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CHAPTER ONE

ORIGINS



In about 1340 Ludolph of Sudheim, a German priest on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, came upon two elderly men on the shores of the Dead Sea. He entered into conversation with them and discovered that they were former Templars, captured when the city of Acre had fallen to the Mamluks in May 1291, who had since then been living in the mountains, cut off from all communication with Latin Christendom. They had wives and children and had survived by working in the sultan's service; they had no idea that the Order of the Temple had been suppressed in 1312 and that the Grand Master had been burnt to death as a relapsed heretic two years later. The men were from Burgundy and Toulouse and, within a year, were repatriated, together with their families. Despite the scandal of the suppression, they were honourably received at the papal court, and were allowed to live out the remainder of their existence in peace.[1] These two Templars were the almost forgotten remnants of what, barely a generation before, had appeared to be one of the most powerful monastic orders in Christendom. During the thirteenth century the Order may have had as many as 7,000 knights, sergeants and serving brothers, and priests, while its associate members, pensioners, officials, and subjects numbered many times that figure. By about 1300 it had built a network of at least 870 castles, preceptories, and subsidiary houses, examples of which could be found in almost every country in western Christendom. The extent of the Templar empire can be gauged from the fact that in 1318 pensions were being paid to former Templars in twenty-four French dioceses, as well as in York, London, Canterbury, Dublin, Tournai, Liège, Camin, Cologne, Magdeburg, Mainz, Castello, Asti, Milan, Bologna, Perugia, Naples, and Trani, in Nicosia in Cyprus, and in

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the kingdoms of Aragon and Mallorca.[2] In turn this network sustained fighting forces for the holy war in Palestine, Syria, Cyprus, and Iberia, together with some of the most formidable and impressive castles ever built. By the late twelfth century and during most of the thirteenth century the Order probably had about 600 knights and 2,000 sergeants on active service in the east[3] and by the 1230s it had built up a Mediterranean fleet capable of transporting men and supplies to Spain, Italy, and the Morea, and ultimately to 'Outremer', the lands beyond the sea. Moreover, its international structure and large resources had made the Templars ideal financial agents, whose expertise and capital were utilised by popes, kings, and nobles.

For medieval chroniclers, who were fond of discoursing upon the transitory nature of life on earth and the fleeting and illusory mirage of success, the rise and fall of the Templars was indeed an ideal paradigm, for this great corporation had found its origins in circumstances almost as humble as those of the two men discovered by Ludolph of Sudheim. In 1095, at Clermont in the Auvergne, Pope Urban II had urged Christians to take up arms to aid their brethren in the east, who were allegedly being harassed, tortured, and killed by a race of new barbarians called the Seljuk Turks. The call had been answered by several thousand warriors and peasants who had combined into the armies of the First Crusade. After many hardships and horrific experiences the better-equipped of the crusaders had managed to fight their way across Asia Minor and into Syria and thence southwards to Jerusalem, which they captured with terrible bloodshed in July 1099. But from the outset the Latins were bound to be at a severe numerical and logistical disadvantage in the east, a disadvantage exacerbated by the unwillingness of many of them to stay once Jerusalem had been taken. Moreover, the fragmented nature of the crusading forces obliged them to adopt *ad hoc* solutions to immediate governmental and ecclesiastical problems. Nevertheless, by the end of the second decade of the twelfth century much had been achieved: the states of Antioch, Tripoli, and Jerusalem, along the coast, and Edessa, inland to the north-east of Antioch, had been established; most of the vital coastal cities had been captured, leaving only Tyre and Ascalon in Muslim hands; and under the forceful King Baldwin I, who had seized power in 1100 after the early death of his brother, Godfrey of Bouillon, a solid monarchical power had been created.

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Yet, although a framework had been erected, many problems remained and nowhere were they more evident than in the conquerors' inability to secure the safety of travellers and pilgrims in the regions supposedly under Frankish control. Fulcher of Chartres, chaplain to Baldwin I and a participant in the First Crusade, chose to make his home in Outremer, and his honest and observant chronicle offers invaluable evidence of conditions in the east under the first generation of settlers. At no time between 1100 and Fulcher's death in about 1127 were the roads around Jerusalem and the adjacent holy places secure. In 1100 the route between Ramla and Jerusalem was infested by robbers who hid in the caves along the way and preyed upon the pilgrims coming up from the port of Jaffa. A quarter of a century later anybody who ventured out of a fortified place around Jerusalem was still in severe danger of ambush either from the Egyptians and Ethiopians in the south or from the Turks in the north. According to Fulcher, the populace lived in a state of perpetual insecurity, always attentive to the trumpet blast which warned them of danger.[4]

Visitors to the kingdom were naturally deeply apprehensive (see figure 1). A Russian abbot called Daniel was one of those who described the dangers and hardships during his pilgrimage in 1106 and 1107. He was a man determined to see all that he could, an ambition which exposed him to even greater perils. The church of St George at Lydda was only about six miles from Jaffa, but was very vulnerable to sorties of the Egyptians from Ascalon. 'And there are many springs here; travellers rest by the water but with great fear, for it is a deserted place and nearby is the town of Ascalon from which Saracens sally forth and kill travellers on these roads. There is a great fear too going up from that place into the hills.' If the traveller reached Jerusalem, he might later wish to visit the River Jordan, but 'it is a very difficult road and dangerous and waterless, for the hills are high and rocky and there are many brigands in those fearful hills and valleys' (see plate 1). On another occasion, returning to Jerusalem after a visit to Hebron, about twenty-three miles to the south, he says: 'there is a very high rocky mountain and on it a great dense forest and there is a way over that terrible mountain but it is difficult to pass along it because the Saracens have a great fortress there from which they attack. And if anyone in a small party tries to travel that road he cannot, but God granted me a good and numerous escort

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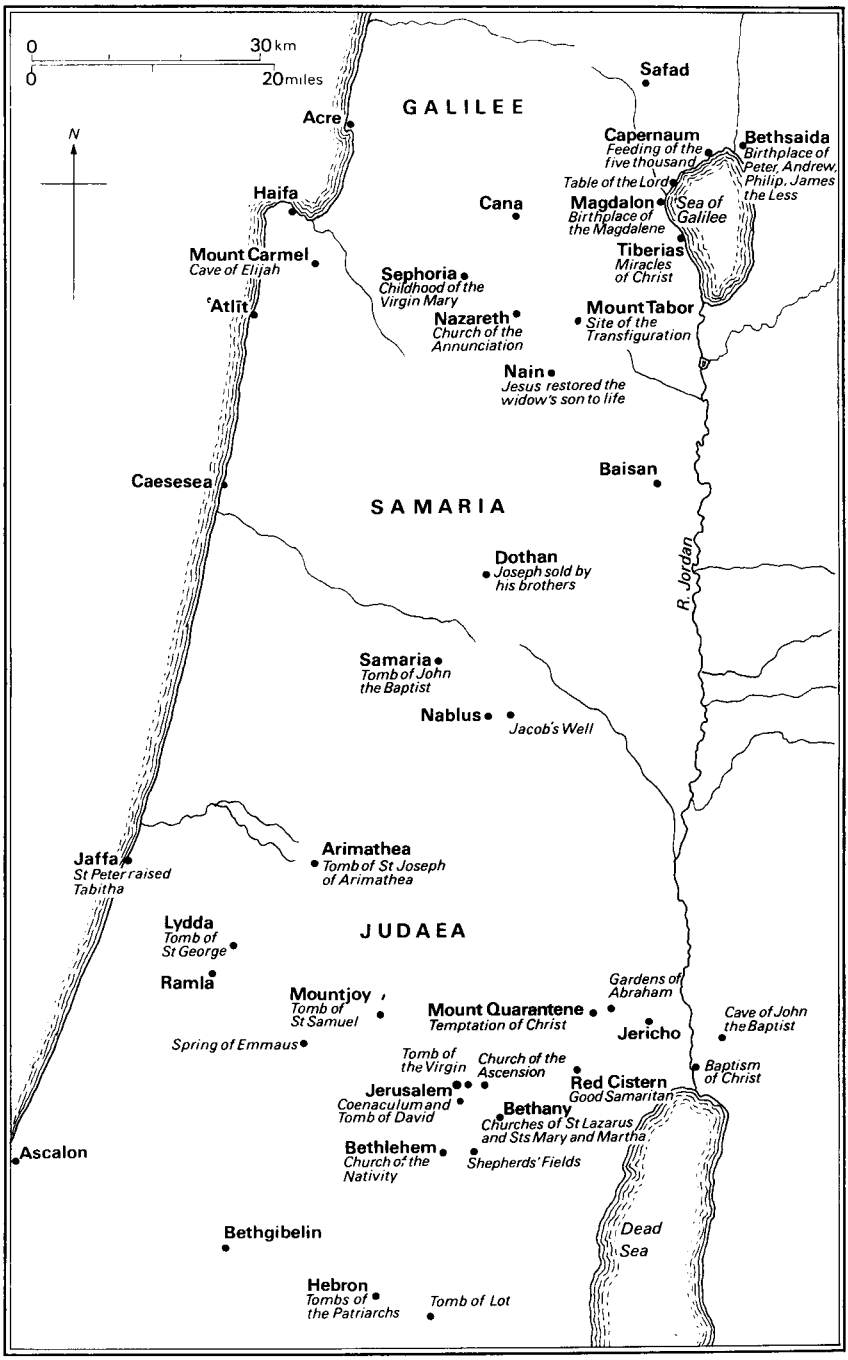

Figure 1 Popular pilgrim sites in the crusader period.

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Plate 1 Maldoim (The Red Cistern) and the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. The Templars instituted regular patrols along this route to protect pilgrims visiting the Jordan.

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and thus I was able to pass that terrible place without hindrance.' Most striking of all is the abbot's description of his visit to Galilee, in the course of which he had to pass near the town of Baisan. Here he conveys a sense of brooding menace which is eloquent testimony to the feelings of vulnerability experienced by pilgrims like himself:

> And this place is very dreadful and dangerous. Seven rivers flow from this town of Bashan and great reeds grow along these rivers and many tall palm trees stand about the town like a dense forest. This place is terrible and difficult of access for here live fierce pagan Saracens who attack travellers at the fords on these rivers. And lions are found here in great numbers. This place is near the River Jordan and a great watermeadow [?] lies between the Jordan and the town of Bashan and the rivers flow from Bashan into the Jordan and there are many lions at that place.[5]

The formation of the Templars arose from a desire to provide protection for such pilgrims. No contemporary thought them sufficiently significant to record their first establishment, but three chroniclers of the second half of the twelfth century, William, Archbishop of Tyre (died *c.* 1186), Michael the Syrian, Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch (died 1199), and Walter Map, Archdeacon of Oxford (died between 1208 and 1210), writing in the light of the Order's later importance, gave their versions of how this came about.[6] William is by far the most important of these. He was born in the east in about 1130, but was absent in the west between about 1146 and 1165. Nevertheless, he diligently investigated events which occurred before his lifetime by reading the sources and questioning those who might know. However his view of the Templars is coloured by the development of an acute dislike of what he saw as their unfair manipulation and exploitation of their privileges in his own time. Michael the Syrian included details not found in William of Tyre, but is generally regarded as less reliable than William when describing matters outside his own experience and times, while Walter Map – the farthest removed from the events – is known as a man for whom a good story usually took precedence over historical inquiry.

Under the year 1118 William says that 'certain noble men of knightly order, devoted to God, pious and God-fearing', the two most important of whom were Hugh of Payns (in Champagne) and Godfrey of Saint-Omer (in Picardy), took vows of poverty, chastity,

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and obedience at the hands of Warmund of Picquigny, Patriarch of Jerusalem. They promised to devote themselves to God's service in the manner of regular canons, and King Baldwin II, who had succeeded his cousin at Easter 1118, gave them a base in his palace, to the south side of the Temple of the Lord, which was the name given by the Franks to the Dome of the Rock. At this time the king was resident in the al-Aqsa mosque at the southern end of the Haram al-Sharif or Temple platform in Jerusalem, for the crusaders believed this to be the site of Solomon's Temple and therefore an appropriate dwelling for the king. In addition the canons of the Temple of the Lord gave them a square near the al-Aqsa where they could follow the monastic offices, while a number of benefices were granted to them by the king and his nobles and the patriarch and other prelates, the income from which was intended to feed and clothe them. The distinctive feature of this fraternity, however, was the duty 'enjoined on them by the lord patriarch and the other bishops for the remission of their sins', which was that 'they should maintain, as far as they could, the roads and highways against the ambushes of thieves and attackers, especially in regard to the safety of pilgrims'.

It is not clear from William's account who originally had the idea of using these men for this purpose, although the implication is that at first they intended simply to adopt a penitential way of life as a kind of lay confraternity, and that later a more active role was suggested to them. Michael the Syrian says that it was the king, a man acutely aware of the deficiencies of the military establishment, who persuaded Hugh of Payns and thirty companions 'to serve in the knighthood, with those attached to him, rather than becoming a monk, in order to work to save his only soul, and to guard these places against robbers'. Walter Map creates a vignette about a knight called Paganus from a village in Burgundy, who took it upon himself to protect pilgrims whom he frequently saw attacked at a horse-pool not far from Jerusalem. When the numbers of the enemy became too great for him on his own, he obtained a hall from the canons of the Temple of the Lord and devoted himself to recruiting more men from among the knights who came on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They lived frugal, chaste, and sober lives. Finally, nearer to the events than any of these chroniclers is a charter of William, Castellan of Saint-Omer, and perhaps a relative of Godfrey, in 1137, 'to the

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knights of the Temple, whom divine providence deputed to the defence of the land of Jerusalem and the protection of pilgrims with the counsel of the Patriarch Warmund and the barons'.[7]

Certainly the creation of a permanent guard for pilgrim travellers must have seemed to both king and patriarch an ideal complement to the activities of the Hospitallers, who provided shelter and medical care for pilgrims. They had been formed as an annex to the monastery of Santa Maria Latina in about 1080, and after the Frankish conquest in 1099 quickly gained royal favour, grants of property and, in 1113, papal recognition. While it seems certain that the Templars influenced the Hospitallers to take on a military role during the 1130s, it is equally likely that initially the Hospital provided Hugh of Payns and Godfrey of Saint-Omer with an effective example of what could be done to help pilgrims. Templars, indeed, appear on only four charters in the Kingdom of Jerusalem before 1128 and two of these are concerned with the affairs of the Hospital. In December 1120, Hugh of Payns was a witness to Baldwin II's confirmation of the privileges of the Hospital, while Robert, 'knight of the Temple', is among the witnesses to a charter of Bernard, Bishop of Nazareth, dated October 1125, exempting the Hospital from payment of tithe in his diocese.[8] Further indirect evidence of the links, at least in the minds of contemporaries, can be found in a charter of Fulk, Count of Anjou (who was very familiar with the Kingdom of Jerusalem), which can be dated soon after 22 September 1127, at Saumur, where among the witnesses is 'Rotbertus Burgundio, miles Sancti Stephani Jerusalem'. This is almost certainly Robert of Craon, who succeeded Hugh of Payns as Master of the Order in about 1136. Here, however, he is associated with St Stephen's Church, outside Jerusalem near the Damascus Gate, which was in fact a dependency of Santa Maria Latina.[9]

It is possible to be more precise about the date of the establishment of the Templars. Among the early grants to the Order was one by Thierry, Count of Flanders, dated 13 September 1128, which states that it was made in the ninth year from the Order's foundation.[10] As this grant was actually made in the presence of Hugh of Payns, it must be more reliable evidence than the year 1118 given by William of Tyre, whose reputation for faulty chronology is well known and who was writing over half a century later.[11] Nor is William consistent, for he says later in the same passage that the Council of Troyes,

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at which the Templars received official papal recognition, occurred in their ninth year. Jean Michel, the scribe who wrote down the council's proceedings, dates his record as the Feast of St Hilary (13 January) 1128, 'the ninth year from the beginning of the aforesaid militia', information which, like Count Thierry's scribe, he must have obtained from Hugh of Payns himself, since he was present at the council.[12] As it has been shown by Rudolf Hiestand that this date should be corrected to January 1129, in accordance with the contemporary French practice of beginning the year on 25 March,[13] the official date of the foundation, according to information gained from the Templars themselves, must fall between 14 January and 13 September 1120.

The most likely occasion for their acceptance in the east was, as Hiestand suggests, at the assembly of prelates and secular leaders held at Nablus in January 1120, which issued a series of decrees on the 23rd of the month. The supposition is reinforced by the fact that the Christian settlers in Outremer were experiencing a period of severe crisis at this time, and the assembly at Nablus had been called in an atmosphere heavy with contrition and penitence.[14] A dramatic letter from the Patriarch Warmund and Gerard, Prior of the Holy Sepulchre, written at about this time, appealed to Diego Gelmirez, Archbishop of Compostella, and his people, to send help in the form of men, money, and food as soon as possible. They were, said Warmund, being attacked on all sides by Saracens from Baghdad, Ascalon, Tyre, and Damascus. The kingdom had become so unsafe that no one dared to venture outside the walls of Jerusalem without an armed escort, while the Saracens had become so bold that they came up to the gates of the city itself.[15] The group may well have first been formed in the course of the previous year, perhaps in reaction to a particularly shocking incident at Easter when a large party of about 700 pilgrims had been attacked in the barren and mountainous region between Jerusalem and the Jordan. Having witnessed the famous miracle of the holy fire at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, they set out, according to the German monastic chronicler, Albert of Aachen, 'in joy and with a cheerful heart', but when they reached an isolated place they were ambushed and, since they were unarmed and weakened by fasting and the journey, they were an easy target. Three hundred were killed and sixty captured. Although King Baldwin quickly sent out a posse of armed knights,

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they failed to make contact because the attackers had already retreated to Tyre and Ascalon.[16]

However, despite the evident support of king and patriarch, according to William of Tyre the early Templars did not have much initial success, having recruited only nine members by the time of the Council of Troyes, and remaining so poor that they were able to dress only in the clothes donated to them by the pious, which meant that they had no distinctive 'occupational' garments of their own. Moreover, according to Fulcher of Chartres, the Franks did not have sufficient resources to maintain 'the Temple of Solomon' properly and the building became dilapidated,[17] so the adjacent area given over to Templar accommodation probably had the same cast-off air as their clothing. It was indeed a formidable and stressful undertaking and there are signs of failing morale and loss of belief in the legitimacy of their mission among the Templars at this time which hint at very real difficulties. The tradition of humble and poor beginnings was certainly accepted by the later Order as established fact, as can be seen by the symbolic representation of poverty on their seal which shows two knights riding on one horse (see plate 7), although the asceticism of the Cistercians, channelled through St Bernard, the famous Abbot of Clairvaux, may also have contributed to this self-image. So too was the idea of nine original founders, which seems still to have been embedded in the Order's collective memory in the middle of the thirteenth century. In the lunette of the apse inside the important Templar church of San Bevignate at Perugia, built and decorated between 1256 and 1262, nine stars are shown around the three crosses painted in the upper register.[18]

Nevertheless, there is an element of topos in these representations. William of Tyre had reasons of his own for stressing the initial humility, for he draws a moral from this when he compares it to the allegedly proud Order of his own day. Although for a long time, he says, they carried out their proper functions, eventually they neglected humility, 'which is known to be the guardian of all the virtues'. Moreover, there is a suspicious symmetry about the nine members in nine years, which is contradicted by Michael the Syrian's figure of thirty and by the intrinsic improbability that the papacy would have allowed a new order which had failed to attract larger numbers than this to be confirmed. They had, as well, regular if modest incomes: a charter of the Holy Sepulchre of 1160 records that

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