

You might have thought that Monty Python had the last word on the Holy Grail, but now Umberto Eco has offered his own version of this potent mediaeval myth in Baudalino, his latest novel.

The title character is a peasant boy in twelfth-century Italy who by chance meets Frederick Barbarossa, the first Holy Roman Emperor. The novel tells of his adventures over the next fifty years: how Frederick adopts him and sends him to Paris to be educated; how he helps his adopted father, by means of his quick wit and good nature, to extricate himself from many tricky situations. Eventually he persuades an aging Frederick to embark on a Crusade. Mired in the dangerous politics of the warring states east of the Mediterranean, Frederick dies mysteriously in the castle of an Armenian dignitary. Baudalino and his eleven motley companions set off to find the fabled eastern kingdom of Prester John, posing as the Twelve Magi.

Truth or lies, fact or fiction? Baudalino relates his story to Niketas, a Byzantine historian in Constantinople, under attack from another wave of barbarian crusaders in 1204. Baudalino cheerfully admits that he has been a liar all his life, and Niketas doubts everything he says. On their approach to the east, Baudalino and his companions encounter many of the strange creatures they expect. They never quite reach the kingdom of Prester John, staying for some time in the neighbouring land of his heir, Deacon Johannes. Even Baudalino is uncertain whether Prester John exists. Baudalino is a mixture of credulity and skepticism. He makes things up only to develop a belief in them.
himself. The Holy Grail is the prime example. He carries the Grail reverently with him for years, half forgetting it was actually his own peasant father’s drinking bowl which he had decided was a more likely vessel for Jesus to have used at the Last Supper than the splendid chalice of the legends. The question of relics and their provenance is a common theme. Relics are easy enough to manufacture, and they are a ready source of cash in those superstitious days. Then again, they believed a relic could be a source of holy inspiration whether it was genuine or not.

_Baudalino_ is a long book, and the first half reads slowly. The shifting political allegiances in twelfth-century Italy and the endless, fruitless philosophical arguments of Baudalino’s fellow scholars – does the vacuum exist? Is the world flat? Where is the Garden of Eden? – do little to drive the narrative along. Once the Third Crusade is launched, more than halfway through the book, the pace picks up and by the end one begins to feel a certain mild interest in the plot. There is a murder mystery to solve – how did Frederick actually die? But this is not _The Name of the Rose_. It is rambling and the characters never really come alive.