

## Olmstead and the Chalice of Antioch



Albert Ten Eyck Olmstead (1880–1945) was professor of oriental history at the Oriental Institute. While best known for the posthumously published *History of the Persian Empire* (<https://oi.uchicago.edu/research/publications/misc/history-persian-empire>), Olmstead was also involved with the "Chalice of Antioch" which was purported to be the Holy Grail during much of the beginning of the 20th century.

The Chalice of Antioch was a silver vessel that was allegedly discovered in the city of Antioch (modern Antakya, now located in Turkey) supposedly by men who were digging a well. It was supposedly found with other silver objects and the entire group was purchased by the antiquities dealers Kouchakji Frères, who were prominent antiquity dealers in Syria. The chalice was sent to Paris and then to the United States during WWI. Gustavus Eisen, who published a book on cylinder seals with the Oriental Institute in 1940 (<https://oi.uchicago.edu/sites/oi.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/shared/docs/oip47.pdf>) was the one who was entrusted to publish the chalice, which he concluded was the Holy Grail. It is evident that Olmstead accepted this idea.

Not only did Olmstead believe Eisen's conclusions, he actively promoted them. Apparently Fahim Kouchakji, who was the owner of the Antioch Chalice at the time and the nephew of the original purchaser, wrote to Olmstead and indicated that he wanted to display the chalice in the Hall of Religion which was part of the 1933–1934 Century of Progress World's Fair in Chicago. Eisen wrote a popular account of the chalice and Olmstead supplied the introduction to this volume. See here (<https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/ead/pdf/century0767.pdf>).

In 1950, the chalice was finally purchased with funds from John D. Rockefeller, Jr. for the Cloisters in New York and while you can't currently see it in person at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York where it is on display, you can read about it on their website and view images of the chalice. There, you will see that it has been concluded that the chalice dates to the 6th century AD and may in fact not be a chalice but rather a lamp.

The chalice inspired a book by Thomas Costain (you can borrow the book here, <https://archive.org/details/silverchalicenov00cost#maincontent>) and in 1954, it was adapted into a film, which marked the debut of Paul Newman. Despite the fact that it was his first film, Paul Newman apparently deeply disliked it. You can rent the film on amazon prime.