranging from the refounded expansion of Amesbury to our present concern, the rebuilding of Glastonbury. Indeed, for the completion of this latter project he is variously reported to have promised either the total annual revenues of his West Country demesne or, more stunningly, the surplus revenues of the entire realm of England.

Whatever the case, the very magnitude of the sums involved must have encouraged Robert of Winchester to favor a grandiose scale in his plans for reconstruction. For in the absence of this royal munificence it is difficult to believe that he would have approved an effort, the contemplated size of which threatened to rival Old St. Peter's in its magnitude.

page 4

If so, though, then disaster struck with the death of Henry II in 1189, for that event brought to the throne a man, Richard the Lionheart, who was determined to use his every resource not for the benefit of abbeys like Glastonbury, but for the liberation of the Holy Land itself.

In other words, with Richard's accession royal funding of Glastonbury came to an end, and that this stoppage provoked a real crisis is suggested by the frequency with which its monks now took to the road, bearing their relics to the far corners of the realm in a desperate attempt to encourage more gifts from the faithful, gifts that would at least partially offset the loss of Henry's generosity. Still, if the funds thus raised remained insufficient, the same year that had brought crisis in the form of Richard's accession was also to bring what proved to be the ultimate solution, the investiture of a new abbot, Richard's cousin Henry of Sully.

One can speculate, of course, that Henry's membership in the Anglo-French nobility had made him familiar with the exploits of Arthur, and these in the form set forth not only by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace, but also, rather more problematically, in that recently created by Chrétien de Troyes. Moreover, at Glastonbury itself there appears to have been more than a little knowledge of Welsh versions of the story. Nevertheless, that Arthur had emerged as *the* hero for people of Henry's station in life, and potentially for his monks as well, would have had little importance for the abbey if it had not been for the fact that on March 29, 1187, Constance of Brittany, the widow of Richard the Lionheart's younger brother Geoffrey, had given birth to a son and, with the consent of Henry II, had named him Arthur. In turn, this fact alone, while indicative of the high place that Arthur had attained in royal circles, would not have had significance except for the further fact that on November 11, 1190, Richard the Lionheart--unmarried, childless, and about to undergo all the life-threatening dangers of a Crusade--decided formally to designate his nephew Arthur as heir to the crown in a letter of intent written to the pope.

Given these circumstances, it rather looks as though Henry of Sully and his monks may well have been moved to look for King Arthur's bones in their graveyard not because Henry II had so counselled them, but only because Richard the Lionheart's designation of his nephew as royal heir had created a context within which the discovery of those bones, and at Henry II's inspiration at that, would make it awkward indeed for Henry's crusading son if he were stubbornly to refuse to renew the generosity of his father. Whatever Richard's difficulties with Henry had been--and the record shows that they had been many--their shared dynastic commitment to Arthur united them in ways that would have made it difficult for Glastonbury's abbot to believe that the new king

page 5

would long continue his indifference to the abbey's financial plight after he had been brought to see that Arthur's bones had there been found largely as a result of Henry's intervention. In short, even the loose ends of Giraldus Cambrensis's tale start to make sense once one appreciates that its specifics took shape only a year and a half after Henry's death and in response to Richard's solution for his own succession problems.

Be that as it may, mixed consequences soon followed. On the positive side, it seems clear that the prospect of renewed royal funding created by Glastonbury's Arthurian claims enabled it not just to continue its rebuilding, but also to provide its monks with a standard of living well in excess of that envisaged in *The Rule of St. Benedict*. In turn, though, because wealth and prosperity have always had their critics, Glastonbury was soon to find that it was not without detractors, the most outspoken of whom proved to be Savaric of Bath, the bishop in whose diocese Glastonbury lay.

Without exception, abbey chroniclers are unremittingly hostile to Savaric, John of Glastonbury first among them. Writing in the 1340s, he reports that Savaric had long been so attracted by the lure of Glastonbury's wealth that in 1192 he used his imperial connections and promises of money to persuade Richard the Lionheart, then an imperial captive in Germany, to nominate him not just as bishop of Bath, but as abbot Glastonbury as well. Given Richard's need for ransom money, not to mention what must have been his anger over the way in which the monks had used Arthur's bones in the previous year to regain his royal generosity, this was a nomination he must have been happy to make, for it led to conflict between bishop and abbey almost immediately. Still, true crisis came only in 1199, with the accession of King John, since (in John of Glastonbury's words) it was only at that point that Savaric decided fully to make good on his claims to the abbey, the wealth of which was becoming ever more apparent:

Bishop Savaric . . . came on Pentecost with a strong and hostile troop, not as a shepherd entering through the door of the sheepfold, but climbing up through the wall when the doors had been shattered. When he was not received and admitted by the monks of their own will, he brought a workman and had the door-bolts of the church and treasury broken by force, dishonorably seized the church's vestments, [and] had the canons of Wells

and other seculars vested in them When [the monks] who had not wished to be present at his enthronement assembled to perform the divine office, he turned them out of the church in flight, and all that day and the following night he laid siege to the cloister with a band armed with swords and cudgels Those confined to the infirmary he publicly denounced as excommuni-

page 6

cates, afflicted them with hunger and fasting, and denied them their supply of ordinary fluid, even water. The next day . . . they were irreverently beaten in the presence of many, both of clerics and laity. And so, when some of them had been broken by fear of punishment and others by blandishments, . . . they submitted to his lordship.

Shocking though this episcopal visitation is meant to appear--a resort to private warfare, and on Pentecost at that--there is, perhaps, another side to the story. By 1199 the magnificence of Glastonbury's reconstruction must have become strikingly apparent, and as Savaric's own actions were soon to suggest, the monks themselves appear to have been enjoying the excesses of the good life. Not to put too fine a point on the matter, these facts would have led any reasonable bishop to conclude that in Glastonbury he had a monastery thoroughly out of control, in need of reform. So, if Savaric responded with steps aimed at eliminating luxurious vestments and overly ostentatious altar plate, following up with a reduction in the daily food and drink allowance to more normal monastic standards, there are grounds for concluding that he was acting less as a demonic agent than as a good shepherd, one determined to reform his flock. And if he had the worst offenders "beaten in the presence of many," even though that deed seemed "irreverent" to our chronicler, surely a more accurate term would be "penitential."

As John of Glastonbury points out, however, "A suitable bestowal of bodily necessities usually encourages monks in the divine service and to a very great extent eliminates the hateful cause of grumbling." On the other hand, because the reforming episcopal regime of Savaric and of his successor Jocelyn of Bath meant that for twenty years, to 1219, no such "suitable bestowal" took place, grumbling became a way of life. Nonetheless, it was to be fully leavened by more imaginative endeavors. If the prosperity created by the discovery of Arthur's bones had led to the disastrous reforms of Savaric, then the obvious solution was to free Glastonbury from the episcopal jurisdiction of Bath and Wells, thereby also freeing it from the nightmare of rigorous adherence to the austerities favored by St. Benedict.

Here, as it happened, Glastonbury's monks proved exceedingly fortunate. In the 1130s William of Malmesbury had written his *De Antiquitate Glastoniensis Ecclesiae*, a work in which that scrupulous scholar had recorded not just all of Glastonbury's known history, but also those ancient charters that had long guaranteed the abbey its cherished liberties. Since these documents closely resemble recognized Benedictine forgeries from the same period, scholars have long questioned their authenticity, but within a medieval context Savaric's intervention had the effect of breathing new life into their supposed strictures. Indeed,

page 7

these charters appeared so relevant that in the first quarter of the thirteenth century Glastonbury hastened to buttress them with further evidence that had either come to light or been written since William of Malmesbury had completed his labors.

For example, in a charter supposedly written in 725, King Ine is made to say that since Glastonbury was "the mother of saints," its monks "should have the power of choosing and appointing their own ruler." Then, not content with that, the new Ine goes on to say:

Moreover I especially do prohibit and forbid, calling on the intercession of Almighty God, the perpetual Virgin Mary, the blessed apostles Peter and Paul and all the saints, any bishop to presume, on any pretext at all, to establish his episcopal seat, or to celebrate solemn mass, or to consecrate altars, or to dedicate churches, or to confer holy orders, or to do anything at all in the church of Glastonbury itself, or in any of the churches subject to it . . . unless he be invited by the abbot or brethren Moreover let such a bishop make provision for this, that every year he, and his clerks that are at Wells, should acknowledge his mother church at Glastonbury with litanies on the second day after the Lord's ascension.

Perhaps needless to say, this charter is far from alone in its strictures. They were imaginatively renewed by

Edmund the Elder in 944, by Edgar the Peaceable in 971, and by Cnut in 1032. Only that outsider William the Conqueror is alleged to have assumed initially that the bishop was in charge, but even he was brought to see that "all jurisdiction there, both in ecclesiastical and secular affairs," belonged to the abbot of Glastonbury alone. Pope Calixtus III was made to concur in 1223, to which Henry II added the simple statement in the 1180s that Glastonbury Abbey and its all possessions "should be entirely free from all jurisdiction of the bishop of Bath, just as is my own crown."

The pattern, then, seems very clear, but in the thirteenth century these forgeries helped to achieve the desired goal. In 1219, Honorius III finally dissolved the union of Bath and Glastonbury, and in the same year the monks were at last able freely to elect an abbot of their own choosing for the first time since 1192. Their choice fell on William Vigor, one of their papal emissaries, and from what is recorded of him by John of Glastonbury it appears that their high expectations of his abbacy were not entirely misplaced:

When Abbot William had taken up his administration, he was liberal and benevolent to all, bestowing generous alms upon the poor and even larger gifts upon great men. He set tyranny aside and with paternal concern fostered the monks as he would sons,

page 8

freely conferring many gifts upon them for their bodies' recreation. In order to improve the convent's beer he added half again as much grain and oats to each brew. He also conceded to the convent a second tithe of all the abbey's grain, for the convent's recreation from week to week. Mercy is called down upon him who is merciful: and so he drew up a charter in which he, with all the convent, excommunicated anyone who might contradict or violate this concession.

With the elevation of William Vigor, then, justice was at last restored to Glastonbury and the world. At the same time, though, there remained grounds for concern. In particular, the canons of Wells retained properties that more properly belonged to the abbey, and there was little reason to suppose that some future bishop of Bath might not decide, in his ambition, to imitate the reforming zeal of Savaric by attempting to reimpose his episcopal authority. In short, more still needed to be done if the abbey's freedom were to be assured, and it was this need that was ultimately to lead to the recognition of Joseph of Arimathea as Glastonbury's founder.

Strikingly, the original version of William of Malmesbury's *De Antiquitate Glastoniensis Ecclesiae* knows nothing of Joseph. On the contrary, it reports only "that Lucius, king of the Britons, sent a plea to Eleutherius, the thirteenth in the line from the blessed Peter, that he should illuminate the darkness of Britain with the light of Christian preaching," and that, as a result, the pope had sent two missionaries, Sts. Phagan and Deruvian, to do so. But William then added, apparently at the urging of his monastic patrons, that while Phagan and Deruvian had built the "old church" of St. Mary at Glastonbury, there was some evidence to indicate that it owed its original foundation to disciples of Christ. If so--and here the writings of Freculph, bishop of Lisieux from 825 to 851, made William believe that this was not improbable--they must have been sent by Gaul's chief apostle, St. Philip.

There the matter might have rested except for developments in the independent world of literature. Thanks to *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, Joseph of Arimathea had long been a popular figure in the medieval West, but by the 1190s he and his career began to take on new dimensions as Robert de Boron first told the story of Joseph's westward journey accompanied not just by the Holy Grail, but also by the whole Grail company. Then, in the first quarter of the thirteenth century the continuators of Chrétien de Troyes and the *Estoire del Saint Graal* elaborated on Robert's basic account by having St. Philip send Joseph to Britain where he and his successors had guarded the Grail until the coming of Arthur. Given these new developments, not to mention the fact that Arthur himself had been resting comfortably at Glastonbury at

page 9

least since 1191, it seems almost inevitable that the amplified edition of William of Malmesbury that took shape shortly before 1250 should have included among its fraudulent charters a reassuring account of how St. Philip had dispatched "his very dear friend, Joseph of Arimathea, . . . who . . . came to Britain in 63 AD." At

Glastonbury, he and his companions had built a church "of twisted wattle, an unsightly construction, no doubt, but one adorned by God with many miracles." It was, adds Pseudo-William, "the first one in that territory." Left unstated, for it needed no stress, was the real point of the passage, that churches first in their foundation take precedence over all others, in this case the ones belonging to that late-comer the bishop of Bath and his villainous associates, the canons of Wells.

Still, if this paper is right in its readings, it is worth noting that the monks often appear to have limited their inventiveness in significant ways. Thus, for example, even though they readily accepted Joseph of Arimathea as their founder, they never rushed out to discover *his* bones. On the contrary, they remained touchingly vague when Henry V demanded a search in 1419, and the only person who is known ever to have attempted one was not a monk but a man named John Blome of London. In 1345 Edward III gave him a license "to dig within the precinct of the said monastery and to seek for those precious relics," but the king allowed him to do so only if "this can be done without hurt to our beloved in Christ the abbot and convent of the said monastery and without destruction of their church and houses there." Moreover, Edward then added that Blome also had to receive permission from Glastonbury itself, and, as far as we know, that permission was never granted, nor the bones ever discovered-though it is true that a sarcophagus popularly thought to be Joseph's was dug up in 1928, 389 years after the dissolution of the abbey.

Glastonbury's treatment of the Holy Grail suggests similar restraint, for from the time that literature began to report that Joseph had brought it to Britain and that he had there become Glastonbury's founder, it must have been tempting indeed to add this dispenser of celestial food to a store of relics that already included, among other marvels, manna from the Wilderness and four fragments of bread from the five loaves with which Christ had fed the five thousand. Yet the abbey never did so. Rather, its "official" story as presented by John of Glastonbury was that Joseph had brought precious samples of Christ's perspiration and blood not in the Grail, as literature had it, but in two cruets, the very ordinariness of which would avoid undue attention or the expectation of continuing miracles. Indeed, when Grail-seeking pilgrims failed to stop their questing, the ultimate solution of the late Middle Ages was the creation of Chalice Well, into the bottomless depths of which a dying Joseph was reported to have tossed the Grail, never to be recovered. This was true

page 10

modesty, given Glastonbury's other fraudulent inventions, and it appears not to have been merely a product of the forger's normal caution. On the contrary, the monks' hesitations here are better explained by the presence of genuine religious scruple, by a recognition that, given Joseph's undoubted role in the crucifixion and further given the Grail's somewhat heterodox associations, any fraud involving them too directly might well endanger the faith. It should be noted, though, that the resulting curative powers of Chalice Well continue to this day, or so the London press would have us believe. In October 1990, for example, it reported that Prince Charles, long an advocate of alternative medicine and still suffering from an arm painfully broken in a polo match the previous June, had secretly visited the well, there to drink from its waters and plunge in his arm.

Be that as it may, Glastonbury's reticence here should not blind us to Joseph's usefulness for the abbey. Whatever his initial role had been in helping the monks to maintain the freedom from episcopal jurisdiction that they had acquired in 1219--and on that issue the record is silent--by the second quarter of the fourteenth century he was to emerge as a helpful figure in a series of court battles through which Glastonbury was attempting to regain title to lands of which it had been wrongfully dispossessed by the bishop of Bath and the canons of Wells. With monotonous regularity these battles ended up in the court of the archbishop of Canterbury, and that Joseph had there played a leading role is nowhere more suggestively implied than in the fact that about 1350 Robert of Avesbury, a registrar for that court, traced the ancestry of King Arthur back to Joseph in his *Historia de mirabilibus gestis Edwardi III*. Since that ancestry had earlier appeared only in John of Glastonbury, the obvious conclusion is that the abbey must have been relying on it heavily in its litigation, for how else would the archiepiscopal registrar have heard of it?

By Robert's time, of course, a century or more had passed since Glastonbury had first recognized Joseph as its founder, and it may well be that the passing years and dimmed memories had imparted a greater aura of truth to this story than it had had for the original refashioner of William of Malmesbury. If so, it could now for the first

time be used with confidence, unhampered by scruple. And there was to be a happy outcome, for, as John of Glastonbury reports it, Abbot Adam of Sodbury and his prior John de Breynton brought "the contests between the lords of the bishop of Bath, the deacon of Wells, and the abbot of Glastonbury . . . to a praiseworthy conclusion, after spending over a thousand marks." After that, John, Adam's successor as abbot, "governed all things benevolently in the course of his pastoral direction and restored all the manors in the best of fashions." Thanks to the wealth generated by King Arthur's tomb, these were surely costs that Glastonbury could well

page 11

afford, and, thanks to the freedom from episcopal meddling now guaranteed by Joseph as founder, its monks would have had good grounds for believing that John's improvements would always be theirs to enjoy.

That these hopes proved mistaken is a story that lies outside the bounds of the Middle Ages, but here, at the end, some elements of that story bear repeating as illustrations of the ways in which the modern world has both denied and preserved the myths to which the Middle Ages so often rise. In 1531, for example, two years before Henry VIII broke with Rome, an event that would lead to Glastonbury's dissolution, he had occasion to dispatch the duke of Norfolk to Eustace Chapuys, Charles V's imperial ambassador, to discuss the matter of Henry's divorce from the emperor's aunt. The duke's position, in brief, was that since Henry was a descendant of Arthur, himself both a descendant of Constantine and the conqueror of emperors, England remained an island empire from which no appeals could go to Rome. In a dispatch to Charles, Chapuys reported that, in an attempt to prove this case,

the duke went on . . . to show . . . a copy of the inscription on the tomb of King Arthur . . . which inscription he produced in a parchment role out of his pouch and handed over to me, adding that he had caused it to be transcribed for my use. I looked at it, and saw only these words written in large letters:
ARTHUR THE PATRICIAN, EMPEROR OF BRITAIN, GAUL, GERMANY, AND DENMARK.

As Glastonbury's own history demonstrates, within a medieval context of this kind of evidence had not infrequently carried the day, and not just in England. During the first half of the fifteenth century, when the councils of Pisa, Constance, and Basel decided that, in the absence of a generally recognized pope, national delegations should be seated and allowed to speak in the order of their nation's conversion to Christ, in all three instances England had received precedence, Glastonbury's claims for Joseph of Arimathea easily overcoming Spain's for St. James, an apostle who was already dead by the time he arrived in Galicia, and France's for St. Denis, a man who was, after all, merely a disciple of St. Paul and hence no match for the Virgin's uncle. A century later, however, the duke of Norfolk was to find his Arthurian evidence undercut by an ambassador whose newly humanistic view of history no longer allowed the kind of myth-generating documentation on which the case for Henry's Arthurian independence was so strikingly based. "My answer," Chapuys continued,

was that I was sorry to see that he was not also entitled Emperor of Asia, as he might have left the present King Henry for his successor in such vast dominions; but that as all things in this world were so subject to change, it was reasonable that an

page 12

English monarch of our days should conquer a portion of the provinces above named, since in those very countries men had been found who had conquered and held for a long time this very kingdom of England, where the succession of William of Normandy still lasted. If by showing me the inscription the duke meant that the present King Henry might be such a conqueror as King Arthur, I could not help observing that the Assyrians, Persians, Macedonians, and Romans had also made great conquests, and everyone knew what had become of their empires.

Nevertheless, humiliating though Chapuys's response undoubtedly was, it provides no more than a partial explanation for what has happened to the Arthurian myth in the modern world. If the humanistic historical views of the Renaissance insured that Arthur and his tomb would, over time, be removed from the historical landscape, Henry VIII's English Reformation also insured that Joseph of Arimathea would experience no such fate. Because he himself was alleged to have been a member of the Holy Family, the people of sixteenth-century England could take comfort in the thought that he had doubtless brought their ancestors Christ's message in a form far

purser than that preached by those non-relatives, the bishops of Rome, men to whom High Anglicans can still occasionally refer with straight face as purveyors of "the Roman heresy." Perhaps needless to say, Rome fought back vigorously, but it did so in ways that never directly challenged the historicity of Joseph's British mission. Thus, if the pope tried to deny Joseph's Anglicanism by proclaiming him a member of the *Roman Martyrology* in 1545, sixteenth-century Catholic maps also insisted that on his way to Britain he had first stopped at Rome for papal consultation and instruction. In response, Anglican maps made clear that he had done no such thing and, by the reign of Elizabeth I, Holinshed was giving the insular view what has proved to be its nearly final popular form:

In the days of [King] Arviragus, about the year of Christ 53 [sic], Joseph of Arimathea, who buried the body of our saviour, . . . came into Britain with divers other godly Christian men, and preaching the gospel there amongst the Britons, . . . converted many to the true belief, . . . and there continued all the residue of his life, obtaining of the king a plot of ground where . . . with his fellows [he] began to lay the firm foundations of the true and perfect religion, in which place . . . was afterward erected the abbey of Glastonbury.

If Holinshed's has proved to be no more than a nearly final version of Joseph's story, the explanation for further change appears to lie in developments demonstrating the extent to which the medieval imagination continues to have intellectual heirs, people in the late twentieth

page 13

century who are still attempting to give concrete form to truths that even the monks of Glastonbury might have accepted only in a purely spiritual sense. And here, doubtless, a California-based magazine named *Heart* provides a perfect case in point, for one of its issues in 1985 was graced both by a computer-generated picture of the Holy Grail on its cover and by a lead article asking the pregnant question, "Did Jesus Go to School in Britain?".

As it happens, alas, the article itself fails to settle that gripping issue, but, strikingly, it does manage to combine the old Cornish legend that Joseph of Arimathea first came to Britain as a tin merchant with the oft-noted fact that the Bible gives no details on Christ's life between ages of thirteen and thirty to argue that during His teens He must have accompanied Great Uncle Joseph on his trips to the tin mines of Cornwall. From there, of course, it was but a short trip to Glastonbury, a place he and Joseph must have reached by sailing up the River Brue. If so, Christ, not Joseph, was the true fashioner of Pseudo-William of Malmesbury's "unsightly" wattle church, the fiery destruction of which in 1184 was to have so many consequences. William Blake's poetic questions are therefore answered: The Holy Lamb of God *was* in England's pleasant pastures seen; the Countenance Divine *did* shine forth upon our clouded hills; and Jerusalem *was* builded here among those dark Satanic mills, specifically at Glastonbury.

Complex though the present story must inevitably appear, it leaves out many important details, among them why Edward I had Arthur and Guinevere unburied and reinterred in 1278; why and how, but only at the end of the seventeenth century, Glastonbury's "Holy Thornbush," which once bloomed on Christmas but which now, thanks to the switch to the Gregorian calendar, does so on Twelfth Night, was transformed into Joseph of Arimathea's flowering staff; or how, finally, the arcane "science" of Pyramidology demonstrates, when properly understood, that at the end of all time Christ's Second Coming will also take place at Glastonbury. Even in spite of such omissions, however, it should be apparent that in the Middle Ages Arthur's monastic tomb was a magical place where a remarkable range of people seem to have found their notions of history, literature, and religion fusing subtly together to form a complex and highly interdisciplinary set of legends, the development of which has much to tell the modern world about the nature of the Middle Ages, their values and outlook. Moreover, as absurd as some of these legends undoubtedly are, the very fact that they continue to evolve suggests the extraordinary degree to which their constructs have retained the power to move even the most contemporary of imaginations. As Mr. Honey, the hero of Nevil Shute's novel *No Highway*, puts it after telling a visitor about Glastonbury's apostolic glories, including Christ's once-and-future visits there, "That's why the English are the greatest

people in the world and always will be, because in the beginning we were blessed by the advice and the example and the teaching of the greatest people who have ever lived." Mr. Honey's views may strike the non-British reader as a trifle ethnocentric here, but if one were to change his "the English" to something like "those medieval authors in whose writings history and literature were seen as one," then there might well be more than a few medievalists who would want to agree with him, at least silently.

Notes

1. The central parts of this piece are adapted with permission from what is, as I write, my still forthcoming "Fraud and its Consequences: Savaric of Bath and the Reform of Glastonbury," *The Archaeology and History of Glastonbury Abbey*, ed. James Carley and Lesley Abrams (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 1991), pp. 273-283. Wanting to avoid distracting footnotes, I have attempted to make sources clear within the text itself, but those wanting editions and specific page references for my medieval quotations will find them properly cited in the article above. The dispatch from Eustace Chapuys to Charles V will be found in Pascual de Gayangos, ed., *Calendar of State Papers, Spanish IV2* (London, 1882), 22-28.