THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR

Helen J. Nicholson

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (print): 9781641891684
e-ISBN (PDF): 9781641891691
e-ISBN (EPUB): 9781641891707

www.arc-humanities.org
Printed and bound in the UK (by CPI Group [UK] Ltd), USA (by Bookmasters), and elsewhere using print-on-demand technology.

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Introduction

The Knights Templar began in obscurity, and grew to be one of the most influential organizations in Christendom. From a small group of warriors who set out to serve God in the best way that they knew, the Knights Templar became a trans-European multinational organization at a time when the only trans-European multinational organizations were branches of the Christian Church. They held property in almost every Christian country in Europe, they had a permanent presence at the papal court and at most royal courts in Latin Christendom, and their members served governments as diplomats, treasurers, and advisors. They were the living embodiment of the Latin Church's reform movement of the eleventh and twelfth century, demonstrating that non-noble people could be virtuous and could serve God in action. The Templars and other new religious movements of their time showed that to reach God, it was no longer necessary to shut oneself up in a religious community and spend one's days in prayer and self-denial; a Christian could go out into the world and serve God in whatever way they knew best. Some Christians served in hospitals, some travelled the roads of Europe preaching God's Word; the Templars defended Christians and Christian territory.

The Templars began in Jerusalem, in the decades following the first crusade's capture of that city in 1099. They acquired their title from their base in the Aqsa mosque, which the Franks called "Solomon's Temple." It took them a decade to get the attention of their contemporaries in Europe, but the reaction—when it came—was almost entirely positive. True, Templars did not fit the traditional model of servants of God: they were not of noble birth, they did not spend their lives shut away in prayer and fasting, and as warriors they could not adhere to the ideals of poverty and austerity held by the early Church because they had to invest in military equipment and horses. Yet they gained fame for their discipline, their courage on the battlefield, and their self-denying piety. In the wake of the first crusade, clearly military skill was needed as much as prayer to defend Jerusalem and the other holy places which the crusaders had won. The Templars embodied contemporary warriors' view that warriors could serve God with their military skills at least as well as monks could serve God with prayer. Their supporters gave the Templars land, money, armour and weapons, rents, and exemptions from taxes and other dues and customary payments. The pope cut them free from the authority of bishops and archbishops and made them answerable only to the papacy. Leading churchmen wrote in their support and encouraged them in their spiritual aims.

The Knights Templar are remembered as valiant warriors, defenders of the defenceless, and heroes of hopeless last stands, who held property and churches across Europe, were very wealthy, and were involved in finance. Yet when we look beyond this image of mystery and romance, at first glance the original Templars can appear quite boring.

The Templars were very pious, but they were not great scholars; they did not write sermons or works of theology, or record the histories of their properties. Their leading members were knights, but they were not nobles; they did not have great social prestige. Most of them came from the lesser knightly, gentry, burgess and other non-knightly families of Latin Christendom, who might be very influential at a local level but who were beneath the notice of contemporary commentators.[1]

1 Alan Forey, "Recruitment to the Military Orders (Twelfth to Mid-Fourteenth Centuries)," *Viator* 17 (1986): 139–71 at 143–47.

As Templars, however, they offer us an insight into the interests and concerns of their social class. Their leaders commissioned religious works for the members' education: a translation of the Old Testament Book of Judges, a female saint's life, a translation of the well-known story of St. Paul's visit to Hell. Templars advised kings and popes, and their last grand master wrote reports for the pope on how to plan a new crusade and the future of military-religious orders. Satirists commented on their business sense, their efficient exploitation of their lands and resources, and their fixation on helping the Holy Land. Helping the Holy Land was what the Templars were all about.

There were some doubters. Supporters' writings hint at complaints that the Templars were greedy because they took booty and that religious men should not shed blood or kill; no one should spread the Word of God by killing people. Yet the Templars were not set up to spread the Word of God; their task was to defend Christians, not to create more Christians. A few of their supporters argued that they also won converts, but the Templars never claimed to be preaching God's Word. Their task was to fight, and for that task they needed money—money that their vast estates across Christian Europe should provide.

The Templars were always accessible to everyone. They would take a donation from anyone, no matter how small, and reward the donor with their prayers. Their regulations even allowed them to approach excommunicated knights to recruit them to the order. Although the order's regulations allowed only adult men to join, married couples could be associate members, women joined some houses as sisters of the order, and noble children were brought up in the order's houses: as King James I of Aragon was brought up in the Templars' castle of Monzón. Anyone could play a role in the Templars' work without taking the three religious vows of personal poverty, chastity, and obedience to a superior. Warriors could join on a temporary basis, fighting alongside the Templars in the Middle East for perhaps a year, and then returning to their homes. The order employed mercenaries on the military frontiers of Christendom, but throughout Latin Christendom also employed many servants, clerks, administrative officials, and other workers, both men and women. Associate members could hold responsibilities within the order, holding an administrative post or even running one of the order's properties. In return, associate members shared the spiritual benefits of the order and the post-mortem security of burial in the order's consecrated ground. Some associate members and employees would become the order's pensioners, living within the order's community, sharing the members' food, with clothing provided. Ironically, the Templars' success in attracting patronage from across Latin Christendom is now a hindrance to research, because the records of their vast European estates are scattered piecemeal throughout the archives of Europe.

The Templars would work with anyone who could assist them in their aims, including Jews and Muslims.[2] They developed systems for transporting money from their European properties to the Middle East, and allowed pilgrims, crusaders, and merchants to use their systems of money transfer, developing processes which modern analysts have compared to modern banking. They had an advantage over Jewish bankers and the great Italian banking families: as a multinational institution spreading their financial risk over a variety of operations, the Templars did not go bankrupt if a debtor defaulted.

In common with all religious and secular leaders of society in the "crusader states," the Templars wrote regular newsletters to their supporters in Europe asking for military and financial aid. These letters had to maintain a careful balance between success stories, showing that previous aid had been effectively employed, and accounts of crises, demonstrating the ongoing need for support. If the Templars made out that all was well, then their supporters in Europe would stop send-

2 On this, see Paula R. Stiles, *Templar Convivencia: Templars and their Associates in 12th and 13th Century Iberia* (self-pub., Amazon, 2012), Kindle.

ing aid; but if they reported nothing but defeats and emergencies, their supporters in Europe would conclude that the Templars were ineffective and withdraw their support. The Templars and other letter-writers in the Latin East tended to concentrate on the crises, and the result is that we know less about the Templars' successes than their failures.

During crusades to the Middle East, contemporary commentators wrote favourably about the Templars' courage and military effectiveness, contrasting them with the ineffectiveness of the other crusaders. It was the Templars who formed the vanguard or rear guard (their sister military-religious order the Knights Hospitaller would take the responsibility for the other end of the army); it was the Templars who formed a rapid reaction force when the enemy broke into the crusader camp, and who drove them out again; the Templars defended the crusader army during a retreat; the Templars warned against rash attacks; and, when the attack turned into a disaster, the Templars fought to the last man.

On the other hand, between crusades, contemporary commentators based in Europe had only newsletters and second-hand reports on events in the Latin East. They reported political infighting in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, truces with the enemy, alliances which went wrong, and devastating defeats. As the Templars, with their standing army and extensive landholdings, formed an influential political force in the Latin East, they were inevitably in the centre of these events, and contemporaries criticized them accordingly. Commentators who were resentful of their privileged status or opposed their policies—such as Archbishop William II of Tyre, recording events in the Kingdom of Jerusalem from the first crusade until 1184—failed to record positive information about the Templars' achievements and exaggerated their failures. When modern writers rely on (for example) William of Tyre's accounts of the Templars' deeds, they reproduce his opinions and what he chose to tell us about the Templars, not necessarily what actually happened. There are other, more contemporary, accounts of what the Templars did in the Latin East in the twelfth century, but they are fragmentary and much more difficult to find than Archbishop William's famous history.

As the Templars held property across most of Latin Christian Europe, were influential at the papal and royal courts, and were exempt from many taxes and customary payments and obligations, they were often at loggerheads with the monks and secular clergy who commented on current events in Europe. When Matthew Paris (d. 1259), monk and chronicler of the Benedictine abbey of St. Albans in England, complained that the Templars and Hospitallers swallowed up great wealth as if they sank it into a pit of the Great Abyss, his view reflected the competition for charitable donations between his great Benedictine abbey and these two modern military-religious orders. Money given to the military-religious orders for the Latin East was money that did not come to help maintain the fabric or operation of St. Albans Abbey, yet so far as Matthew could see the Templars and Hospitallers wasted it.

Despite such grumbles, the Templars and their fellow military-religious orders were well-regarded by bishops and religious leaders because they provided an example of religious devotion in everyday life, and they could also give spiritual support to their tenants and neighbours. Twelfth-century Europe did not have the extensive network of parish churches that its growing population needed. The supporters of the Templars, Hospitallers, and other new religious orders of the twelfth century gave them land that was ripe for development but needed investment. The Templars and their fellow religious orders brought in tenants who drained marsh, irrigated dry land, cleared woodland, and made unproductive land productive; they could also be relied on to repair parish churches and install a suitable priest. They built new churches and provided pastoral care in regions where hitherto there had been no available priests.[3] In theory, all of this develop-

3 Jochen Schenk, "Aspects and Problems of the Templars' Religious Presence in Medieval Europe from the Twelfth to the Early Fourteenth Century," *Traditio* 71 (2016): 273–302.

ment work should have raised more money for the Templars' operations in the Latin East, but in fact it probably became a drain on their resources rather than benefitting them.

Despite their vast resources, the Templars could never operate entirely outside the military strategies of the secular rulers of the Latin East. In 1129 King Baldwin II of Jerusalem set off to capture Damascus, supported by among others the Templars—whose leader, Hugh de Payns, had been overseas in Europe recruiting warriors and collecting money to support the campaign. When King Baldwin retreated without capturing Damascus, there were complaints in the West: the writer of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle declared that Hugh de Payns had lied. The Templars were also vulnerable to criticism from returning crusaders who wanted to justify their lack of achievement in the East. If a crusade had failed, it was easy to blame the Franks of the Latin East for failing to support the European crusaders, and particularly to blame the Templars for giving the wrong advice. Ironically, the Templars were criticized for their advice even when it turned out to have been correct.

Yet the Templars must have had military successes, because they survived as an active military force for over one hundred and seventy years, from around 1120 to 1291, and supporters were still giving them resources and joining their institution right up to the arrest of the Templars in 1307–8. When in June 1306 Pope Clement V asked the Grand Masters of the Templars and of the Hospitallers for their opinion on how the Holy Land could be recovered and whether their two institutions should be amalgamated, he demonstrated that he still regarded these military religious institutions as having a valuable role to play in the defence of Christendom.

Whatever their contemporaries thought of them, our views of the Templars are now indelibly coloured by the means of their destruction. In October 1307 King Philip IV of France ordered the arrest of all the Templars within his domains, on charges of blasphemy and sexual depravity. He instructed that if the Templars would not confess to these charges, they should be tortured until confessions were obtained. Many Templars in France confessed under torture or the threat of torture, although contemporaries reported that thirty-six Templars interrogated in Paris died under torture rather than confess to these false charges. The testimonies extracted by torture are not reliable evidence about the Templars or their order. Few writers came forward to defend the Templars, but it is hardly surprising that their supporters remained silent as the pope declared that anyone who defended or helped them would also be suspected of heresy.

Although many contemporaries outside France believed that King Philip attacked the Templars to get their wealth, rather than because they were guilty as charged, some refused to countenance the possibility that the king, or the pope who failed to stop the trial, would have connived at the destruction of an innocent religious order. There must have been something behind the charges, they believed; not just that the Templars' wide properties and failure to prevent the Mamluk conquest of the Latin East made them vulnerable to powerful and greedy rulers. Modern readers might ask why, if the Templars were innocent, the order was dissolved by the pope. Yet even if the kings of England, the Iberian Peninsula, and Cyprus had not been forced by the pope to follow the King of France's lead and arrest the Templars, the confiscation of their French territories would have made it difficult for the Templars to continue operations after 1307. As it was, the long and bitter trial of the Templars ended acrimoniously with the order's guilt not proven. Under pressure from King Philip, Pope Clement V dissolved the Templars on the grounds that the order was too defamed to continue, and gave its properties to the equally unpopular Hospitallers.

The argument over the Templars' guilt has continued to the present day. In the century after the trial, authors who resented the influence of the King of France blamed him for destroying the Templars and stated that his aim was to get their wealth, or to avoid repaying a generous loan. By the fifteenth century, some writers were describing the Hospitallers as being founded after the Templars were destroyed—as if all the Templars had died when the city of Acre fell to the Mamluks in 1291, and the Hospitallers replaced them.

Thomas Fuller (d. 1661), a Protestant cleric writing a history of the crusades just before the 1642–51 Civil War broke out in England, concluded that the Templars were generally seen as innocent of the sins of which they were charged, and that their great wealth was the cause of their downfall.[4] In Catholic countries, however, the decision of a pope and a Catholic king could not so easily be criticized. The simplistic story of the Templars' rise, decline, and fall was attractive to moralizing historians and story-tellers alike. The Romance movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth century made much of the Templars as flawed heroes, anti-heroes, or bearers of mysteries, especially as the guardians of the Holy Grail—an image loosely based on just one of the numerous medieval stories about the Holy Grail. These myths about the Templars threaten to make serious scholarship impossible, by discrediting them as a subject of academic research.

This book focuses on some controversial aspects of the Templars' history: how they began, the origins of the concept of the military-religious order, Templar religious beliefs, Templar warfare, the Templars' impact on society, and the end of the order. As the present can never recover the past, we can never fully understand the Templars—but we can try to avoid simplistic answers and seek fuller, more nuanced solutions.

4 Thomas Fuller, *The Historie of the Holy Warre* (Cambridge: Thomas Buck, 1639), 233 (bk. 5, ch. 3).