

AN INQUIRY INTO THE DEMISE OF THE TEMPLARS

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Circa 1310, 113 knights, belonging to one of the most powerful military religious Orders of the 12th and 13th centuries, were slowly burned at the stake in Paris. Others were put to the torch in Lorraine and Normandy.¹ The Knights Templar were charged with heresy, sodomy, denunciation of Christ, having vows which put the benefit of the Order before morality, cat and idol worship, and other various sins. Those who were not burned were sentenced to life in prison,² or during England's more lenient trials, life in a monastery.³

The Templars were a very powerful force in their time. Their rapid rise to fame and fortune, the events at the close of the Crusades, their confidence as a military religious force, and a number of other circumstances led ultimately to their destruction as an Order. Their rise and fall was not caused solely by their internal evils, as some historians argue. Rather, it was a blend of inherent flaws, outer circumstances, and the mindset of the times that caused the dissolution of the Order. It was also, to an extent, just the spontaneous unfolding of events, a randomness often found in history.

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Many historians have tried to answer the question of Templar guilt or innocence, either justifying Philip le Beau's⁴ actions as a statesman, or protesting the unjust treatment of the Knights Templar. The Templars represented a rebirth of chivalry and the knightly ideal, fused with intense religious fervor. Some of that ideal still remains with us today, leading historians to try to explain the demise of the Templars.

In order to understand the circumstances which brought the dissolution of the Order, some attention should be given to the context in which the Templars came into being. Jerusalem was captured by the Christians at the end of the First Crusade in July, 1099. King Baldwin I established a solid monarchy in the Holy Land. By the 1130s the states of Edessa, Antioch, Tripoli and Jerusalem had been established as Christian states, and only Tyre and Ascalon were left under Muslim occupation.⁵

Once Jerusalem had been captured in 1099, many crusaders wanted to return home, creating a disorganized, scattered army. Furthermore, the Christians who remained were far from home, which put them at a "severe numerical and logistical disadvantage in the East."⁶ Thus, despite great advances, serious governmental and ecclesiastical problems remained. One of the most evident was that, while the states were secure, the roads remained treacherous for pilgrims and travelers. Pilgrims were often attacked by robbers. Ethiopians, Egyptians and Turks frequently ambushed whoever was caught outside fortified Jerusalem. According to Fulcher of Charters, chaplain to Baldwin, the population was constantly fearful, and listened perpetually for the trumpets which heralded danger.⁷

It was under these circumstances that the Order of the Knights Templar was created. Hugh de Payens, Godfrey St. Omer and seven other men dedicated themselves as the *Poor Soldiers of Jesus Christ*⁸ in 1113 A.D.⁹ They took the three vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, in the vein of the Canons Regular, in front of the patriarch of Jerusalem, Warmund of Picuigny. Baldwin II succeeded his cousin on Easter 1118,¹⁰ and that year he gave to the *Poor Soldiers of Jesus Christ* a house on Mt. Moriah, where a

temple had stood. It was from this temple that they became known as the Knights Templar. Their mission was to keep the roads to the Holy Places free and safe for pilgrims, and to defend those places against the advances of the infidel.¹¹

King Baldwin saw this new Order as incredibly valuable to the Latin kingdom in the East, and, in an effort to more formally establish the Knights Templar, sent two knights to St. Bernard¹² to request his assistance in gaining papal recognition. St. Bernard was enthusiastic about the prospect, and, with his assistance, the Templars were formally recognized in 1128 AD at the council of Troyes.¹³

There was another large religious military Order that sprang from “the successful issue of the first Crusade.”¹⁴ Before the first Christian capture of Jerusalem, several Italian merchants set about the task of creating a safe haven for western Christians on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. A convent, church, and two hospitals were built. Those who worked at this safe haven became known as Hospitallers.¹⁵ After Jerusalem’s capture by crusaders, the Hospitallers began to receive large amounts of land and recruits for their care of the sick and wounded soldiers. They formed a corporate union for administrative purposes and were granted various privileges, which allowed them to spread their work beyond Jerusalem. Continuing to grow,¹⁶ they took up arms in Antioch in 1119 AD.¹⁷ Modern historians tend to think of this development as a natural extension of the Hospitaller mission for the care of pilgrims. The logic was that they would not have to care for as many wounded pilgrims if they prevented them from being attacked in the first place.¹⁸

The Templars were slow to gain supporters in the West, prompting Hugh de Payens to go on a publicity campaign in 1127.¹⁹ He was remarkably successful, and soon many countries had their own Templar branch and house.²⁰ Their appeal was great, for they were among the only properly trained soldiers in the Crusades. They fought diligently for the Christian cause, not only in Palestine, but against the Tartars in Hungary and the Moors in Spain as well.²¹ Their pervasiveness rapidly gained them

a reputation as a formidable military force. One historian states that, in an attack upon an Egyptian army, “those Muslims who were not killed dropped their loot and even their weapons to make an unencumbered flight back to Egypt.”²²

Their religious zeal, soldierly skill, and the praise of their patron St. Bernard, won them the favor of kings, nobles, popes, princes and prospective recruits. Money, land and privileges began to pour in. The Templars, due to this rush of success, began an internal metamorphosis that was to radically alter the essence of the Order.

St. Bernard at this time drew up a set of rules and statutes, based on the Cistercian rule, strict and ascetic in nature. The brothers should be constant and regular in public and private devotions; they should give alms, speak little, have a spare and frugal diet, be courteous and gentle to all Christians and refrain from gold and silver ornaments on their armor. Templars should have no family and no property,²³ and were compelled to avoid entering houses with a woman in childbirth or attending baptisms.²⁴ Hunting, sports, gambling, shows and other diversions were forbidden.²⁵ The extent to which they lived up to these original, ascetic expectations would be a mark of their success or failure.

The Templars rapidly acquired a great deal of wealth and power. This power derived mainly from the numerous lay and ecclesiastical privileges heaped upon them. Almost every pope of the period announced a Bull granting new privileges to the Templars. They became exempt from clerical taxes, tithes and excommunication. They had the authority to open their own churches and collect money, even in an area under interdict. They had their own chaplains and graveyards, the protection of the higher church authorities and the support of the clergy.²⁶ The Bull *Omne Datum Optimum* resulted in considerable privilege, and independence from the local clerical authorities.

In addition to ecclesiastical privileges, the Templars were granted numerous political and economic benefits. In England, for example, the Order was exempt from secular taxation, tolls,

customs duties on wine and wool, seizure of goods in wartime and feudal burdens. They were given numerous judicial and jurisdictional powers as well.²⁷

When a powerful knight, blessed by the will of God, and answerable only to the Pope, becomes exempt from virtually all civil and ecclesiastical duties, asceticism can be difficult to maintain. Freedom often loses touch with responsibility, giving way to the abuse of power. Even as early as 1154 the Patriarch of Jerusalem was complaining of the Templars' abuse of privileges. The Templars, in response, shot his door full of arrows, showing early their capacity for insolence.²⁸ William of Tyre, writing in the late 12th century,²⁹ notes this shift from their early ideals, saying,

For a long time they kept intact their noble purpose...at length, however, they began to neglect humility...they withdrew from the patriarch of Jerusalem...and refused him the obedience which their predecessors had shown him.³⁰

As privileges and exemptions increased, abuse on the part of the privileged, and jealousy on the part of the unprivileged, became inevitable. The Templars "drew frequent censure."³¹

In 1207 Pope Innocent III wrote a letter that excoriated Templar pride. In 1242, when Ascalon was recaptured, the fortress was not given to the Templars on account of their excessive arrogance.³² In England they often marked crosses on houses not owned by them. The cross was the mark of a "privileged" house. To unlawfully mark a house was to usurp the king's domain, preventing him from collecting money.³³ They disregarded the king's customs and "involved [his] officers in vexatious lawsuits."³⁴ In 1160, Pope Alexander III had issued a Bull forbidding the abuse of the Templars. People had been pulling them off their horses and otherwise harassing them, suggesting that popular opinion did not necessarily side with the Templars.³⁵

Templar wealth grew at the same rapid pace as their power. The Templars became the principle financial agents of European nobles. Their chapters were well fortified, making them ideal places to store money and other valuables.³⁶ The Temple in London was used for royal deposits as early as 1185. In 1204-1205,

the crown jewels were deposited there by King John, and redeposited by his successor, Henry III.³⁷

The knights held a high standard of honor, which made them good convoys of money. Their international status made them excellent brokers.³⁸ Templars were able to offer services as agents for ransom payments and tax collection. They gave loans to pilgrims and crusaders, transferred funds to the Holy Land, and even developed payment at a distance and credit plans. At the time, the Holy Land had a predominantly monetary economy, with which the Templars readily became integrated. They thus anticipated the slow change to a more monetary economy in the West, and were well prepared to offer proficient services.³⁹

As historian Thomas W. Parker states, “Financial rights, privileges, and the Templars’ attitude made them powerful, independent, and hated.”⁴⁰ At the Siege of Ascalon, the Grand Master Bernard de Tremelay allowed only Templars to enter the breach. Many grumbled, assuming that he was selfishly allowing Templars to obtain the greatest part of the plunder.⁴¹ Also, the Templars are thought to have accepted at least one bribe. Templars at the English house in Bisham, led by Brother Hugh of Stockton, released criminals in exchange for a silver goblet.⁴² In the cynical words of James of Vitry to the Templars, “you profess to have no individual property, but in common you wish to have everything.”⁴³

Privilege and power inevitably seem to stir jealousy, and, as in the case of the Templars, an arrogant or insolent attitude will certainly not improve popular opinion. The privileged position is a difficult one. The Templars were restrained only by their own will, and will sometimes break down. A strong knight with God on his side and a holy mission to complete might indeed feel unconstrained, as long as his actions are wrapped in the banner of the crusading cause.

Though the Templars made many enemies, they remained the most favored Order up through the mid-thirteenth century. There exist many accounts of Templar bravery and excellence.

They were essential tools of clergy and royalty. How then, did they fall into such disrepute, leading to torture, death, and the Order's dissolution?

The answer may lie, at least in part, with the circumstances surrounding the fall of Acre and the end of the Crusades. In spring of 1291, the Muslims laid siege to the last Christian city in the Holy Land. The Templars fought valiantly alongside the Hospitallers, but were eventually forced into the last Christian stronghold, a Templar castle. The sultan offered a free retreat to Cyprus for the surrender of the building, prompting the Templars to allow Mamluke soldiers through the gates. The Mamlukes began to pillage and rape the women, infuriating the Templars. The knights sealed the gates and slaughtered the Mamlukes.⁴⁴ In retaliation, the sultan mined under the walls of the towers and caused the whole structure to collapse, killing everyone inside. This was the final blow that eliminated Christian dominion in the Holy Land.⁴⁵ It was to be the last military battle ever fought by the Templars. They had lost their position in the East,⁴⁶ as well as their *raison d'être*. How could they fight for pilgrims and Western control of the Holy Land when neither existed any longer? This loss of purpose became one of several circumstances to blame for the eradication of the Knights Templar.

In France, King Philip the Fair was, according to some sources, growing apprehensive of the Templars, who had many holdings in his country. Philip had a number of reasons to worry. In his eyes, the Templars were an exceptionally powerful force, with a reputation for disobedience and insolence. Being an international Order, they maintained no allegiance to any particular country. The French monarchy, therefore, had little authority over the Templars, a fact that would threaten any national leader. They were rumored to have a great deal of wealth, and were no longer directing their resources to the Holy Land, it being beyond the reach of Western domination. Philip might have worried that their power and perceived wealth would be a nuisance in the very religious and increasingly monetary Western world.⁴⁷

The idea of a national identity was also taking root in France.⁴⁸ Philip the Fair endeavored to secure and strengthen the French monarchy. He wished to establish the power of the secular state over that of the church. The Templars represented, not only the threat of a powerful Order, but also the long, imposing arm of the church. Philip's determination to bring down the Order probably stemmed from his desire to stifle any system challenging the superiority of the crown.⁴⁹

According to other sources, Philip was simply a money-hungry tyrant who would stoop to any level to fill his treasury.⁵⁰ Parker states that "the crucial and the immediate reason for the attack on the Templars was financial—Philip the Fair's pressing need for money."⁵¹ While this is certainly a valid and essential point, it cannot constitute a sufficient explanation, for it raises the question: "Why not the Hospitallers?" It is well known that the Hospitallers were considerably wealthier than the Templars, having nineteen thousand manors to the Templars' nine thousand in 1244.⁵² A more thorough explanation is necessary.

There are numerous similarities in the Orders of the Temple and the Hospital. The inquiry as to why the Templars fell when the Hospitallers were the wealthier Order is indeed quite valid, as many of the proposed reasons for the Templar downfall could be lucidly applied to both Orders. Both lent money to King Louis during the Crusades⁵³ and otherwise engaged in money lending, though the Hospitallers were engaged to a lesser degree. Both Orders were given scores of privileges, lay and ecclesiastical,⁵⁴ and both were exceedingly wealthy, the Hospitallers more so, in fact. They both shared a good deal of criticism and rumors. During the siege of Damascus the Orders were accused of deliberately impeding the siege. In the Egyptian campaign they were likewise accused of treachery.⁵⁵

Especially significant is the fact that blame for the loss of Acre fell on both Orders. In fact, the Hospitallers suffered the additional humiliation of having their leader survive when it was his duty to die in battle as did the Templar master, William de Beaujeu.⁵⁶

The Hospitallers were saved, and the Templars left politically vulnerable, by a widely read document entitled *De excidio urbis Aconis*. It was the most popular account of the disaster at Acre and survives in many Latin and French manuscripts. It accused the Templars of arriving late to the defense of the city, and of incompetence upon their eventual arrival. At the same time, the deeds of Brother Mathew of Claremont, marshal of the Hospital, were praised and glorified. The deeds of William de Beaujeu were brushed over, and the Templars belittled, with the result of “effectively remov[ing] the Order of the temple from the lime-light and [giving] all the glory for the defense of the city to the Hospital.”⁵⁷

Knights of the religious military Orders were believed to have been blessed by God.⁵⁸ Failure indicated His displeasure, which in turn indicated sin and worthlessness.⁵⁹ The Templars had claimed themselves to be the sole defenders of the Holy Kingdom, boasting that their presence was the only barrier against the Muslim hordes. These proud claims set the Templars up for a disastrous fall. The destruction of Acre was especially devastating for the Temple due to both the shameful description awarded them, and their own boastful claims.

The fall of Acre brought to light a change in the role of knighthood. The crusading motivation and ideal diminished towards the end of the thirteenth century, along with the need for a military religious Order. The Templars were on the unfortunate verge of obsolescence. The Hospitallers escaped this fate since they were more able to adapt to the changing situation.⁶⁰ They had a dual mission, and could always fall back on their original cause: care of the sick.⁶¹

The Christian ideal itself was also undergoing change. During this time period, there was a preference for “practical” Christianity, as opposed to an idealistic, less productive way of thought. The dual function of the Hospitallers was thus more acceptable to many than the singular function of the Templars. The Hospitaller mission was considered more charitable than the Templar mission in the eyes of the public. Although dedicating

one's life to the fight for the Holy Land was in itself a charitable act, many favored the traditional forms of charity as shown by the Hospitallers. They found the Hospitallers to be more pious than their purely military counterparts. The public was simply impressed by the Hospital's emphasis on care for others, an aspect to which the Templars failed to call attention.⁶²

The subsequent actions of the Orders would push public favor even more to the side of the Hospitallers. Despite the damage to the reputation of the Templars, or perhaps due to it, they were expected to take charge of a new crusade. After all, they were still holy knights⁶³ with plentiful resources. Thus, reports that the Templars had retreated to their European manors were greeted with dismay.⁶⁴

The Templars became paralyzed after the Crusades, and made little attempt to justify their existence. They produced no plans for the future,⁶⁵ and became rather troublesome to the governments of the countries in which they lived.⁶⁶

This was in stark contrast to the activities of the Hospital. They had continued to be active and effective, showing continued zeal by capturing the isle of Rhodes.⁶⁷ And of course, their hospitals remained open, and they continued with their charitable work.

The Templars were left politically vulnerable at the end of the Crusades. The loss of Acre was more devastating for them than for any other Order, due in part to their arrogance and the demanding expectations of others. The most popular account of the siege favored the Hospitallers, and derisively remarked upon the Templars' role. The object of their mission had disappeared, and they had no other cause on which to fall back. They were overtaken by lethargy. These flaws stood out in contrast to the productivity of the Hospitallers. The Temple's inability to prove itself useful to Christendom, as well as the decline of the ideals on which it was founded, left the Order unpopular and obsolete.

The Templars had a long-standing reputation for avarice and pride. Chroniclers are unanimous in descriptions of the

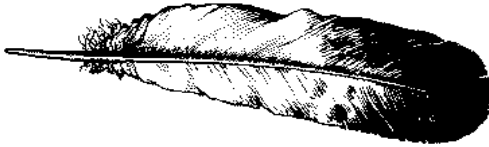
insolent and arrogant behavior of the knights.⁶⁸ They simply had too much wealth (or at least dealt with too much money) and too much power. In general, the Order became demoralized⁶⁹ and slackened in ideals and purpose.⁷⁰ At the close of the Crusades, they were already unpopular due to their wealthy and privileged status, and were politically weak due to a number of circumstances. There were also rumors of secrecy and treachery. The Templars spent a great deal of time on campaign in the East, and doubtless learned more about eastern cultures than the average crusader who remained for no more than a few months. Crusaders coming to fight would be dismayed to discover a truce upon arrival, and would link the truce to Templar treachery in their discontent.⁷¹

Philip was likely well aware of the situation. If it were, indeed, his lust for money that prompted his actions, then he would have found a perfect victim in the declining Order of the Temple. If he was acting as a statesman, then he simply propelled the downward momentum. He found two able tools, in the persons of Pope Clement V, a “king’s man,”⁷² and in Esquiu de Florian. Florian was an ex-Templar who came forward, claiming that the Templars were guilty of shocking crimes. Whether he was paid by Philip to make such accusations remains unknown.⁷³

Arrests of the Templars began in France on October 13th, 1307. Their property was seized,⁷⁴ and they were tortured in the medieval tradition of forced confession. Torturers held the knights’ feet over fire until the flesh melted off the bones. They pulled teeth, and suspended prisoners with weights attached to their limbs.⁷⁵ Eventually many were burnt at the stake. Similar, but more merciful trials were held in several other countries, with the eventual decision of dissolution, if not guilt.

Were the Templars really guilty of sodomy and cat worship? Such accusations were typical of the period and probably hid a deeper agenda. Moreover, what was rumor 800 years ago will most likely never be established as fact today, and the surrounding context gains significance as historians accept an indefinite answer to the question of Templar guilt.

What can be said is that an Order of knight monks, originally ascetic and humble, became incredibly successful. Their rapid rise transformed the Order into an international superpower of the Middle Ages. Exempt from all civil and ecclesiastical duties, they were free to carry on the Holy War and free to do as they pleased. They gained a reputation for insolence, greed, and arrogance. The fall of Acre reflected on the “sole defenders” quite poorly. The Order faded with the crusading ideal, unable to adapt to the changing times. These wealthy, insolent, missionless knights were potential opponents to Western governments, and King Philip le Beau of France, whatever his true motives, took it upon himself to secure the destruction of the Order. He succeeded.



¹ C.G. Addison, The Knights Templar History (New York: Ams Press, Inc., 1972) p. 413

² Ibid., p. 413

³ Thomas W. Parker, The Knights Templar in England (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1963) p. 104

⁴ Philip le Beau was king of France at the time of the Templars' dissolution. He was their first and most vicious royal prosecutor.

⁵ Malcom Barber, The New Knighthood: A History of the Order of the Temple (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) p. 2

⁶ Ibid., p. 2

⁷ Ibid., pp. 2-3

⁸ F.C. Woodhouse, The Military Religious Orders of the Middle Ages: the Hospitallers, the Templars, the Teutonic Knights and Others (New York: Pott, Young & Co., 1879) pp. 207-208

⁹ Addison, p. 143

¹⁰ Barber, pp. 6-7

¹¹ Woodhouse, p. 208

¹² Saint Bernard of Clairveaux (1090-1153) was a French ecclesiast remembered for a mastery of rhetoric and sacred scriptures unsurpassed by his contemporaries.

[“St. Bernard,” Westminster Dictionary of Church History ed. Jerald C. Brauer, 1971, pp. 108-109]

¹³ Woodhouse, p. 208

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 207

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 11-15

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 234

¹⁷ W.K.R. Bedford, The Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem: Being a History of the English Hospitallers of St. John, Their Rise and Progress (London: AMS, 1978) p. 8

¹⁸ Helen Nicholson, The Knights Hospitaller (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001) p. 13

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 13

²⁰ Woodhouse, p. 210

²¹ Edward J. Martin, The Trials of the Templars (London: George AMS, 1978) p. 16

²² John J. Robinson, Dungeon, Fire and Sword: The Knights Templar in the Crusades (New York: M. Evans & Co., Inc., 1991) p. 131

²³ Woodhouse, pp. 209-210

²⁴ Martin, pp. 14-16

- ²⁵ Woodhouse, p. 210
- ²⁶ Parker, p. 3
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27
- ²⁸ Edward Burman, The Templars, Knights of God: the Rise and Fall of the Knights Templars (Great Britain: Aquarian Press, 1986) p. 137
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 137
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 139
- ³³ Parker, p. 27
- ³⁴ Martin, p. 21
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17
- ³⁷ Burman, p. 81
- ³⁸ Martin, pp. 16-17
- ³⁹ Burman, pp. 75-76
- ⁴⁰ Parker, p. 4
- ⁴¹ Burman, p. 139
- ⁴² Helen Nicholson, Templars, Hospitallers, and Teutonic Knights: Images of the Military Orders 1128-1291 (London: Leicester University Press, 1993) p. 129
- ⁴³ Martin, p. 20
- ⁴⁴ Burman, pp. 133-134
- ⁴⁵ Woodhouse, pp. 233-234
- ⁴⁶ Burman, p. 135
- ⁴⁷ Martin, p. 26
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29
- ⁵⁰ Woodhouse, p. 237
- ⁵¹ Parker, p. 86
- ⁵² Martin, p. 25
- ⁵³ Nicholson, Hospitallers, p. 20
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22
- ⁵⁶ Nicholson, Images, pp. 125-126
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 126-127
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134
- ⁶⁰ Burman, p. 145
- ⁶¹ Nicholson, Hospitallers, p. 88
- ⁶² Nicholson, Images, pp. 121-122
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 124

- ⁶⁴ Bedford, p. 17
- ⁶⁵ Colonel E. J. King, The Knights of St. John in England (London: St. John's Gate, 1924) pp. 26-27
- ⁶⁶ Bedford, p. 17
- ⁶⁷ Nicholson, Hospitallers, pp. 46-47
- ⁶⁸ Martin, p. 20
- ⁶⁹ King, pp. 26-27
- ⁷⁰ Martin, p. 24
- ⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 19-20
- ⁷² Ibid., p. 33
- ⁷³ Ibid., pp. 30-32
- ⁷⁴ Parker, p. 86
- ⁷⁵ Woodhouse, pp. 240-241

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