The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ

Lynn Picknett, Clive Prince
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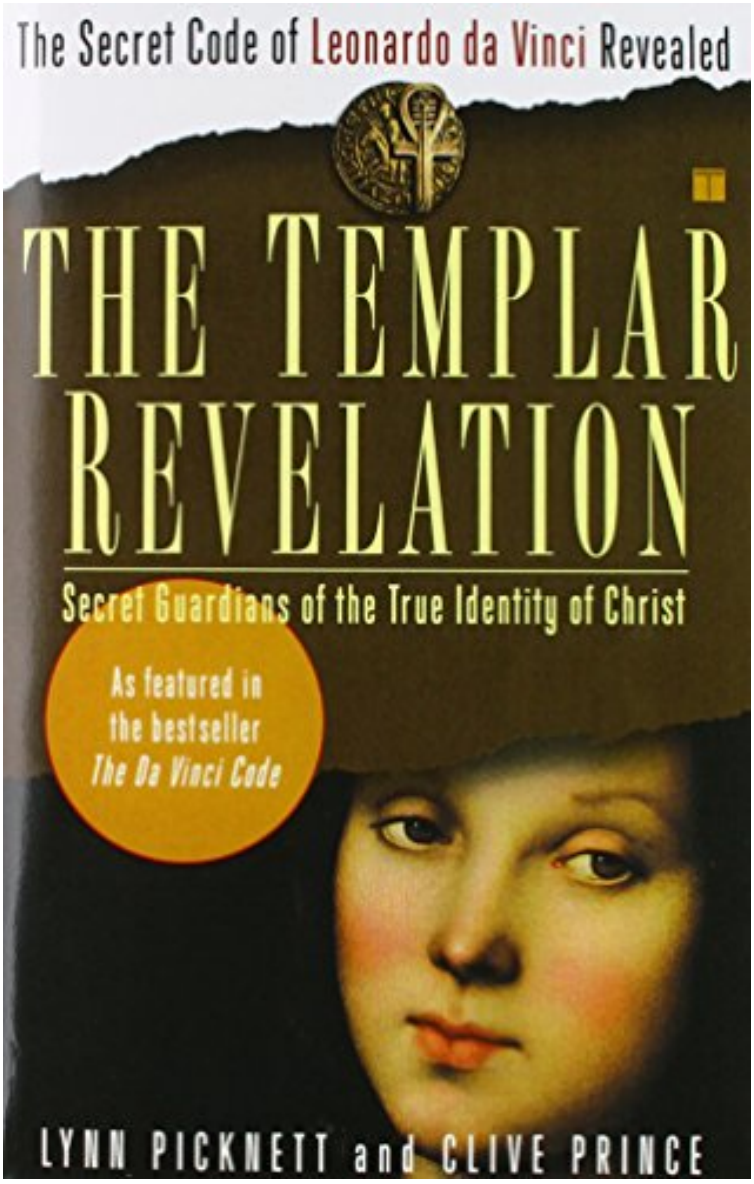

#535022 in Books Lynn Picknett 1998-11-12 1998-11-12Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.44 x 1.30 x 5.50l, .90 #File Name: 0684848910432 pagesThe Templar Revelation Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ | File size: 28.Mb

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THE MOST CLOSELY GUARDED SECRET OF THE WESTERN WORLD IS ABOUT TO BE REVEALED -- AND YOU WILL NEVER SEE CHRISTIANITY IN THE SAME LIGHT AGAIN. In a remarkable achievement of historical detective work that is destined to become a classic, authors Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince delve into the mysterious world of the Freemasons, the Cathars, the Knights Templar, and the occult to discover the truth behind an underground religion with roots in the first century that survives even today. Chronicling their fascinating quest for truth through time and space, the authors reveal an astonishing new view of the real motives and character of the founder of Christianity, as well as the actual historical -- and revelatory -- roles of John the Baptist and Mary Magdalene. Painstakingly researched and thoroughly documented, The Templar Revelation presents a secret history, preserved through the centuries but encoded in works of art and even in the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe, whose final chapter could shatter the foundation of the Christian Church.

Colin Wilson Author of Atlas of Holy Places and Sacred Sites One of the most fascinating books I have read since The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail.About the AuthorLynn Picknett is a writer, researcher, and lecturer on historical and religious mysteries. Her seminal book, written with Clive Prince,The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ, inspired the New York Times bestsellers The Da Vinci Code and The Secret Supper. They are also the authors of The Sion Revelation: The Truth About the Guardians of Christ's Sacred Bloodline. She lives in London, England.Clive Prince is awriter, researcher, and lecturer on the paranormal, the occult, and historical and religious mysteries. With Lynn Picknett, he is the author of The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ and Turin Shroud: In Whose Image? He lives in London, England.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.CHAPTER ONE: THE SECRET CODE OF LEONARDO DA VINCIIt is one of the most famous -- and enduring -- works of art in the world. Leonardo da Vinci's fresco The Last Supper is the one surviving piece of the original church of Santa Maria delle Grazie near Milan, being on the only wall that remained standing after Allied bombing reduced the rest of the building to rubble in the Second World War. Although many other admired artists such as Ghirlandaio, and Nicolas Poussin -- even such an idiosyncratic painter as Salvador Dali -- have also given the world their version of this significant biblical scene, it is Leonardo's which has, for some reason, captured the imagination more than most. Versions of it are seen everywhere, encompassing both ends of the spectrum of taste, from the sublime to the ridiculous.Some images may be so familiar that they are never truly examined, and although they lie openly before the viewer's gaze and invite closer scrutiny, at their most profound and meaningful level they actually remain totally closed books. So it is with Leonardo's Last Supper -- and, unbelievably enough, with almost all of his other remaining works.It was the work of Leonardo (1452-1519) -- that tortured genius of Renaissance Italy -- that was to draw us on to a path that led to discoveries so breathtaking in their implications that at first it seemed impossible: impossible that generations of academics had simply not observed what leapt to our startled notice -- and impossible that such explosive information had lain patiently waiting all this time for writers like us from outside the mainstream of historical or religious research to discover.So, to begin our story proper we have to return to Leonardo's Last Supper and look at it with new eyes. This is not the time to view it in the context of the familiar art-historical assumptions. This is the moment when it is appropriate to see it as a complete newcomer to this most familiar of scenes would see it, to let the scales of preconception fall from one's eyes and, perhaps for the first time, really look at it.The central figure is, of course, that of Jesus, whom Leonardo referred to as 'the Redeemer' in his notes for the work. (Even so, the reader is warned against making any of the obvious assumptions here.) He looks contemplatively downwards and slightly to his left, hands outstretched on the table before him as if presenting some gift to the viewer. As this is the Last Supper at which, so the New Testament tells us, Jesus initiated the sacrament of the bread and wine, urging his followers to partake of them as his 'flesh' and 'blood', one might reasonably expect some chalice or cup of wine to be set before him, to be encompassed by that gesture. After all, for Christians this meal came immediately before Jesus' 'Passion' in the garden of Gethsemane when he fervently prayed that 'this cup pass from me...' -- another allusion to the wine/blood imagery -- and also before his death by crucifixion when his holy blood was spilled on behalf of all mankind. Yet there is no wine in front of Jesus (and a mere token amount on the whole table). Could it be that those spread hands are making what, according to the artists, is essentially an empty gesture?In the light of the missing wine, perhaps it is also no accident that of all the bread on the table very little is actually broken. As Jesus himself identified the bread with his own body which was to be broken in the supreme sacrifice, is some subtle message being conveyed about the true nature of Jesus' suffering?This, however, is merely the tip of the iceberg of the unorthodoxy depicted in this painting. In the biblical account it is the young St John -- known as 'the Beloved' -- who was physically so close to Jesus on this occasion as to be leaning 'on his bosom'. Yet Leonardo's

representation of this young person does not, as required by the biblical 'stage directions', so recline, but instead leans exaggeratedly away from the Redeemer, head almost coquettishly tilted to the right. Even where this one character is concerned this is by no means all, for newcomers to the painting might be forgiven for harbouring curious uncertainties about the so-called St John. For while it is true that the artist's own predilections tended to represent the epitome of male beauty as somewhat effeminate, surely this is a woman we are looking at. Everything about 'him' is startlingly feminine. Aged and weathered though the fresco may be, one can still make out the tiny, graceful hands, the pretty, elfin features, the distinctly female bosom and the gold necklace. This woman, for surely it is such, is also wearing garments that mark her out as being special. They are the mirror image of the Redeemer's: where one wears a blue robe and a red cloak, the other wears a red robe and a blue cloak in the identical style. No-one else at the table wears clothes that mirror those of Jesus in this way. But then no-one else at the table is a woman.Central to the overall composition is the shape that Jesus and this woman make together -- a giant, spreadeagled 'M', almost as if they were literally joined at the hip but had suffered a falling out, or even grown apart. To our knowledge no academic has referred to this feminine character as anything other than 'St John', and the 'M' shape has also passed them by. Leonardo was, we have discovered in our researches, an excellent psychologist who amused himself by presenting the patrons who had given him standard religious commissions with highly unorthodox images, knowing that people will view the most startling heresy with equanimity because they usually only see what they expect to see. If you are commissioned to paint a standard Christian scene and present the public with something that looks superficially like it, they will never question its dubious symbolism. Yet Leonardo must have hoped that perhaps others who shared his unusual interpretation of the New Testament message would recognize his version, or that someone, somewhere, some objective observer, would one day seize on the image of this mysterious woman linked with the letter 'M' and ask the obvious questions. Who was this 'M' and why was she so important? Why would Leonardo risk his reputation -- even his life in those days of the flaming pyre -- to include her in this crucial Christian scene?Whoever she is, her own fate appears to be less than secure, for a hand cuts across her gracefully bent neck in what seems to be a threatening gesture. The Redeemer, too, is menaced by an upright forefinger positively thrust into his face with obvious vehemence. Both Jesus and 'M' appear totally oblivious to these threats, each apparently lost in the world of their own thoughts, each in their own way serene and composed. But it is as if secret symbols are being employed, not only to warn Jesus and his female companion of their separate fates, but also to instruct (or perhaps remind) the observer of some information which it would otherwise be dangerous to make public. Is Leonardo using this painting to convey some private belief which it would have been little short of insane to share with a wider audience in any obvious fashion? And could it be that this belief might have a message for many more than his immediate circle, perhaps even for us today?Let us look further at this astonishing work. To the observer's right of the fresco a tall bearded man bends almost double to speak to the last disciple at the table. In doing so he has turned his back completely on the Redeemer. It is this disciple -- St Thaddeus or St Jude -- whose model is acknowledged to be Leonardo himself. Nothing that Renaissance painters ever depicted wasaccidental or included merely to be pretty, and this particular exemplar of the time and the profession was known to be a stickler for the visual double entendre. (His preoccupation with using the right model for the various disciples can be detected in his wry suggestion that the irritating Prior of the Santa Maria Monastery himself sit for the character of Judas!) So why did Leonardo paint himself looking so obviously away from Jesus?There is more. An anomalous hand points a dagger at a disciple's stomach one person away from 'M'. By no stretch of the imagination could the hand belong to anyone sitting at that table because it is physically impossible for those near by to have twisted round to get the dagger in that position. However, what is truly amazing about this disembodied hand is not so much that it exists, but that in all our reading about Leonardo we have come across only a couple of references to it, and they show a curious reluctance to find anything unusual about it. Like the St John who is really a woman, nothing could be more obvious -- and more bizarre -- once it is pointed out, yet usually it is completely blanked out by the observer's eye and mind simply because it is so extraordinary and so outrageous.We have often heard it said that Leonardo was a pious Christian whose religious paintings reflected the depth of his faith. As we have seen so far, at least one of them includes highly dubious imagery in terms of Christian orthodoxy, and our further research, as we shall see, reveals that nothing could be further from the truth than the idea that Leonardo was a true believer -- a believer, that is, in any accepted, or acceptable, form of Christianity. Already, the curious and anomalous features in just one of his works seem to indicate that he was trying to tell us of another layer of meaning in that familiar biblical scene, of another world of belief beyond the accepted outline of the image frozen on that fifteenth-century mural near Milan.Whatever those heterodox inclusions may mean, they were, it cannot be stressed too much, totally at variance with orthodox Christianity. This itself is hardly news to many of today's materialist/rationalists, for to them Leonardo was the first real scientist, a man who had no time for superstitions or religion in any form, who was the very antithesis of the mystic or the occultist. Yet they, too, have failed to see what is plainly set out before their eyes. To paint the Last Supper without significant amounts of wine is like painting the critical moment of a coronation without the crown: it either misses the point completely or is making quite another one, to the extent that it marks the painter out as nothing less than an out and out heretic, someone who did possess religious beliefs, but ones which were at odds, perhaps even at war, with those of Christian orthodoxy. And Leonardo's other works, we have discovered,

underline his own specific heretical obsessions through carefully applied and consistent imagery, something that would not happen if the artist were an atheist merely engaged in earning his living. These uncalled for inclusions and symbols are also much, much more than the sceptic's satirical response to such a commission -- they are not just the equivalent of sticking a red nose on St Peter, for example. What we are looking at in the Last Supper and his other works is the secret code of Leonardo da Vinci, which we believe has a startling relevance to the world today.It may be argued that whatever Leonardo did or did not believe, this was merely the foible of one man, and a notoriously odd man at that, one whose story was one of endless paradoxes. He might have been a loner, but he was also the life and soul of the party; he despised fortune-tellers, but his accounts listed monies paid to astrologers; he was a vegetarian and caring animal-lover but his tenderness rarely extended to humankind; he obsessively dissected corpses and watched executions with an anatomist's eye; he was both a profound thinker and a master of riddles, conjuring tricks and hoaxes. Given such a complex outlook, it is perhaps only to be expected that his personal views on religion and philosophy were unusual, even quirky. For that reason alone, it may be tempting to dismiss his heretical beliefs as irrelevant to today. While it is generally admitted that Leonardo was hugely gifted, the modern tendency to arrogant 'epochism' seeks to undermine his achievements. After all, when he was in his prime, even the technique of printing was a novelty. What could one lone inventor of such a primitive time possibly have to offer a world that is endlessly informed by surfing the Net, and which can, in a matter of seconds, communicate through the telephone or the fax machine with people on continents that had not even been discovered in his day?There are two answers to that. The first is that Leonardo was not, to use a paradox, a run-of-the-mill genius. Whereas most people know that he designed flying machines and primitive military tanks, some of his inventions were so unlikely for his day that those of a more whimsical turn of mind have even suggested that he might have actually had visions of the future. His designs for a bicycle, for example, only came to light in the late 1960s. Unlike the painfully protracted trial-and-error stages in the development of the early Victorian bicycle, however, the da Vinci roadracer had two wheels of equal size and a chain and gear mechanism. But even more fascinating than the actual design, is the question of what possible reason he could have had for inventing a bike in the first place. For man has always wanted to fly like the birds, but having a driving desire to pedal along less than perfect roads precariously balanced on two wheels is completely mystifying (and does not, unlike flying, figure in any classic fable). Leonardo also predicted the telephone, among many other futuristic claims to fame.If Leonardo was even more of a genius than the history books allow, there is still the question as to what possible knowledge he could have had that would impinge in any meaningful or widespread way five centuries after he lived. While it might be argued that the teachings of a first-century rabbi might be expected to have even less relevance to our time and place, it is also true that some ideas are universal and eternal, and that the truth, if it can be found or defined, is never essentially undermined by the passage of the centuries.It was not, however, either Leonardo's philosophy (whether overt or covert) or his art which first attracted both of us to him. It was his most paradoxical work, one that is both incredibly famous and at the same time least known, which drew us into our intensive Leonardo research. As described in detail in our last book, we discovered that it was the Maestro who had faked the Turin Shroud, which had long been believed to have been miraculously imprinted with Jesus' image at the time of his death. In 1988, carbon dating tests proved it to all but a handful of desperate believers to be an artefact of late medieval or early Renaissance times, but to us it remained a truly remarkable image -- to say the least. Uppermost in our minds was the question of the identity of the hoaxer, for whoever had created this amazing 'relic' had to be a genius.The Turin Shroud, as all the literature -- both for and against its authenticity -- recognizes, behaves like a photograph. It exhibits a curious 'negative effect', which means that it looks like a vague scorchmark to the naked eye but can be seen in fine detail in photographic negative. Because no known painting or brassrubbing behaves in this way, the negative effect has been taken by the 'Shroudies' (believers that it is truly the Shroud of Jesus) to be proof of the miraculous qualities of the image. However, we discovered that the image on the Turin Shroud behaves like a photograph because that is precisely what it is.Incredible though it may seem at first, the Turin Shroud is a photograph. We, together with Keith Prince, reconstructed what we believed the original technique to be and in doing so became the first people ever to replicate all the hitherto unexplained characteristics of the Turin Shroud. And, despite the Shroudies' claims that it was impossible, we did so using extremely basic equipment. We used a camera obscura (a pinhole camera), chemically coated cloth, treated with materials readily available in the fifteenth century, and large doses of light. However, the subject of our experimental photograph was a plaster bust of a girl, which was disappointingly lightyears away in status from the original model. For although the face on the Shroud was not, as had been widely claimed, that of Jesus, it was in fact the face of the hoaxer himself. In brief, the Turin Shroud is, among many other things, a five-hundred-year-old photograph of none other than Leonardo da Vinci.Despite some curious claims to the contrary, this cannot have been the work of a pious Christian believer. The Turin Shroud, seen in photographic negative, apparently shows the broken and bleeding body of Jesus. It must be remembered that this is no ordinary blood, for to Christians it is not only literally divine: it is also the vehicle through which the world can be redeemed. To our minds, one simply cannot fake that blood and be considered a believer -- nor could one have even the least respect for the person of Jesus and replace his image with that of oneself. Leonardo did both of these things, with meticulous care and even, one suspects, a certain relish. Of course he knew that, as the supposed image of

Jesus -- for no-one would realize it was the Florentine artist himself -- the Shroud would be prayed over by a sizeable number of pilgrims even during his own lifetime. For all we know he actually hovered in the shadows and watched them do it -- it would have been in keeping with what we know of his character. But did he also guess just how many pilgrims would be crossing themselves in front of his image over the centuries? Did he imagine that one day intelligent people would actually be converted to Catholicism simply by looking into that beautiful, tortured face? And could he possibly have foreseen that the West's cultural image of what Jesus looked like would come largely from the image on the Turin Shroud? Did he realize that one day millions of people the world over would be worshipping the image of a fifteenth-century homosexual heretic in the place of their beloved God, that Leonardo da Vinci was literally to become the image of Jesus Christ?The Shroud was, we believe, very nearly the most outrageous -- and successful -- joke ever played on history. But, although it has fooled millions, it is more than a hymn to the art of the tasteless hoax. We believe that Leonardo used the opportunity to create the ultimate Christian relic as a vehicle for two things: an innovative technique and an encoded heretical belief. The technique of primitive photography was -- as events were to show -- highly dangerous to make public in that paranoid and superstitious era. But it no doubt amused Leonardo to make sure that this prototype was looked after by the very priests he despised. Of course it could be that this ironic priestly guardianship was purely coincidental, merely a fateful twist in an already remarkable story, but to us it smacks of Leonardo's passion for total control, which can be seen here to reach far beyond the grave.The Turin Shroud, fake and work of genius though it is, also carries certain symbols that underline Leonardo's own particular obsessions, as seen in his other, more generally accepted, works. For example, there is at the base of Shroudman's neck a distinct demarcation line. When the image as a whole is turned into a 'contour map', using the most sophisticated computer technology, we can see that the line marks the lower end of the head image at the front, while there is, as it, were a sea of unimaged, flat darkness immediately under it until the image begins again at the upper chest. We believe there are two reasons for this. One is purely practical, for the front image is a composite, the body being that of a genuinely crucified man and the face being Leonardo's own, so that line perhaps of necessity indicates the 'join' of the two images. However, this hoaxer was no mean workman, and it would have been relatively easy to obscure or fudge that tell-tale demarcation line. But what if Leonardo, in fact, actually had no desire to get rid of it? What if he left it there deliberately in order to make a point 'for those with eyes to see'?What possible heresy can the Turin Shroud carry, even in code? Surely there is a limit to the symbols one can hide in a simple, stark image of a naked crucified man -- and one that has been analyzed by many top scientists using state-of-the-art equipment? While we will be returning to this theme in due course, let us merely hint for now that these questions may be answered by looking afresh at two main aspects of the image. The first concerns the abundance of blood which appears to be running freshly down Jesus' arms -- and which may appear, superficially, to contradict the symbolic lack of wine on the table of the Last Supper, but which in fact reinforces that particular point. The second concerns the obvious demarcation line between head and body, as if Leonardo were drawing our attention to a beheading...As far as we know, Jesus was not beheaded and the image is a composite, so we are being asked to consider the images of two separate characters who were nevertheless closely linked in some way. But even so, why should someone who was beheaded be set 'over' one who was crucified?As will be seen, this clue of the severed head on the Turin Shroud is merely a reinforcement of symbols in many of Leonardo's other works. We have noted how the anomalous young woman, 'M', in his Last Supper, is apparently being menaced by a hand slicing across her delicate neck, and how Jesus himself is being threatened by an upright finger thrust into his face, apparently as a warning -- or perhaps a reminder, or both. In Leonardo's works this upright forefinger is always, in every case, a direct reference to John the Baptist.This saint, the alleged forerunner of Jesus, who told the world to 'behold the Lamb of God', whose sandals he was not worthy to unlatch, was of supreme importance to Leonardo, if only to judge from his omnipresence in the artist's surviving works. This obsession itself is curious for one who is so widely deemed by modern rationalists to have had no time for religion. A man to whom all the characters and traditions of Christianity were as nothing would hardly have devoted so much time and energy to one particular saint as he did to John the Baptist. Time and time again it is this John who dominates Leonardo's life, both at a conscious level in his works and at a synchronistic level in the coincidences that surrounded him. It is almost as if the Baptist followed him around. For example, his beloved city of Florence itself is dedicated to that saint, as is the cathedral in Turin wherein Leonardo's fake Holy Shroud lies in state. His last painting, which, with the Mona Lisa, stood unclaimed in the chamber of his dying hours, was of John the Baptist, and his only surviving piece of sculpture (executed together with Giovan Francesco Rustici, a known occultist) also depicted the Baptist. It now stands above the entrance to the baptistry in Florence, high above the heads of the tourists and, unfortunately, providing fair game for the irreverent flocks of pigeons.That upright forefinger -- what we call the 'John gesture' -- was featured in Raphael's The School of Athens (1509). There we see the venerable character of Plato exhibiting this sign, but in the circumstances it is not quite such a mysterious allusion as one might suspect. In fact, the model for Plato was none other than Leonardo himself, obviously making a gesture that was not only characteristic of him in some way, but also profoundly significant to him (and presumably also to Raphael and others of their circle).In case it is thought that we are making too much of what we term 'the John gesture', let us look at other examples of it in Leonardo's work.It figures in several of his paintings and, as we have said, always carries the same significance. In his unfinished

Adoration of the Magi (which was begun in 1481) an anonymous bystander makes this gesture close to a mound of earth out of which grows a carob tree. Most observers would hardly notice this, for their eyes would inevitably be drawn to what they would believe the whole point of the picture to be -- as the title suggests, the worshipping of the Holy Family by the 'wise men', or Magi. The beautiful and dreamy Virgin, with the infant Jesus on her knee, is portrayed as an insipid and colourless character. The Magi kneel, presenting her with their gifts for the child, while in the background a crowd mills around, apparently also worshipping the mother and child. But, like the Last Supper, this is only superficially a Christian painting and repays closer scrutiny.The worshippers in the foreground are hardly examples of health and beauty. Gaunt almost to the point of being corpselike, their outstretched hands appear not so much to be raised in wonderment but more as if they are clawing in a nightmarish fashion at the couple. The Magi present their gifts -- but only two of the legendary three. Frankincense and myrrh are being offered, but no gold. To those of Leonardo's day, gold meant not only immediate wealth, but was also a symbol of kingship -- and here it is being withheld from Jesus.If one looks behind the Virgin and the Magi there appears to be a second group of worshippers. These are much healthier and more normal-looking -- but if one follows their eyelines it is obvious that they are not looking at the Virgin and child at all, but seem instead to be revering the roots of the carob tree, at which one man is making the John gesture'. And the carob tree is traditionally associated with -- John the Baptist...Down to the bottom right-hand corner of the painting a young man turns deliberately away from the Holy Family. It is generally accepted that this is Leonardo himself, but the somewhat weak argument that is often used to explain this aversion -- that the artist felt himself unworthy to face them -- will scarcely stand up. For Leonardo is widely known to have been no lover of the Church. Besides, in the character of St Thaddeus or St Jude in the Last Supper he is also pointedly turned away from the Redeemer, thus underlining some extreme emotional response to the central figures in the Christian story. And as Leonardo was hardly the epitome of either piety or humility, this reaction is unlikely to have been inspired by a sense of inferiority or obsequiousness.Turning to Leonardo's beautiful and haunting cartoon for the Virgin and Child with St Anne (1501), which graces London's National Gallery, again there are elements that should -- but rarely do -- disturb the observer with their subversive implications. The drawing shows the Virgin and child together with St Anne (Mary's mother) and John the Baptist as a child. The infant Jesus is apparently blessing his cousin John, who gazes upwards reflectively, while St Anne peers intently into her daughter's oblivious face from close quarters -- and is making the 'John gesture' with a curiously large and masculine hand. However, this upraised forefinger rises immediately over the tiny hand of Jesus which is giving the blessing, as if overshadowing it both literally and metaphorically. And although the Virgin appears to be seated in an extremely uncomfortable way -- almost 'sidesaddle', in fact -- it is the baby Jesus whose positioning is particularly odd. The Virgin holds him as if she has just thrust him forward to make his blessing, as if she has brought him into the picture simply to do so but can only hold him there with difficulty. Meanwhile, John rests casually against St Anne's knee as if unconcerned at the honour he is being given. Could it be that the Virgin's own mother is reminding her of something secret connected with John?According to the accompanying notice in the National Gallery, some art experts, puzzled by the youthfulness of St Anne and the anomalous presence of John the Baptist, have speculated that the painting actually depicted Mary and her cousin Elisabeth -- John's mother. This seems plausible, and if correct, reinforces the point.This apparent reversal of the usual roles of Jesus and John can also be seen on one of the two versions of Leonardo's Virgin of the Rocks. Art historians have never satisfactorily explained why there should be two, but one is currently exhibited in the National Gallery in London, and the other -- to us by far the more interesting -- is in the Louvre in Paris.The original commission was from an organization known as the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception, and was for a single painting to be the centrepiece of a triptych for the altar of their chapel in the church of San Francesco Grand in Milan. (The other two paintings for the triptych were to be by other artists.) The contract, dated 25 April 1483, still exists, and sheds interesting light on the expected work -- and on what the members of the confraternity actually received. In it they carefully specified the shape and dimensions of the painting they wanted -- a necessity, for the frame for the triptych already existed. Oddly, both of Leonardo's finished versions meet these specifications, although why he did two of them is unknown. We may, however, hazard a guess about these divergent interpretations which has little to do with perfectionism and more with an awareness of their explosive potential.The contract also specified the theme of the painting. It was to portray an event not found in the Gospels but long present in Christian legend. This was the story of how, during the flight into Egypt, Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus had sheltered in a desert cave, where they met the infant John the Baptist, who was protected by the archangel Uriel. The point of this legend is that it allowed an escape from one of the more obvious and embarrassing questions raised by the Gospel story of Jesus' baptism. Why should a supposedly sinless Jesus require baptism at all, given that the ritual is a symbolic gesture of having one's sins washed away and of one's commitment to future godliness? Why should the Son of God himself have submitted to what was clearly an act of authority on the part of the Baptist?This legend tells how, at this remarkably fortuitous meeting of the two holy infants, Jesus conferred on his cousin John the authority to baptize him when they were both adults. For several reasons this seems to us to be a most ironic commission for the confraternity to give Leonardo, but equally one might suspect that he would have delighted in receiving it -- and in making the interpretation, at least in one of the versions, very much his own.In the style of the day, the members of the confraternity had specified a lavish

and ornate painting, complete with lashings of gold leaf and a flurry of cherubs and ghostly Old Testament prophets to fill out the space. What they got in the end was quite different, to such an extent that relations between them and the artist became acrimonious, culminating in a lawsuit that dragged on for more than twenty years.Leonardo chose to represent the scene as realistically as possible, with no extraneous characters -- there were to be no fat cherubs or shadowy prophets of doom for him. In fact, the dramatis personae have been perhaps excessively whittled down, for although this scene supposedly depicts the flight into Egypt of the Holy Family, Joseph does not appear in it at all.The Louvre version, which was the earlier, shows a blue-robed Virgin with a protective arm around one child, the other infant being grouped with Uriel. Curiously, the two children are identical, but odder still, it is the child with the angel who is blessing the other, and Mary's child who is kneeling in subservience. This has led art historians to assume that, for some reason, Leonardo chose to pose the child John with Mary. After all, there are no labels with which to identify the individuals, and surely the child who has the authority to bless must be Jesus.There are, however, other ways to interpret this picture, ways that not only suggest strong subliminal and highly unorthodox messages, but also reinforce the codes used in Leonardo's other works. Perhaps the similarity of the two children here suggests that Leonardo was deliberately fudging their identity for his own purposes. And, while Mary is protectively embracing the child generally accepted as being John with her left hand, her right is stretched out above the head of 'Jesus' in what seems to be a gesture of downright hostility. This is what Serge Bramly, in his recent biography of Leonardo, describes as 'reminiscent of an eagle's talons'. Uriel is pointing across to Mary's child, but is also, significantly, looking enigmatically out at the observer -- that is, resolutely away from the Virgin and child. While it may be easier and more acceptable to interpret this gesture as an indication of the one who is to be the Messiah, there are other possible meanings.What if the child with Mary, in the Louvre version of The Virgin of the Rocks, is Jesus -- as one might logically expect -- and the youngster with Uriel is John? Remember that in this case it is John who is blessing Jesus, with the latter submitting to his authority. Uriel, as John's special protector, is avoiding even looking at Jesus. And Mary, protecting her son, is casting a threatening hand high above the head of the baby John. Several inches directly below her outstretched palm the pointing hand of Uriel cuts straight across, as if the two gestures are encompassing some cryptic clue. It is as if Leonardo is indicating that some object, some significant -- but invisible -- thing ought to fill the space between them. In the context it is by no means fanciful to understand that Mary's outstretched fingers are meant to look as if they were placed on the crown of an invisible head, while Uriel's pointing forefinger cuts across the space precisely where the neck would be. This phantom head floats just above the child who is with Uriel...So this child is effectively labelled after all, for which of the two of them was to die by beheading? And if this is truly John the Baptist, it is he who is shown to be giving the blessing, to be the superior one.Yet when we turn to the much later National Gallery version, we find that all the elements needed to make these heretical deductions are missing -- but those elements only. The two children are quite different in appearance, and the one with Mary bears the traditional long-stemmed cross of the Baptist (although it is true that this may have been added by a later artist). Here Mary's right hand is still outstretched above the other child, but this time there is no suggestion of a threat. Uriel no longer points, nor looks away from the scene. It is as if Leonardo is inviting us to 'spot the difference' -- daring us to draw our own conclusions from the anomalous details.This kind of examination of Leonardo's work reveals a plethora of provocative and disturbing undercurrents. There does seem to be a repetition, using several ingenious subliminal symbols and signals, of the John the Baptist theme. Time and time again he, and images denoting him, are elevated above the figure of Jesus -- even, if we are right, in the symbols that are cunningly laid on the Turin Shroud itself.There is something driven about this insistence, not least in the very intricacy of the images that Leonardo used, and indeed, in the risk he took in presenting even such clever and subliminal heresy to the world. Perhaps, as we have already hinted, the reason he finished so little of his work was not so much that he was a perfectionist, but more that he was only too aware of what might happen to him if anyone of note saw through the thin layer of orthodoxy to the outright 'blasphemy' that lay just under the surface. Perhaps even the intellectual and physical giant that was Leonardo was a little wary of falling foul of the authorities -- once was quite enough for him.However, there was surely no need for him to put his head on the block by working such heretical messages into his paintings unless he had a passionate belief in them. As we have already seen, far from being the atheistic materialist so beloved of many moderns, Leonardo was deeply, seriously committed to a system of belief that ran totally counter to what was then, and still is now, mainstream Christianity. It was what many would choose to call the 'occult'.To most people today that is a word that has immediate, and less than positive, connotations. It is taken to mean black magic, or the cavortings of depraved charlatans -- or both. In fact, the word 'occult' simply means 'hidden' and is commonly used in astronomy, such as in the description of one heavenly body 'occulting', or eclipsing, another. Where Leonardo was concerned, one might agree that while there were indeed elements in his life and beliefs that smacked of sinister rites and magical practices, it is also true that what he sought was, above and beyond anything else, knowledge. Most of what he sought had, however, been effectively 'occulted' by society -- and by one omnipresent and powerful organization in particular. Throughout most of Europe at that time the Church frowned upon any scientific experimentation and took drastic steps to silence those who made their unorthodox or particularly individual views public.However, Florence -- where Leonardo was born and brought up, and at whose court his career really began -- was a flourishing centre for a new

wave of knowledge. This, astonishingly enough, was due entirely to this city being a haven for large numbers of influential occultists and magicians. Leonardo's first patrons, the de Medici family who ruled Florence, actively encouraged occult scholarship and even sponsored researchers to look for, and translate, specific lost manuscripts.This fascination with the arcane was not the Renaissance equivalent of today's newspaper horoscopes. Although there were inevitably areas of investigation that would seem to us naive or downright superstitious, there were also many more which represented a serious attempt to understand the universe and man's place within it. The magician, however, sought to go a little further, and discover how to control the forces of nature. Seen in this light, perhaps it is not so remarkable that Leonardo of all people was, as we believe, an active participant in the occult culture of his time and place. And the distinguished historian Dame Frances Yates has even suggested that the whole key to Leonardo's far-ranging genius might have lain in contemporary ideas of magic.The details of the precise philosophies so prevalent in this Florentine occult movement can be found in our previous book, but briefly, the lynchpin of all the groups of the day was hermeticism, which takes its name from Hermes Trismegistus, the great, if legendary, Egyptian magus whose books presented a coherent magical system. By far the most important part of hermetic thinking was the idea that man was in some way literally divine -- a concept that was in itself so threatening to the Church's hold on the hearts and minds of its flock as to be deemed anathema.Hermetic principles were certainly demonstrated in Leonardo's life and work, but at first glance there would seem to be a glaring discrepancy between these sophisticated philosophical and cosmological ideas and heretical notions which nevertheless upheld the importance of biblical figures. (We must stress that the heterodox beliefs of Leonardo and his circle were not merely the result of a reaction against a corrupt and credulous Church. As history has shown, there was indeed a strong, and certainly not undercover, reaction to the Church of Rome -- the whole Protestant movement. But had Leonardo been alive today we would not find him worshipping in that kind of church either.)However, there is a great deal of evidence that hermeticists could also be outright heretics. Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), the fanatical preacher of hermeticism, proclaimed that his beliefs came from an ancient Egyptian religion that preceded Christianity -- and which eclipsed it in importance.Part of this flourishing occult world -- but still too wary of the Church's disapproval to be anything other than an underground movement -- were the alchemists. Again they are a group which suffers from a modern preconception. Today they are derided as fools who wasted their lives trying vainly to turn base metal into gold; in fact this image was a useful smokescreen for the serious alchemists who were more concerned with proper scientific experimentation -- but also with personal transformation and its implicit total control of one's own fate. Again, it is not difficult to see that someone as hungry for knowledge as Leonardo would be part of that movement, perhaps even a prime mover in it. While there is no direct evidence for his involvement, he was known to consort with committed occultists of all shades, and our own research into his faking of the Turin Shroud suggests strongly that the image was the direct result of his own 'alchemical' experiments. (In fact we have come to the conclusion that photography itself was once one of the great alchemical secrets.)Put simply: it is highly unlikely that Leonardo would have been unfamiliar with any system of knowledge that was available in his day, but at the same time, given the risks involved in being openly part of them, it is equally unlikely that he would commit any evidence of this to paper. Yet, as we have seen, the symbols and images he repeatedly used in his so-called Christian paintings were hardly those which, had they realized their true nature, would have been appreciated by the Church authorities.Even so, a fascination with hermeticism might seem, superficially at least, to be almost at the opposite end of the scale to a preoccupation with John the Baptist -- and the putative significance of the woman 'M'. In fact, it was this discrepancy which puzzled us to such an extent that we delved further. Of course it could be argued that what all this endless raising of forefingers means is that one Renaissance genius was obsessed with John the Baptist. But was it possible that a deeper significance lay behind Leonardo's own personal belief? Was the message that can be read into his paintings in some way actually true?Certainly the Maestro has long been acknowledged in occult circles as being the possessor of secret knowledge. When we began researching his part in the Turin Shroud we came across many rumours among such people to the effect not only that he had a hand in its creation, but also that he was a known magus of some renown. There is even a nineteenth-century Parisian poster advertising the Salon of the Rose + Cross -- a meeting-place for artistically minded occultists -- that depicts Leonardo as Keeper of the Holy Grail (which in such circles can be taken to be shorthand for Keeper of the Mysteries). Again, rumours and artistic licence do not in themselves add up to much, but, taken together with all the indications listed above, they certainly whetted our appetite to know more about the unknown Leonardo.So far we had isolated the major strand of what appeared to be Leonardo's obsession: John the Baptist. While it was only natural that he would receive commissions to paint or sculpt that saint while living in Florence -- a place that was dedicated to John -- it is a fact that, when left to himself, Leonardo chose to do so. After all, the last painting he was to work on before his death in 1519 -- which was not commissioned by anyone, but painted for his own reasons -- was of John the Baptist. Perhaps he wanted the image to look at as he lay dying. And even when he had been paid to paint an orthodox Christian scene, he always, if he could get away with it, emphasized the role of the Baptist in it.As we have seen, his images of John are elaborately concocted to convey a specific message, even if it is grasped imperfectly and subliminally. John is certainly depicted as important -- but then he was the forerunner, herald and blood relative of Jesus, so it is only natural that his role should be recognized in this way. Yet Leonardo is not

telling us that the Baptist was, like everyone else, inferior to Jesus. In his Virgin of the Rocks the angel is, arguably, pointing to John, who is blessing Jesus and not vice versa. In the Adoration of the Magi the healthy, normal-looking people are worshipping the elevated roots of the carob tree -- John's tree -- and not the colourless Virgin and child. And the 'John gesture', that upraised right-hand forefinger, is thrust into Jesus' face at the Last Supper in what is clearly no loving or supportive manner; at the very least, it seems to be saying in a bluntly threatening manner, 'Remember John'. And that least known of Leonardo's works, the Shroud of Turin, bears the same kind of symbolism, with its image of an apparently severed head being placed 'over' a classically crucified body. The overwhelming evidence is that, to Leonardo at least, John the Baptist was actually superior to Jesus.All this might make Leonardo appear to have been a voice crying in the wilderness. After all, many great minds have been eccentric, to say the least. Perhaps this was yet another area of his life in which he stood outside the conventions of his day, unappreciated and alone. But we were also aware, even at the outset of our research in the late 1980s, that evidence -- albeit of a highly controversial nature -- had emerged in recent years that linked him with a sinister and powerful secret society. This group, which allegedly existed many centuries before Leonardo, involved some of the most influential individuals and families in European history, and -- according to some sources -- it still exists today. Not only, it is said, were members of the aristocracy prime movers in this organization, but also some of today's most eminent figures in political and economic life keep it alive for their own particular aims.If we had fondly imagined in those early days that we would be spending our time in art galleries decoding Renaissance paintings we could hardly have been further from the truth.