

Introduction



The Templars were a military religious Order, founded in the Holy Land in 1119. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries they acquired extensive property both in the crusader states in Palestine and Syria and in the West, especially in France, and they were granted far-reaching ecclesiastical and jurisdictional privileges both by the popes to whom they were immediately responsible, and by the secular monarchs in whose lands their members resided. They also functioned as bankers on a large scale, a position facilitated by the international nature of their organisation. But most of all they bore a large share of the responsibility for the military defence of the crusader states in the East, to which they owed their origin and on account of which they had become so famous and powerful. However, in 1291, the Christian settlers of the East were driven out of Palestine by the Mamluks of Egypt, and the Templars were cut adrift from the main purpose of their existence.

Suddenly, in the early hours of Friday 13 October 1307, the brothers of this Order residing in France were arrested by the officials of King Philip IV in the name of the papal inquisitors, and their property was taken over by royal representatives. They were charged with serious heresies encompassing the denial of Christ and spitting on the crucifix, indecent kissing and homosexuality, and idol worship, carried on in secret receptions and chapter meetings of the Order. In October and November, the captured Templars, including James of Molay, the grand master, and Hugh of Pairaud, the visitor, almost unanimously confessed their guilt. Torture was freely used upon many of the prisoners. Molay then repeated his confession before a public assembly of theologians from the university of Paris. For his part King Philip wrote to the other monarchs of Christendom urging them to follow his lead and to arrest the Templars in their own lands, for the confessions had proved them to be manifest heretics.

The reigning pope, Clement V, at first saw the arrests as a direct affront to his authority, for the Templars were responsible to the papacy, and

although the previous summer there had been discussions between the pope and the king concerning the condition of the Order, Clement had not actually authorised the arrests. However, after his initial anger, he was forced to accept the situation and, instead of resisting, endeavoured to put himself in charge. On 22 November 1307 he issued the bull *Pastoralis praeeminentiae*, which ordered all the monarchs of Christendom to arrest the Templars and sequester their lands in the name of the papacy. This bull initiated proceedings in the British Isles, Iberia, Germany, Italy and Cyprus. Two cardinals were then sent to Paris to interview the leaders of the Order personally. But, once in front of the papal representatives, Molay and Pairaud revoked their confessions and urged the rest of the Templars to do the same.

By now the pope had become highly suspicious of the whole affair and, early in 1308, he suspended the inquisitorial proceedings. Philip IV and his ministers were obliged to spend the next six months in an attempt to force the pope to reopen the trial, both by the marshalling of public and theological opinion in France, and by the implicit threat of physical violence against the pope himself. This campaign culminated in a meeting between the pope and the king at Poitiers in May and June, 1308, in which, after much debate, the pope finally agreed to set up two kinds of inquiry: one by a papal commission into the Order itself, and another consisting of a series of provincial councils, held at diocesan level, to investigate the guilt or innocence of individual Templars. Furthermore, a general council of the Church was arranged, to be held at Vienne in October 1310, to make a final decision in the matter. Meanwhile, three cardinals were sent to Chinon to hear the depositions of the leaders of the Order who were imprisoned there, only to find that they had reverted to their original confessions.

The episcopal inquiries, which were largely dominated by bishops closely associated with the French monarchy, seem to have begun work in 1309, and it appears that in most cases the Templars repeated their confessions, once again under pressure from extensive torture. The papal commission investigating the Order as a whole did not begin its sittings until November 1309. Initially it appeared that the familiar pattern of confessions would be followed, but at first falteringly and then with gathering momentum, the brothers, led by two able Templar priests, Peter of Bologna and Reginald of Provins, began to mount a defence of their Order and their way of life before the commission. By early May 1310 almost six hundred Templars had agreed to defend the Order, denying the validity of previous confessions whether made

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Excerpt

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before the inquisitors in 1307 or the bishops in 1309. Pope Clement, seeing that no immediate end to the proceedings seemed in prospect, postponed the council of Vienne for a year until October 1311. It was to crush this increasingly confident Templar defence that Philip IV took drastic action. The archbishop of Sens, a royal nominee, reopened his inquiry against individual Templars within his province and, finding fifty-four of them guilty of being relapsed heretics, handed them over to the secular authorities. On 12 May 1310 the fifty-four Templars were burnt at the stake in a field outside Paris. Of the two leading defenders, Peter of Bologna mysteriously disappeared, and Reginald of Provins was sentenced to perpetual imprisonment by the council of Sens. With the exception of a few brave individuals, the burnings effectively silenced the defence, and many Templars returned to their confessions. The hearings of the papal commission eventually petered out in June 1311.

In the summer of 1311 the pope collected together the evidence sent from France, as well as the material slowly coming in from the other countries where proceedings had taken place. In essence only in France and in those regions under French domination or influence were there substantial confessions from Templars. In October the council of Vienne at last opened, and the pope pressed for the suppression (although not the condemnation) of the Order on the grounds that it was now too defamed to carry on. However, resistance among the fathers at the council was considerable, and the pope, pressed by the military presence of the king of France, only achieved his will by imposing silence on the council to be broken under pain of excommunication. The bull *Vox in excelso* of 22 March 1312 suppressed the Order, and *Ad providam* of 2 May granted its property to the other great military order, the Hospital. Soon after, Philip IV extracted a huge sum of money from the Hospitallers in compensation for his costs in bringing the Templars to trial. As for the individual Templars, in some cases they had to submit to heavy penances including perpetual imprisonment, and in others, where they had admitted nothing, they were sent to monasteries of other orders to spin out the rest of their lives. The leaders eventually came before the papal representatives on 18 March 1314 and were sentenced to perpetual imprisonment. Hugh of Pairaud and Geoffrey of Gonneville, Preceptor of Aquitaine, accepted their fate in silence, but James of Molay and Geoffrey of Charney, Preceptor of Normandy, loudly protested their innocence and asserted that the Order was pure and holy. At once the king ordered that they

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be condemned as relapsed heretics and, on the same evening, they were burnt at the stake on the Ile des Javiaux in the Seine.

The aim of this book is to trace in detail the course of these events, to examine the motivation of the chief participants, and to assess the extent to which the charges brought against the Order were justified.

CHAPTER I

The Participants

THE ORDER OF THE TEMPLE

In this place a great misfortune befell, by which the Saracens who had come into the city, as I have said, were able to enter more easily and quickly, and by which our people were greatly disheartened. The occasion was this: a javelin came at the master of the Temple, just as he raised his left hand. He had no shield save his spear in his right hand. The javelin struck him under the armpit, and the shaft sank into his body a palm's-length; it came in through the gap where the plates of the armour were not joined. This was not proper armour, but rather light armour for putting on hastily at an alarm.

When he felt himself mortally wounded, he turned to go. Some of the defenders thought that he was retiring because he wanted to save himself. The standard-bearer saw him go, and fell in behind him, and then all his household followed as well. After he had gone some way, twenty crusaders from the Vallo di Spoleto saw him withdrawing, and they called to him, 'Oh, for God's sake, Sir, don't leave, or the city will fall at once!' And he cried out to them in a loud voice, so that everyone could hear him: 'My lords, I can do no more, for I am killed; see the wound here!'

And then we saw the javelin stuck in his body, and as he spoke he dropped the spear on the ground, and his head slumped to one side. He started to fall from his horse, but those of his household sprang down from their horses and supported him and took him off, and laid him on a shield that they found cast off there, a tall, broad buckler. They carried him off towards the St Anthony Gate, but found it closed; instead, they found a small door which had a bridge leading from the *fosse* into the residence of the Lady Maria of Antioch, which had previously belonged to Sir James of La Mandelée.

There his household removed his armour, cutting the *cuirasse* off at the shoulders, for they could do nothing else because of the wound he had taken. Then they put him, still in his *epaulières*, under a blanket, and took him towards the seashore, which is to say, on the beach which is between the abbatoir where

they slaughter beasts and the house of the lord of Tyre. There they heard a cry from in front of the Tower of the Legate, that the Saracens were there, so some of the household leapt into the sea to try to reach the two *barques* that were there – there were only these two, because the sea was so stormy and the waves so great that the *barques* were unable to cope with them – and many of the men were lost because of this. Other members of his household carried him to the Temple fortress with the aid of other men, and they laid him within the house – not going in by way of the gate, which they did not want to open, but taking him by way of a courtyard where they piled manure.

He lived all that day without saying a word, for since he had been taken down from his horse he had not spoken, save only a word to those in the Temple; when he heard the clamour of men fleeing death, he wanted to know what was happening. They told him that men were fighting, and he commanded that they should leave him in peace.

He did not speak again, but gave up his soul to God. He was buried before his tabernacle, which was the altar where they said mass. And God has his soul – but what great harm was caused by his death!

This dramatic eyewitness description of the death of William of Beaujeu, the Master of the Temple, at Acre on 18 May, 1291, was written by an author known as the Templar of Tyre. He was not in fact a Templar, but the master's secretary and confidant, a position he had held since 1285, and it is clear from this account that he was with his patron to the end.² The great port of Acre with its large protected harbour was a key city in the history of the Latin states in the East. It had been captured by the crusaders as early as 1104, only five years after the fall of Jerusalem to the forces of the First Crusade and, although it had been taken by Saladin in July, 1187, soon after his victory over the Christians at the battle of Hattin, it had been regained by the Third Crusade four years later. From Acre Richard I of England had been able to launch his campaign against Saladin, a campaign which led to the sultan's defeat near Arsuf on 7 September, 1191, and which ensured that, despite Saladin's retention of Jerusalem (which had fallen to him on 2 October, 1187, after Hattin) the Latin states would survive into the thirteenth century. There had been several crises since – most notably the Christian defeat at La Forbie in October, 1244, during which the Templar master, Armand of Périgord, simply disappeared, either overwhelmed in fighting or carried off to prison or death by the victors – but the siege of Acre in the spring of 1291 was indeed the decisive moment in the history of Latin states.

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Acre had held out since 5 April, when al-Ashraf Khalil, the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt, had first brought the full strength of his formidable army to bear, but the fighting which killed William of Beaujeu had already penetrated the streets, and by that time only the Temple compound, situated on the north side of the city along the sea front, was still resisting. With the master's death, the remaining Templars knew that there was little time left, and Theobald Gaudin, the Grand Commander, together with a contingent which must have included the Templar of Tyre, took a Venetian ship to Sidon, fifty-eight miles to the north, leaving Peter of Sevrey, the Marshal, and a group of Templars, to try to protect the panic-stricken inhabitants now struggling into the Templar area. They lasted another ten days, during which time Peter of Sevrey and some of his men attempted to negotiate with al-Ashraf, only to be taken and beheaded. The last Templars in the city were crushed to death when their main tower collapsed as a result of undermining; apparently none survived. Meanwhile, in the sea castle at Sidon, a Templar possession, Theobald Gaudin was elected master, and from there he sailed to Cyprus from which he promised to send help. However, according to the Templar of Tyre who, in contrast to his admiration for William of Beaujeu, had little time for the new master, he went about it 'in such an unenthusiastic way' that the Templars in Cyprus sent word to the brethren still at Sidon to abandon it, advice which they duly took on 14 July.³ The last Templar castles, Tortosa to the north, and the great sea fortress of 'Atlit to the south, were now isolated, and they too were evacuated on 3 and 14 August. From then on the most forward Templar base was the island of Cyprus.

Until the Templars were forced to leave 'Atlit they had functioned as defenders of the holy places and the Latin settlements in Palestine and Syria for 172 years without a break. They had begun modestly when, in 1119, two French knights, Hugh of Payns and Godfrey of Saint-Omer, together with a small number of companions, volunteered to protect pilgrims travelling from the port of Jaffa to Jerusalem and the surrounding holy places. At first the knights seem to have been dependent upon the Augustinian canons of the Holy Sepulchre and to have been resident in the Muristan, just to the south of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.⁴ Here the Order of St John provided hospital facilities for sick pilgrims, a conjunction which suggests that the two operations were closely connected. Indeed, in clause 49 of the Latin Rule of the Temple of 1129, the Templars are commanded to serve the sick 'as if they were Christ', a phrase very reminiscent of the Hospitaller obligation towards

‘our lords the sick’.⁵ King Baldwin II and Warmund of Picquigny, Patriarch of Jerusalem, provided the knights with a base on the Temple platform, together with grants in money and kind, and it is likely they received ecclesiastical sanction at the council of Nablus, held in January, 1120. Sometime during the 1120s, Baldwin II moved out of his quarters in the al-Aqsa mosque and re-established himself in the Tower of David on the opposite side of the city. This left Hugh of Payns and his knights to occupy what the Latins regarded as ‘the Temple of Solomon’.

The armies of the First Crusade had captured Jerusalem in July, 1099, but the creation of viable political entities remained a struggle throughout the first generation of settlement: attacks from the Turks in the north and the Egyptians in the south were difficult to repel with the limited forces available to the early rulers, Godfrey of Bouillon (1099–1100), Baldwin I (1100–18) and Baldwin II (1118–31), while the need to seize the vital Mediterranean ports placed a further strain on resources. Not surprisingly, the contribution of the French knights, small as it was, was encouraged by the Christian leaders, as well as by prominent pilgrims such as Fulk V, Count of Anjou, who visited the holy places in 1120, and Hugh of Troyes, Count of Champagne, who appears to have joined the group himself in 1125.⁶ When Fulk of Anjou agreed to marry Melisende, Baldwin II’s eldest daughter and heir, Hugh of Payns was a member of the delegation sent to fetch him; once in the West, he not only attended upon Fulk, but also began an energetic and successful recruiting campaign in France and the British Isles, travelling extensively through Champagne, Anjou, Normandy and Flanders, and crossing the Channel to England and Scotland. Other members of the group similarly drew on their home territories in an effort to raise forces for an attack on Damascus, planned by Baldwin II to follow the marriage of Fulk and Melisende.⁷

Hugh’s major purpose in the West had, however, been prearranged for, in January, 1129, he presented himself before an ecclesiastical council at Troyes in Champagne, presided over by Matthew du Remois, Cardinal-Bishop of Albano, the papal legate in France. Supported by the five companions he had brought with him, he ‘conveyed from memory . . . the manner and observance of the small beginnings of his military order which owed its existence to Him who says, “I speak to you who am the beginning”’. The result was a Rule of 71 clauses, written in Latin, incorporating those elements of previous practice that the fathers at the council found acceptable and rejecting practices described as absurd. The brethren were divided into two classes: the knights, who wore white,

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and the sergeants (later also called serving brothers), who wore black or brown. Squires were allocated to provide practical support, while spiritual needs were supplied by chaplains, although neither were professed members of the Order. Association for a fixed period was continued, a custom which included married brothers, who were required to bequeath a portion of their possessions to the Order if they were to enjoy full spiritual benefits, although they were not to share the same quarters as fully professed brethren. Temporary association could be conceded to knights, sergeants or squires. In contrast to much contemporary monastic practice, the Order was not to accept sisters nor to receive oblates, since women served as a temptation which might undermine 'the flower of chastity', while young boys, not yet old enough to bear arms, were simply an encumbrance. Perhaps the lack of a formal novitiate was a consequence of this; a probationary period was laid down, but its term was entirely at the discretion of the master, based on his judgement of the nature of the candidate's life.

In view of 'their exceptional merit and particular probity', the Templars were granted lands and men, together with their customary services, and they were allowed to receive tithes. Within the convent lifestyle was a modified form of contemporary practices among the regulars: attendance at the Divine Office, communal meals, taken in silence and accompanied by readings from Scripture, plain diet with meat three days per week, unostentatious behaviour, clothing and accoutrements, and no personal possessions. Ultimate authority lay with the master, as it did with the abbot in the Benedictine world; joining the Temple was a commitment to obedience which characterised all who gave themselves to a monastery. Any offences were therefore subject to a proportionate penance, while refusal to accept such discipline would result in expulsion. According to clause 65, 'It is essential that the sickly sheep be removed from the congregation of the faithful brothers.'⁸

The Latin Rule of the Temple reflects the wide experience of those who were present at Troyes. These included the archbishops of Reims and Sens, ten of their suffragan bishops, eight abbots, and two of the most powerful provincial lords, Theobald, Count of Blois and Champagne, and William, Count of Auxerre and Nevers. Cistercian influence was, however, predominant, since four of the abbots were from the Order and, according to John Michael, the scribe, the council was convened at the instigation of Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux. Moreover, it was to Bernard that Hugh of Payns turned, shortly after the council, with a request that he write a 'sermon of encouragement' for him and his fellow knights.

This eventually took the form of a treatise, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, set out in thirteen chapters. After extolling the virtues of the Templars and contrasting them with the venality and viciousness of contemporary secular knights, Bernard analysed one by one the spiritual significance of the holy sites which it was the role of the Templars to protect, the most important of which was the Holy Sepulchre itself.⁹ The striking similarity between the depiction of the crimes of secular knights in the prologue to the Rule and their elaboration in chapter two of the treatise helps to confirm the powerful influence that the abbot of Clairvaux had upon the proceedings at Troyes. Not surprisingly, a later master of the Temple described the Order as having its origins in Cîteaux and its predecessors.¹⁰

However, even if the idea of the council had evolved in Cistercian circles, it was assembled under papal auspices in the person of Matthew of Albano, Honorius II's legate, without whose authority the Order could not have gained official recognition. At first sight such papal interest might seem unlikely, for the number of Templars was still small, but in fact it was quite consistent with recent papal policy. Since the era of Gregory VII (1073–85), the popes had energetically encouraged monastic communities to seek papal protection, a policy developed both to increase papal power and to reduce secular influence. The emergence of new orders, like the Carthusians and the Cistercians, and the reform of the cathedral canons, most evident from the late eleventh century onwards, gave huge impetus to this trend, as the popes sought to make them directly responsible to Rome.¹¹ Thus ten years after Troyes, Innocent II began the process of conferring privileges on the Order, encapsulated in their fundamental bull, *Omne Datum Optimum* (29 March, 1139), granted to the second master, Robert of Craon, and his successors. The Templars were 'appointed by the Lord defenders of the Catholic Church and attackers of the enemies of Christ', a role which entitled them to exclusive possession of any spoils taken in battle. All their possessions were placed 'under the protection and tutelage of the Holy See for all time to come'. Nobody was to be chosen as master unless he was 'both a military and a religious person who had made profession of the habit of your brotherhood', no changes could be made to their Rule except by the master and chapter, and no secular or ecclesiastical person could demand any fealty or homage from them. However, once professed, a brother could not leave the Order nor transfer elsewhere to another monastery without the permission of the master. As stated in the Rule, they were not obliged to render tithes, although they could retain any tithes they themselves