

# MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY



## *A voyage, a Cave & Words of Life*

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## A VOYAGE, A CAVE & WORDS OF LIFE

### Adrift on a perilous sea

How did this woman from Palestine get to France? The story goes that Mary Magdalene was cast out to sea by enemies in a rudderless boat with Lazarus, Martha, a new disciple called Maximin and others. They ended up in the region of Marseilles. The story is included in a ‘lives of the saints’, called the *Legenda Aurea*, or Golden Legend, written in 1260. The author Jacopo di Voraigne drew this immensely popular compilation of miraculous escapes, healings and fantastic beasts from a range of earlier sources. To a large extent it became the Catholic ‘textbook’.

In the legend Mary’s name is interpreted as ‘bitter sea’ (Mariam) based on the Hebrew *mar*, ‘bitter’ and *yam* ‘sea’ (for the Egyptian origin, after Miryam sister of Moses, from *mry* ‘loved’, see portal 3: *Mary – What’s in a Name?*). But the Mediterranean Sea, subject to wild storms, was certainly bitter for a small party adrift without a rudder.



*‘The Magdalene Voyage to Marseilles’, by Giotto c. 1320, Basilica of St Francis, Assisi*

In the ancient world the destructive power of this ‘middle sea’ filled people with fear. Many preferred to take the long land journey around its shores. Sailors

would never dare to venture forth without prayers and offerings to the gods, especially mighty Oceanus-Neptune and Dis Pater in the underworld. Then they hugged the coast. When fierce storms did arise, the supposed cause of the storm might be thrown overboard. Yet the occurrence of miracles and magical rescues was a repeating maritime trope.

The sea has always been a poetic symbol of inner alchemy. Behind such stories of transformation and rebirth is another force, a goddess. In Greece she was called Aphrodite, the bright goddess of beauty and love who was born fully formed from the sea foam. Her radiance revealed the perfected work of the divine spirits that gave form to the ever-moving cosmos. This is about more than the physical and artists strove to portray her harmonious physical form to represent that higher reality. Seekers who attuned to her beauty would awaken to the beauty and love within their souls. With her ally Eros, she also became the epitome of erotic love – something taken up negatively in the Catholic church, especially in the picture of Mary Magdalene. In ‘The Return of the Goddess’ portal there’s the opportunity to explore her in relation to Aphrodite.

As a Christian, Jacopo di Voraigue would not have consciously marked this connection. He accepts the Catholic church version of Mary as a reformed and penitent whore, although he also writes that she became a light-giver.

The Magdalene was the woman who was forgiven much because she loved much. But careful reading of legends will lead us to their universality. In this sense the sea journey of Mary Magdalene is one we all take. It may be desperate and stormy but aided by the goddess of love and transformation it will be a healing journey that leads to the shore.

God of course guided the group to shore in the Catholic legend, and there Mary Magdalene proceeded to convert the heathens and they rushed off to destroy the pagan shrines. Lazarus became bishop of Marseilles, Maximin bishop of Aix-en-Provence and Martha wise protector of Tarascon.

### **Ancestress of kings**

A black servant called Sarah is also said to have been with the castaways until they landed in southern France, in this case in the Camargue near Arles. Sarah is named as the patron saint of the Romany people with the pilgrimage centre in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer.

In another version Sarah is named as the Magdalene’s daughter. The name Sarah means ‘princess’ and this story relates to the legend that the holy bloodline of the Merovingian kings of France descends from Mary and her daughter. And from that came the idea of a sacred lineage of all the French kings.

According to the thesis built up in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln published in 1982, Jesus was the father of the Magdalene’s child. These ideas were turned into a popular thriller in

Dan Brown's 2003 *The Da Vinci Code*, about the sacred bloodline secretly in existence today.

While the *Holy Blood* authors drew on early medieval chronicler Gregory of Tours and one Fredegar who mixed actual historical events with legends and religious doctrine, their central argument stems from stories about the semi-legendary fifth century leader Merovech, the grandfather of Clovis the first king to unite the Franks under the Merovingian banner.

Merovech was said to have been born from his mother's union with a sea monster. The authors hypothesised that this mysterious 'fish' referred to Jesus Christ. They based their idea on the simplified fish images drawn in the catacombs by early Christians in the days of persecution.

The Greek word for fish is *ichthys*, the same letters as the beginning capitals of *Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter* which means, Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. Fish diagrams became code and alerted followers to the presence of other Christians, while such a common image would not be likely to raise suspicion.



Sometimes 'evidence' is stacked up even when the ground is not firm. This is the way the world argues, from ancestry to politics to religion and to legendary characters. Legends can have roots in real events. The Magdalene may have gone to Egypt, to Ephesus, to Rome or France, although over time actual events will have been embellished and probably forgotten. Rather than empirical argument trying for proof, a sense of rightness may assist us to seek the inner truth behind legend.

### **Mary the penitent recluse**

As legends grow, they are often a mixture of different legendary material, for example reclusive Mary Magdalene in her cave acquired the characteristics of Mary of Egypt, a fifth century saint, the subject of another legend. From a young age this Mary lived a life of extreme lust, until she encountered an image of the Virgin Mary, after which she retreated to the desert and spent the rest of her life



in penitence there, while her clothes rotted away, and her hair grew to cover her nakedness (a picture that also conveniently aligned with the reclusive Catholic Magdalene).

In medieval iconography Mary is often portrayed reading a book and/or with tears in her eyes. Both told the story of a woman whose eyes had turned away from sin to a fully contemplative life, forever reading about Christ and straining her eyes in the effort – something familiar to people in those days before electric lighting. Tintoretto's painting of Mary Magdalene (on the front page) is one of the numerous artworks that followed the tradition of penitent Mary.

Pilgrims who visit the Basilica of St Maxim (to see the Magdalene's skull relic) also visit a cave, now a lovely grotto chapel, high in the Sainte-Baume mountains. The grotto is where it is said Mary Magdalene spent her last thirty years alone, upheld and nourished by angels.

The Sainte-Baume mountain edifice and the cool beech forest below, watered by sacred springs, is a most ancient holy place, where Ligurian druids offered sacrifices and Greeks and Romans worshipped the great mother goddess as Cybele.

Today when you walk as a pilgrim through the ancient forest and climb the steps to the grotto in some mysterious manner Mary, who may well invoke the ancient goddess, is present in your meditations. Her love touches you in a profound way. This happens in places where countless imaginations have attuned to their sacredness and is often why we visit such sites. Such settings have an aura and it is the power within legends that gives them their longevity.



*The remote setting of Mary's cave (near the buildings lower right)*

The Golden Legend records that no one knew Mary was there until a priest who had built a retreat near the cave saw angels entering. He ventured towards it, but a mysterious force stopped him from approaching. Eventually Mary allowed him in and identified herself. The priest took the amazing news to her friend, the bishop Maximin. She died soon after. According to the Golden Legend:

And Maximinus himself tells in his writings that the saint's visage, long used to the sight of the angels, had become so radiant that one might more easily have looked into the rays of the sun than into her face. Then the bishop, summoning the aforesaid priest and his clergy, gave the Body and Blood of the Lord to Saint Mary Magdalen: and no sooner had she taken the Communion than her body fell lifeless before the altar, and her soul took its flight to the Lord. And such was the perfume of her sanctity that for seven days the oratory was filled with it.

Jacopo's designation of Mary as enlightened light-giver relates to this part of the legend.

### **Speaking through the Creative Word**

When I was writing *Marriages of the Magdalene*, I felt the need to draw on her legendary sojourns including in the south of France to create my story. Fiction, yet it also felt true, although my researches led me to envisage a less reclusive Mary than the Catholic saint hidden away for so long. I responded to the few stories and artworks depicting an active Mary Magdalene preaching and teaching. To me this is Mary the apostle, the bringer of the Word.

In the excerpt below Mary (Miryam) has spent many years in the Roman province of Gallia Narbonensis (southern France) and has disappeared on one of her teaching and healing journeys. Her cousin Naphtali has sailed from Ephesus to search for her:

In the towns and villages on our journey, people sang the songs she taught them, and they were passing these on to their children and grandchildren. The songs do not tell of duality, of flesh and spirit divided. Their story is always about the love between heaven and earth and of heaven's offering to humankind ...

We never discovered where Miryam's body lies, but it does not matter. We found her everywhere there in that land. We heard her mystery speaking from the wayside shrines adorned with personal offerings to the Lady. We saw her grace in the marsh creatures, the water birds spreading their wings for flight, and the rushing white horses. We felt her beauty in the river with the willows sweeping its edge, her fruitfulness in the rows of grape vines and the fields of lavender and dancing grain. We reached into her soul in the still, deep lakes. And we knew her strength in tall conifers and every mountain reaching like a tower to heaven – Miryam of the Migdal who carried abroad the golden chalice of light.

I place great importance on Mary Magdalene's speaking because one of humanity's most powerful gifts is the voice. In the gnostic gospels of Nag Hammadi and in her enduring legends Mary Magdalene is portrayed as a powerful Christos initiate. Behind the events of her stories, even fanciful ones, we recognise her speaking the truth and spreading the gospel of love. She spoke then and she speaks still.

The larynx is shaped rather like a chalice, and it is a powerhouse of creativity. In an initiate like Mary the voice would be filled with healing and procreative power.



*Diagram of the Larynx*

Linda Sussman writes:

Inhabiting language entails more than vocal articulation. The initiate-speaker ventures towards an experienced sense of an eternal, unconditional 'I' ... This means to become Word-like in oneself.

—Sussman, *The Speech of the Grail: A Journey Towards Speaking that Heals and Transforms*, Lindisfarne Press, 1995

Our finest aspirations mark the spirit in us. And in all of us, females, males, adults and children, the chalice-shaped larynx is full of potential as a wellspring of life. Like Mary Magdalene, we too can allow our words to emerge from this inner place of creation, beauty and all-embracing love as she did. This is our potential destiny, to enable the indwelling spirit to flow freely through our voices. That is when the Grail of the world will be filled and refilled.

This chalice is an imagination of the Holy Grail. And the Grail has long been associated with Mary Magdalene and her alabaster jar, the one containing oil she used to anoint the feet of Jesus. The light-filled radiance of Mary and the mysterious Holy Grail will be our next topic.