

ROSSLYN CHAPEL: A LEGACY IN STONE

By Dr. Karen Ralls

Just a few miles south of Edinburgh, Scotland, stands one of the most ornately-carved 15th century medieval stone chapels in all of Europe. Perhaps you have visited Rosslyn Chapel or seen it featured in *The Da Vinci Code*. The symbolism of Rosslyn's exquisite medieval carvings—from the Green Man to the famed Apprentice Pillar—continue to intrigue many today. In *The Knights Templar Encyclopedia*, Rosslyn Chapel is of course one of the major entries under 'R'...and as its subject matter relates to many other subjects of interest to 'Templar history buffs'...let's explore a bit about it here.

But what is the actual history of this extraordinary chapel? Rosslyn Chapel has been the focus of many a Quest throughout the centuries. A number of legends abound; it has been said to house everything from the Ark of the Covenant, the Holy Grail, a Black Madonna, lost scrolls from the Temple of Jerusalem, and much more, deep within its vaults. For years many have speculated about what—if anything—may have been hidden at Rosslyn, who put it there, and why. Others remain sceptical, saying that until the vaults are actually excavated, no one can say for sure. There have been many theories about the chapel and the wisdom of the ages that it may hold, from sober analysis to wild speculation. History, myth and legend seem to be all intertwined when dealing with a subject as complex as Rosslyn.

So is the Grail or some other treasure really hidden there? Did the Templars really build Rosslyn, as some allege? Why is Rosslyn Chapel so important today? But before we begin to unravel this web, let's start with some of the known facts about Rosslyn.

SIR WILLIAM ST. CLAIR, FOUNDER

Work was started on this magnificent stone chapel in the mid-15th century – a key time, the very end of the late Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance. Rosslyn Chapel was an extraordinary effort in its time, one personally overseen by the illustrious founder himself, Sir William St. Clair, the third and last St. Clair Prince of Orkney. (1) A genuine "Renaissance man", it was said that he inspected each design for every carving, showing that he was concerned that each carving be sculpted precisely as he wanted it as part of his overall vision. The result is a unique *arcantum in stone* for posterity. Rosslyn took 40 years to build; the existing chapel is only part of what was intended to be a much larger cruciform building with a tower at its centre.

Rosslyn Chapel was begun in 1446, in the time period in between the dissolution of the Templar order (1312) and the official beginnings of Freemasonry (1717). But contrary to popular belief, Sir William, the founder, was *not* a Knight Templar or a Freemason. Why? To begin with, the Order of the Temple was officially suppressed by papal bull in May of 1312. Pope Clement V officially declared that the charges against the Order were "not proven"; however, the Order was by then so maligned by its controversial trial that he decided to simply dissolve the Order altogether. (2) The official beginnings of Freemasonry as we know it today began in 1717 with the Grand Lodge of England, followed by the Grand Lodge of Scotland in 1736, although there were numerous stonemasons' guilds in existence before then as well. So Rosslyn was built at the direction of Sir William St Clair, its Master of Works, and not by the Knights Templar or the Freemasons. There is also no known historical connection to Mary Magdalene at Rosslyn Chapel, however.

One of the best-known sources about Rosslyn Chapel and the St. Clair family was written in 1700 by Father Richard Augustine Hay, Canon of St. Genevieve in Paris and Prior of St. Piermont. There are no contemporary accounts, so Fr. Hay's account is viewed by many as the best source. Even though it was written some 215 years after the chapel was completed, it still remains as one of the earliest known sources about Rosslyn. Here, Fr. Hay describes how the founder, Sir William St. Clair, personally inspected each and every carving in draft form in wood before giving it to the masons to carve in stone. He refers to builders and stone masons coming from "other regions" and "foreign kingdoms", yet no one to this day can say for certain exactly where they came from, leading to further speculation, with France as a good bet. (3)

THE REFORMATION AND ROSSLYN

Rosslyn Chapel was generously endowed by the founder, Sir William, and by his grandson (also Sir William) in 1523, with land for dwelling houses and gardens. But as the Reformation took hold in 16th century Scotland, this change had a devastating effect on the chapel. During this time, the Sinclairs still remained staunchly Catholic, but as history has shown, many Catholic churches, altars and furnishings were very badly damaged or destroyed. The chapel gradually fell into disuse. But in 1650, Oliver Cromwell's troops under General Monck attacked Rosslyn Castle and his horses were housed in the chapel. Some believe this actually may have helped to 'save' the chapel from further destruction, claiming that Cromwell was a Freemason, and that this may have been why he did not order the chapel to be greatly damaged. However, there is no direct proof of this. (4) Later, on the 11 December 1688, an angry Protestant mob from Edinburgh and Roslin village pillaged and burnt Rosslyn Castle and further damaged the chapel. It remained abandoned until 1736, when James St. Clair began repairs, at the encouragement of Sir John Clerk of Penicuik. So given this rather turbulent history, we are fortunate indeed to have Rosslyn Chapel in all of its glory still available for us to see today.

THE GREEN MAN

Inside Rosslyn Chapel, the profusion of carved symbolism is extraordinary, ranging from biblical allegory to pagan symbolism. One of the best-known carvings is the Green Man. There are at least 103 carved images of the Green Man inside the chapel alone, but this does not take into account the others on the outside or on the roof. Rosslyn has the greatest number of Green Man images of any medieval chapel in Europe. The Green Man is usually portrayed as a head with profuse foliage growing from his mouth, which represents fertility and the fecundity of nature. The many faces of the Rosslyn Green Men appear in many guises, from the joyful to the downright impish. The Green Man in a Christian context is often said to represent death and resurrection, similar to earlier traditions of vegetation gods who died and rose again, like Tammuz or Osiris, for example. Generally, it wasn't until the 6th century before the Green Man motif shows up in western medieval Christian carvings.

Although many assume that the Green Man is mainly a "Celtic" motif, this is not the case. Green Man carvings are also found in a number of ancient eastern temples, something that unfortunately doesn't seem to be widely acknowledged in the west. Ancient images of the Green Man can still be seen in the Apo Kayan area of Borneo, where he is perceived as the Lord God of the Forest, in the chapels of Dhankar Gompa, high in the Indian Himalayas, in the temples of Kathmandu, Nepal, and in the Jain temples of Ranakpur, among others. Later, he appears in Roman buildings, too. In short, the Green Man is a *universal* theme with very early roots: "Heads from the Lebanon and Iraq can be dated to the 2nd century A.D., and there are early Romanesque heads in 11th century Templar churches in Jerusalem. From the 12th to the 15th centuries, heads appeared in cathedrals and churches across Europe...." (5)

But in the context of a late medieval Scottish chapel, no doubt the founder Sir William Sinclair was acknowledging the Celtic traditions of the area and the beautiful natural setting of the chapel itself. It may well be that the chapel itself is placed precisely where it is *because of* the surrounding natural environment. It is not generally acknowledged that the glen in particular was known to many long *before* Rosslyn was built, as bronze age artefacts have been found there, in addition to Roman finds involving the possible worship of Mithras and what many believe to be runic and/or Pictish carvings. Clearly, Rosslyn and its environs has been viewed as a 'power spot' for some time. As late as 2005, the Rosslyn Chapel Trust envisioned further plans to have a medieval garden built at Rosslyn.

The proliferation of Green Man images at Rosslyn is acknowledging the innate dynamism and "aliveness" of the earth, as well as the processes of nature, a not-too-surprising image to find in such a bountiful location. Even today, the colour green still symbolizes spring, paradise, reproduction, initiation, joy, abundance, prosperity, hope, immortality; in medieval times, it also became the colour attributed to St. John the Evangelist. The dynamic interplay between man and nature, and the cycle of Nature through time, is clearly symbolized by the Green Man, Rosslyn's most prolific carving.

THE APPRENTICE PILLAR

Stunning in its exquisitely carved beauty, the famous Apprentice Pillar at Rosslyn Chapel has a number of legends associated with it. It is the third of three stone pillars, believed to represent the concepts of Wisdom, Strength, and Beauty. Its symbolism as a whole represents to some, a 'world tree', a fountain of immortality, illustrating the perpetual conflict of the forces of light and darkness. At its base is the "Dread Biter" serpent of Norse legend, said to lie at the root of the Yggdrasil world tree, which continuously gnaws away at the forces of darkness and ignorance. The Sinclairs were of Norman and Scandinavian descent, so such parallels have often been made in reference to this pillar.

The most popular Grail legend about the Apprentice pillar insists that there is a "Grail" of some type hidden within the pillar – specifically, a silver platter. Scans have been done of the pillar in the past and nothing metal was detected; however, this has merely resulted in others speculating that perhaps the Grail hidden there is not made of metal! Some insist it may be a so-called 'mummified head of Christ' or a simple wooden chalice, but there is no proof of these theories. But again, until the pillar is actually dismantled, speculation is rife. However this is extremely unlikely to happen, according to the current custodians of Rosslyn Chapel, The Rosslyn Chapel Trust, the heritage body that is responsible for overseeing the important, large scale preservation projects of the chapel today.

The Apprentice Pillar also has a special legend associated with it, that of a "murdered Apprentice". The story is told by the Earl of Rosslyn in the official guidebook:

The Master Mason, having received from the Founder the model of a pillar of exquisite workmanship and design, hesitated to carry it out until he had been to Rome....and seen the original. He went abroad and in his absence an apprentice...set to work and carried out the design as it now stands, a perfect marvel of workmanship. The Master Mason on his return, seeing the pillar completed, instead of being delighted at the success of his pupil, was so stung with envy that...with rage and passion...he struck [the apprentice] with his mallet, killed him on the spot... (6)

The legend of a talented 'murdered apprentice' by a jealous master has been told from at least the 17th century at Rosslyn, if not before, and it also refers to another specific carving in the chapel by the same name. This murdered apprentice carving may not have necessarily been that of an apprentice at all, as in ancient and medieval times *only Master masons* were allowed to sport a full beard, which implies that the original carving at Rosslyn, which had a beard, may in fact have been that of a 'murdered Master' and not a 'murdered apprentice', according to some. Of course, the ancient theme of a murdered Master builder killed by jealous colleagues is also a familiar one to Freemasons, as the important legend of Hiram Abiff. Masonic scholars state that the earliest known account of the Hiram legend in Freemasonry did not appear until the 1730s, i.e., so if true, this would be some 284 years after Rosslyn Chapel was built. Also, the legend of a murdered master builder is not particularly unique only to Rosslyn Chapel, as it is

also found in Rouen Cathedral, for example. The general theme of the sacrifice of master artificers at building sites goes back to much earlier times, so the legend in Rosslyn Chapel may in fact be actually representative of something far more ancient.

Much of the genuine "message" of Rosslyn Chapel is as much about where a specific carving is located in the chapel--and how it relates to whatever else is around it-- as much as the design of the specific carving itself. This is true in many medieval buildings. It is often neglected that much of the symbolism at Rosslyn consists of Old or New Testament or apocryphal-based, as well as pagan iconography, so a variety of symbols are present. At Rosslyn, it *does* matter if a carving is located on the north wall as opposed to the east wall, or next to one carving and not another, for example. In a sense, Rosslyn can be "read" as a "library in stone", as if you start in the northeast corner and then walk clockwise around the chapel, the Green Men carvings get progressively older, for example, and the Dance of Death carving is closer to the end than the beginning. The great Cycle unfolds...

THE CRYPT

It may also be of interest that historically, the sacristy, or 'crypt', of Rosslyn is the oldest part of the building, as it was built earlier than the chapel itself. It is also important to note that there is no documented historical evidence at all to suggest a Templar connection with Rosslyn Chapel itself -- rather, the 'real' medieval Templar connection is at the nearby village of Temple, called Balantradoch in medieval times. The ruins of the medieval Temple church still stand today. So this site was the genuine headquarters of the Scottish medieval Knights Templar -- and not Rosslyn Chapel -- which might be surprising to many today. Yet there was a genuine medieval Templar headquarters in Scotland -- but although this is very NEAR to Rosslyn Castle and Chapel, it is not the same site.

WILL THERE BE AN EXCAVATION?

Many theories abound about what may be hidden at Rosslyn Chapel, which has created a "myth in the making" which seems to have a life all its own. Unfortunately, this has also led to great, even wild, speculation, which has at times detracted from the important architectural legacy of the chapel and the good work of the Sinclair family and Rosslyn Chapel Trust in preserving the building. But "the question" remains: Will the vaults of Rosslyn Chapel ever be excavated?

In an effort to find some answers to these questions, the Director of Rosslyn Chapel Trust, Mr. Stuart Beattie, was asked about the excavation issue. He explains:

Due to the Scottish law of the 'Right of Sepulchre', a rather lengthy legal procedure would have to be followed, in order to secure the necessary permission to dig on the church grounds by the authorities. Meanwhile,

the focus is on the *preservation* of the building, and not on excavation, at this time. (7)

This basically means that as there are important burial sites located around the chapel, one cannot simply start "digging up graves", so to speak. This is why there is a special law of the "Right of Sepulchre", so that graves and church yards will not be disturbed. Much important restoration work needs to be done on the chapel now, in order to save it from further damage and to protect it for posterity, Mr. Beattie says, adding that this must obviously be the first priority of The Rosslyn Chapel Trust. He says that perhaps at some future point, they *may* put forth a challenge to the legal hurdle of the "Right to Sepulchre" in order to obtain the proper legal permission that would be needed to begin a professional excavation. But this is not likely to be any time soon, Mr. Beattie believes, as the emphasis is on the preservation of the building, which must come first.

James Simpson, architect of the extensive conservation project at Rosslyn, states in his recent contribution to the book that accompanied the 2002 Rosslyn art exhibition at the National Gallery of Scotland:

It may be 2010 before the programme of conservation and development currently envisaged is completed. Fifty or so years of decline will have been followed by thirty years of making up the deficit. Nor will that be the end of the matter; managing and caring for a site like Rosslyn never ends. It is in the very nature of 'heritage' that responsibilities, as well as rights, are passed on from generation to generation... (8)

But speculation will undoubtedly continue as the conservation project will not be finished until at least 2010, so any excavation would occur after that at the very earliest.

AN 'ARCANUM IN STONE'

Over the years the Guilds, the Templars, the Rosicrucians, and the Masons have all recognised something of their own mystery teaching in the complex allegory presented by Rosslyn Chapel. An arcanum, a book in stone... (9)

Of interest to us today, many believe it still retains its special secrets, whatever they may be. Rosslyn is officially known as the Collegiate Church of St. Matthew and is an active Scottish Episcopal church today, something often overlooked. But it has never lost its mystery or its call to us today, to embark on our own Quest for the wisdom of the ages. The Templars, too, have never lost their intrigue or mystery for us today. By exploring all of the major interrelated topics-- A to Z --about the Templars in *The Knights Templar Encyclopedia*, you, too, can be fully up to date on the latest factual information about this fascinating medieval Order. Let's recall the Templars' famous motto -- 'Carpe Diem!' -- (Seize the day!). You, too, can 'seize the day'....and keep the genuine flame of the medieval Templars' memory alive, today.

NOTES

- 1 Earl of Rosslyn, *Rosslyn Chapel*, official guidebook, Rosslyn Chapel Trust, Roslin, Midlothian, 1997, 2
- 2 Ralls, K., *The Templars and the Grail*, Quest, Chicago, 2003, 90
- 3 Earl of Rosslyn, *Rosslyn Chapel*, 2
- 4 Ralls, K, and Robertson, I, *The Quest for the Celtic Key*, Luath Press, Edinburgh, 2002, 345
- 5 Harding, M., *A Little Book of the Green Man*, Aurum Press, London, 1998, 58
- 6 Earl of Rosslyn, *Rosslyn Chapel*, 27
- 7 personal communication by Rosslyn Chapel Trust Director Mr. Stuart Beattie, to author Dr. Karen Ralls, 2000
- 8 Simpson, J., "The Conservation of Rosslyn: An Unfinished Story of Decline and Recovery", in *Rosslyn: Country of Painter and Poet*, Trustees of the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, 2002, 84
- 9 Brydon, R., *A History of the Guilds, the Masons, and the Rosy Cross*, Rosslyn Chapel Trust, Rosslyn Chapel, Roslin, Midlothian, 1994, back page

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