

• BY J. CHAMBERLIN

Imagine for a moment that the most coveted of all “Holy Relics” has been secretly hidden on a remote island in the Caribbean. J.P. Noel, author of *The St. Croix Ark*, takes that idea seriously and takes his readers on a wild journey to explore the stunning possibility that the Ark of the Covenant may indeed be resting in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

After opening with a captivating story about a vacation taken to St. Croix Island, Noel relates how he was bitten by a local insect. The surprising euphoric effects and a possible near-death experience launches him on a quest to investigate the bug, its venom, and a possible new pharmaceutical drug for healing and pain mitigation.

As he struggles to learn about his insect, Noel becomes enthralled by the unique and murky history of St. Croix. A second trip to the island intensifies his curiosity, and he stumbles across an old structure located in the Salt River Bay—original landing site of Christopher Columbus, which is marked with red crosses.

As he began to research the island of St. Croix, Noel was struck by the poorly documented presence of the first European inhabitants: the Knights of Malta, who had once owned St. Croix.

An extensive history of the Knights Templar and the Knights of Malta/St. John, Noel's *The St. Croix Ark* argues that the Ark of the Covenant could have been secretly moved to St. Croix when the Knights of Malta purchased the Virgin Islands.

The reader gets a complete understanding of Noel's conspiracy theory, a journey that dates to the time of the first Crusades, and a place called King Solomon's Temple, which is, as most of us know, the last known location of the Ark of the Covenant.

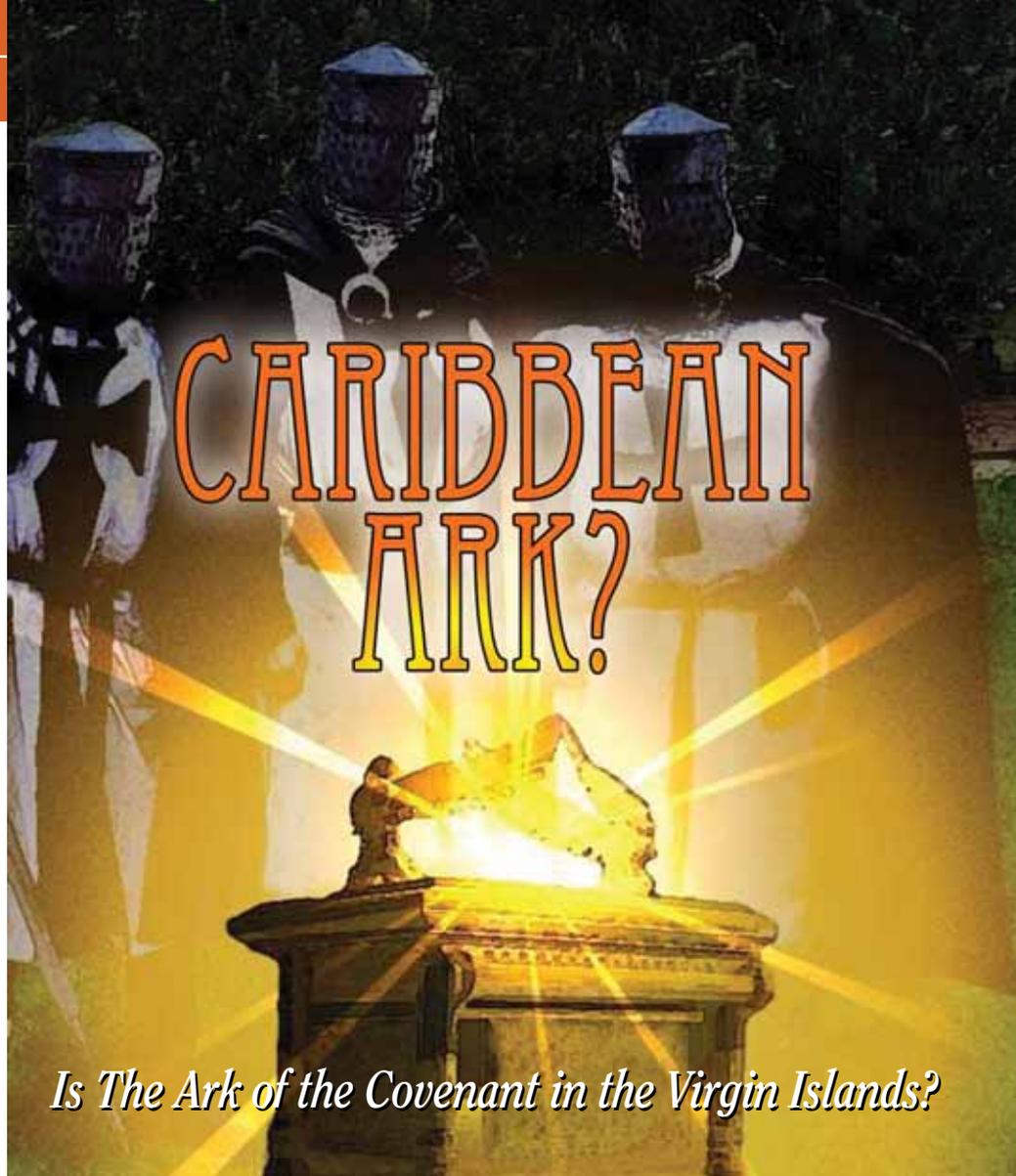
Noel sifts through countless documents and spends nearly 3,000 hours seeking for answers and pursues an unforgettable journey with the potential to rock not only St. Croix but historians everywhere.

An Alternate History

At the center of Noel's account is a detailed explanation of how the Knights came to purchase St. Croix in 1651 as well as his previously unexplored theory of just how the Ark could have been brought to and stored on the island.

To fully comprehend his assertion, one must first understand the Ark's history. The original location is said to be Solomon's Temple, which is also the originating home of the Franciscan monks, hundreds of years prior to the first crusade. Noel suggests that these monks in turn became the Knights Hospitallers.

Following the destruction of a hospital built in AD 600, a second was erected on the site of St. John the Baptist Monastery. It was



here that the Order of St. John was established. The Knights of St. John or Knights Hospitallers ultimately become known as the Knights of Malta.

Noel suggests that a decade before the First Crusade, the Knights discovered the Ark. The instigation of the Crusades could have provided a temporary solution to secure Jerusalem and to safely remove the Ark.

The discovery of the Ark, he believes, would do much to explain the mysterious creation of the Knights Templar, the infamous nine members said to have been the guardians of deeply religious artifacts. Noel questions why historical depictions of this small group portray them as responsible for the protection of thousands of Christian pilgrims.

Noel argues that the Knights of Malta had a secret Sect, known as the “Secrati,” charged with guarding the Ark (similar to the Templars who had previously guarded it). Highly secretive, as they were, these men, it would seem, would be the perfect pallbearers for this, the holiest of relics.

As that premise is explored in depth, the book reveals details which make it clear that

the Knights Templar and the Knights of Malta are likely a brotherhood. The Knights, he argues, transported the Ark from Jerusalem to a citadel in Acre, a small town in Israel. The author points out historical records confirming a connection of the two orders and placing both in the same fortress at Acre.

The notion becomes more intriguing as Noel's history unfolds. Acre was merely a stepping stone to the next holding ground: Krak des Chevaliers in Syria. As with Acre, Krak des Chevaliers has also been documented as a home for the Knights of Malta and Knights Templar.

The knights had held the Ark for more than 150 years, when the King of France formally abolished the Templars in 1312. Their possessions were given to the Knights of Malta, demonstrating, says Noel, that the two entities worked in unison to protect the Ark.

Also in 1312 the Knights of Malta were forced to leave Cyprus. For the following 214 years their new home would be Rhodes.

Noel points out that after the Knights Templar were disbanded, they continued to

Continued on Page 37

Continued from Page 35

maintain a heavy presence within the Knights of Malta. This is evident through the documented receipt of large ships and other key items which made it possible to continue their agenda of protecting the Ark.

Following a massive assault on the Island of Rhodes by the Muslims, the Christian knights were forced to retreat. Suleiman, however, allowed them to take their possessions and archives to Malta in 1530 which became their permanent home. This barren outpost, with its difficult landscape, would become a perfect place for the Knights to hold the Ark until its final move to the Caribbean.



As the map illustrates, the area surrounding the Knights of Malta in the Mediterranean was largely becoming Muslim. Christians were quickly losing ground; if the trend were to continue, Malta too would fall. A new and safer haven for the Ark would have to be found.

Why St. Croix?

The adventure continues as Christopher Columbus lands at Salt River Bay. The story here takes a twist. Noel explains that Columbus himself might have been a commissioned Knight of Malta and points out that he was, indeed, financed by a "Christian Monarch."

So, as Columbus sailed the ocean blue, his landing in the "new world" happened to be at St. Croix—an island that would not be added to the Americas for 400 years!

Noel takes us back to the original building which he had stumbled upon in the beginning of his quest—the one that bore the red crosses (eerily similar to those by

which the Malta are now known) in Salt River Bay. This tiny plot of land on St. Croix is the site at which Columbus landed and which he named "Santa Cruz" which, in English, means "Holy Cross."

It is at this point the coincidences intersect: this plot of land in the Salt River Bay is the same spot where the Knights of Malta later landed when they laid claim to the island, a century and a half later. Noel cites another alternative history, one proposed by author, Ruggero Marino, who claims Columbus may actually have been a Templar Knight, and that he may have been the illegitimate son of Pope Innocent VIII. Noel, like Marino, claims the entire mission funded by the Christian Monarch was really more about exploring new lands that were free from the Muslim threat to relocate the Ark.

When looking at old maps of St. Croix, it

is clear that early on Christianity certainly took a grip on the island—and that these plots of land and early names may date back to the Malta era: Sion Farm and Jerusalem have become subdistricts of the island, all in close proximity to the Salt River Bay area.

Nearly 150 years after Columbus's discovery, the Knights of Malta set about exploring the Caribbean. Why? Perhaps they were becoming weary of the growing Islamic forces that surrounded their small islands back in the Mediterranean. In the Great Siege of Malta in 1565, the Knights were victorious, but a Muslim takeover clearly threatened. If they really had the Ark, their secret sect would certainly want it moved. But the question was, where?

The Secрати

From 1492 to 1665—a period which closely overlaps the time of Columbus's landing on St. Croix and, indeed, continues all the way up to when the Knights became

Continued on Page 64

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Continued from Page 37

the owners of the islands—eight of the Grandmasters of the Knights of Malta came from Aragon. The King of Aragon was also the head of the Christian Monarchy and the very same royalty which gave the Knights the island of Malta. The connections that Noel makes are, at the very least, startling. Might these add up to be more than mere coincidence?

Due to the sect's secrecy, few Grandmasters would have known of the Ark's existence within their own organization. Noel claims that only Grandmaster Jean Paul Lascaris and one other "Secrati" member, Phillippe de Longvilliers de Poincy (a Bailiff Grand Cross of the Knights) were aware of the Ark's removal and subsequent relocation to the Caribbean.

Noel examines the historical records and concludes that sometime in the early 1600's de Poincy and the "Secrati" set sail from Malta to the Island of St. Kitts in the Caribbean, under the direction of Lascaris, who ensured that there would be no record of the journey.

A mystifying reality is seen right after the Knights land in Salt River Bay in 1650—Lascaris ordered all personal journals belonging to the members of the Knights of



Malta to be returned to the library of the Order rather than, as had been the previous practice, given to family members. One fascinating revelation from Noel is that all journals from the era during which the Knights maintained a presence in the Caribbean mysteriously disappeared. There are absolutely *no* journals or historical records available from the time they were on the island!

Control the Books, Control History

More compelling is that there are two completely alternate versions of history here—one that is told primarily on the European side and the other in the Caribbean.

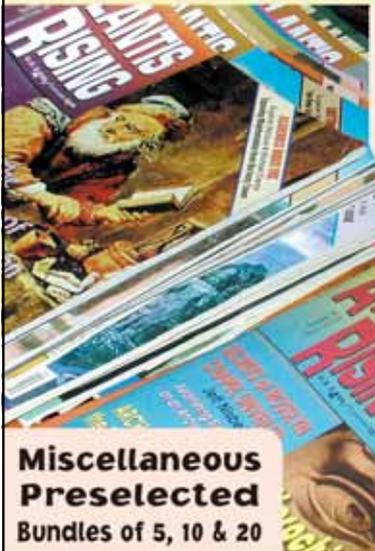
Even stranger is how the modern-day Knights of Malta have somehow evaded their

own history—even the historical list, their Caribbean transactions is missing. In contrast, every other island that the Knights of Malta occupied gives an in-depth historical record of their presence. Yet even the Danish purchase agreements show they were, indeed, on St. Croix for nearly 15 years. The "Secrati" seemed to have successfully controlled history. Until now, that is.

Rockefeller Connection

Around 1665, after the Knights, according to Noel, successfully deposited the Ark for safekeeping, they sold the island and moved back to Malta. For 300 years, he asserts, St. Croix remained the holding ground for the Ark. Shortly after the United States

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acquired the island in 1917, the Rockefeller family suddenly entered the picture.

A strange coincidence plagues the author. As he digs even deeper into the archives of history, he discovers that Rockefeller Jr., after receiving guidance from the high ranking Grand Cross of the Knights of Malta, Lord Plumer, purchases a huge plot of land to be used as a museum in Palestine—at a location that is in the direct line of sight from Solomon's Temple. Even more ominous, the first archaeological dig for the Rockefeller Museum was at the old Templar ruins of Acre before the museum even opened.

Then, a few years later, in the 1920s, the family decided to purchase large amounts of land on St. John and St. Croix. Noel points out an interesting connection with the purchase of the old Palestine museum (which contained several old scrolls and historical parchments that may never have been seen or examined by western scholars), to the Rockefeller's buying spree in the Virgin Islands. Even in Rockefeller Jr.'s own words (still on the website), upon donating over two million dollars to buy the old Palestine museum, "that the new museum will be used to find and preserve holy relics;" and to this day, indeed they have. You have, doubtless, heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

While it's not clear why, or for what purpose, at that time, the immensely wealthy family decided to purchase massive tracts of land on St. Croix and St. John—it may cause some to wonder if their vast wealth has been used to keep this ancient holy relic in hiding.

Noel remains confident that the Ark is located somewhere in St. Croix—but the readers should consider the possibility that perhaps the island of St. John is its actual resting place. The Rockefellers gave the land to the National Park Service years ago. It seems reasonable to believe it could be well protected and undisturbed here.

As the book wraps up, Noel leaves these questions, and more, to be explored. If he has correctly identified the Knights of Malta as the guardians, protectors, and ultimately movers of the Ark, then their strange fascination with island-hopping should not be forgotten either. Nor should it be overlooked that the Caribbean islands—particularly St. Croix—would provide an ideal holding ground. St. Croix is the only island that the Knights purchased that is non-volcanic, thus being capable of withstanding the natural elements for much longer. And let's not forget the pathway of the Knights that began in Jerusalem, mysteriously ends on St. Croix Island.

Of course, one of the most enchanting features of *The St. Croix Ark* is J.P. Noel's own digital art which fills the entire book. Whether one purchases the digital PDF, CD-ROM, or the hardbound book, the reader will enjoy some wonderfully designed, intricate artwork produced almost entirely by Noel himself. ■

For more information, see the ad in the back of the magazine or visit the website www.thestcroixark.com

Continued from Page 39

of uncovering its secrets only to meet his death while attempting to do so. Both on the Internet and locally, wild variations of the story circulate. Here is the documented truth.

Daniel Bettex was a Swiss citizen and a security officer at Geneva airport. Enchanted by the beauty of southern France, he frequented the area on his holidays. Eventually, he contacted a local Cathar organization founded by the mayor of nearby Arques, Déodat Roché. The group sought to research and promote the religion destroyed by the Church during the so-called Albigensian Crusade of the thirteenth century. Bettex enquired about places where he could help them with research. Remote, undisturbed locales were his primary interest. Roché advised Bettex to study the sector of Bugarach, which had been little prospected by other members of his organization, even though it was known that the Cathars were familiar with the village. To this end, Roché also recommended that Bettex contact the organization's then secretary Lucienne Julien as his liaison. The latter subsequently maintained a close correspondence with Bettex as he progressed in his research.

Over the ensuing years, when Bettex was at home in Switzerland, he would leaf through files; when, during summer vacations, he descended to the south of France, he would explore and dig. He also studied the remaining old registers for details of mining activities and information on the underground network that existed in the limestone environment, learning how much—or how little—had been explored.

Bettex also uncovered a work on the mythology of the mountain written by a university student during the Second World War. The author had been called up for military service and his fate was unknown. The thesis referenced several legends and myths, some going back as early as the fifteenth century. It was clear that Jules Verne was, by no means, the first to invent a mythology about this mountain.

Such a compendium is, of course, not an archaeological report, but the stories did reveal a relationship between various myths and locations around the mountain—locations that people, for generations, had linked with an entrance to a mythical underground world. Bettex wondered whether he could be the one who would locate the en-

trance and finally reveal its existence. Would he prove that Verne was not just a science fiction writer, but had written a *fact-based* account—was there a real entrance to the Center of the Earth?

Bettex was able to find one of the entrances listed in the account, but it was blocked. He reopened it to find that it led to a peaceful underground river, which though deep, was yet possible to navigate. He also found that there was a type of quay or landing, in an L-shape, which suggested that the structure was not the result of a geological event but was man-made—purposefully

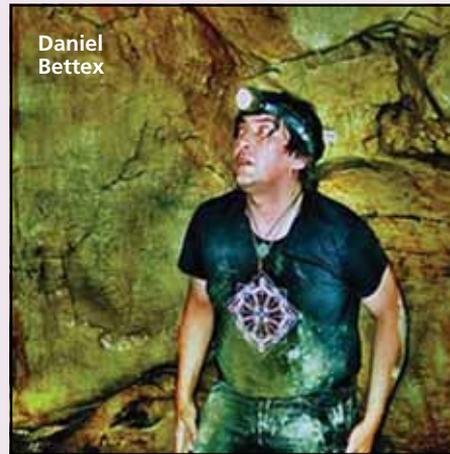
built. But by whom, when, and for what? Those were questions he could not answer.

He had taken photographs of this and other voyages into the belly of the mountain, as he explored its known and less known and sometimes even forgotten caves. He showed them to Julien, who reported that there were several stone structures inside the underground cave system, proving they were once inhabited. But it proved little else.

Bettex had also entered the local derelict castle and spent a great amount of time in the basement—work which he carried out with the full knowledge and participation of the owner and the relevant authorities; though in those days, there was far less paperwork to cope with. There, he found several stones with graffiti, some of which was clearly in the shape of a container and a stretcher, a scene he found suggestive of the Ark of the Covenant being carried on a stretcher. Could the graffiti mean that the mountain was the resting place of the Ark?

A rumor circulates all the quicker if it is considered to be a secret. Thus, one statement went that Bettex was searching for the Ark of the Covenant, that he had now located it, as evidenced by his photographs and the graffiti: it was under Bugarach. A related rumor ran that General Moshe Dayan, the head of the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad, had become personally interested in Bettex's research. With such notorious Israel officials now apparently tracking him, Bettex's local profile went up by several points, and the rumor of the Ark of the Covenant underneath Bugarach became more and better known. One rumor had it that Moshe Dayan contacted Bettex personally, warning and advising him to stop everything if he discovered the artifact and especially not to touch anything. Bettex must surely have been familiar with his Bible, which clearly spells out the dangers of touching the Ark.

Daniel Bettex took a long time to decide where precisely he would carry out his major excavation. Once he had done so, he made ➤



Daniel Bettex