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The Sword in the Stone—The Legend of Saint Galgano

An article by [Björn Hellqvist](#)



About 30 km (20 miles) southwest of Siena in beautiful Tuscany, Italy, stands the ruins of a Cistercian abbey. In a nearby chapel is one of the strangest relics ever: the sword of Saint Galgano, seemingly thrust into the bedrock to the hilt. How did it end up there?

The Tale of Saint Galgano

Galgano Guidotti was born in 1148, the son of a minor noble, and one of those punk, no-good young knights constantly looking for trouble and worldly pleasures. One day when he least expected it, Archangel Michael appeared before him and showed him the way to salvation, and kindly provided him with directions as well. Next day, Sir Galgano announced that he was going to become a hermit and took up residence in a cave. His friends and relatives ridiculed him, and Dionisia, his mother, bade him to wear his expensive nobleman's clothes and at least pay a last visit to his fiancée. On his way there, his horse reared, throwing Galgano. Spitting road dust, he suddenly felt as if he was being lifted to his feet by an invisible force, and a seraphic voice and a will he was unable to resist led him to Monte Siepi, a rugged hill close to his home town of Chiusdino.

The voice bade him to stand still and look at the top of the hill: Galgano saw a round temple with Jesus and Mary surrounded by the Apostles. The voice told him to climb the hill, and while doing so, the vision faded. When he reached the top the voice spoke again, inviting him to renounce his loose, easy living. Galgano replied that it was easier said than done, about as easy as splitting a rock with a sword. To prove his point, he drew his blade and thrust at the rocky ground. With an ease that would impress even cinderblock-splitting sword dealers at Renaissance fairs, the sword penetrated the living bedrock to the hilt. Galgano got the message, and took up permanent residence on that hill as a humble hermit. He led a life in poverty, visited by the occasional peasant looking for a blessing. He befriended wild animals, and once, when the Devil sent an assassin in the guise of a monk, the wild wolves living with Galgano attacked the killer and, according to legend, "gnawed his bones."

Galgano Guidotti died in 1181, at the age of 33 years, and was canonized four years later. His funeral was a major event, attended by bishops and three Cistercian abbots, including one who had got lost while on his way to Rome. The next year, the Bishop of Volterra gave Monte Siepi to the Cistercian monks, aware that they would build a shrine to Galgano's memory. They began building in 1185, erecting a round chapel that became known as the Cappella di Monte Siepi, on the hill above the main abbey, with the sword forming the centerpiece.

The Cappella offers a breathtaking view of the Abbey, the neighboring buildings and the beautiful surrounding countryside. Galgano's body was for some reason lost after the funeral, although his head, which is said to have grown golden curls for many years following his death, was placed in one side chapel, and the chewed bones of the arms of the assassin in another. Saint Galgano's head is preserved as a relic in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Siena, while the skeletal arms are still in place. The crowds of pilgrims were so numerous that the Cistercians were authorized to build another monastery named after the Saint a short distance away. It was to be one of the most beautiful Gothic buildings in Italy, and one of the Cistercians' two largest Italian foundations. The monastery soon became both powerful and respected. Monks from San Galgano were appointed to high offices throughout Tuscany. In the 14th century, a Gothic side chapel was added to the original Romanesque Cappella, and in the 18th century a rectory was added. The side chapel has the remains of some frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, including a faint picture of Galgano offering the sword in the stone to Saint Michael. The Abbey was sacked by the (in)famous English mercenary captain Sir John Hawkwood and his White Company, and by 1397 the abbot was its only inhabitant. The Abbey deteriorated over the centuries, becoming the impressive ruins seen today.

Post Mortem

For centuries, the sword was believed to be a fake to everyone but the most devout. The sword (or at least what can be seen of it) is a rather basic sword in a style typical for the 12th century, seemingly seamlessly embedded in the bedrock. The pommel is flat and of a slightly egg-shaped, truncated form, and the guard is a straight bar of steel. The dimensions are: height of grip + pommel 144 mm, guard width 172 mm, blade width 43 mm.

A similar sword, dated to c. 1173, was found near Bury St. Edmunds in England. It is described in *Records of the Medieval Sword*, p. 62. In 2001, metal analysis conducted by Luigi Garlaschelli of the University of Pavia, revealed that the sword is very old, and that there's nothing that supports the opinion that the sword is a recent fake.

Ground-penetrating radar analysis revealed that beneath the sword, there is a cavity measuring 2 meters by 1 meter, which is thought to be a burial recess, possibly containing the saint's long-lost body. Carbon-dating confirmed that two mummified arms in the same chapel at Montesiepi were also from the 12th century. A version of the legend has it that anyone who tried to remove the sword had their arms ripped out.

It is argued that the legend of Saint Galgano formed the inspiration for the medieval legends about King Arthur and the Sword in the Stone, with which he proved his birthright. A story like that of Saint Galgano could travel all over Europe, and it is interesting to note that the first story about Arthur pulling a sword from a stone (or more exactly an anvil on top of the stone) appears in the decades following Saint Galgano's canonization in one of the poems by the Burgundian poet Robert de Boron. So, in the ever-changing legends of Arthur, it isn't unlikely that him pulling the sword out of the stone was inspired by the act of a reformed Italian knight...

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About the Author

Björn Hellqvist is a Swedish optometrist with an interest in historical European swords.

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Sword, found near Bury St. Edmunds

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