

The Order of the Knights Templar

Todd J.

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Professor Ron Wohlert

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Introduction:

Throughout history, there have been numerous secret societies of all types and origins. Societies such as the Free Masons and the Illuminati have all had rich histories and typically left their individual marks on society. Many of these groups have come and gone; however, no such order has had as much prominent influence on the fabric of ancient society and Western culture as that of the Knights Templar. Although its movement spanned a mere two hundred years before its collapse, the Order of the Knights Templar could be credited to many innovative and cultural “firsts” in history, as well as the inevitable spread of Christianity as the dominant world religion.

Early History:

The Knights Templar is best known for its prominence in the Christian Crusades and the fame created by it. However, it is important to understand the history which led to the Crusades and the founding of the order in the first place. In the early days of the Roman Empire, Christians were punished and persecuted for their religious beliefs. The official religion of the empire was pagan and was in worship of specific Roman gods. Thousands died in numerous eras of persecutions by the command of past emperors, some worse than others. In 308 AD, however, a former Roman military officer and politician known as Constantine became Emperor of Rome. In an attempt to rebuild and re-unite Rome, Constantine passed the Rescript of Milan. This edict decreed that Christians have “full authority to observe that religion which each preferred”, as well as the right to be free from unrighteous persecution. With these new freedoms, the Christian religion began to grow at a rapid pace and quickly became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.

For the next several hundred years, Christianity continued to grow in Western Europe and the Holy Roman Empire as well as into the east Orthodox territories (Dwyer, 1985). By the late eleventh century however, greater Western Europe was for the most part all that remained of the predominantly Christian territories. The Turks, Persians, and Arabs, in their own goal of conquest, had encroached into Christian territories for the past hundred years. This did not go unnoticed by Christian kings and rulers, and they began to feel that some action was needed to keep their kingdoms intact. After a significant loss in what led to the near decimation of Christian Asia Minor to Islamic incursion, the Christian emperor in Constantinople pleaded for assistance from the Europeans (Madden, 2001).

The First Crusade:

From the very beginning, the western Christian world had two goals--to halt the increasing incursion of Islam in the East, and to recapture Jerusalem. Although the history of Jerusalem had been fraught with war and constant decimation, a pilgrimage to and from the holy land for Christians had always been relatively possible. It was not until the year 1010 when an order by ruler Caliph Al-Hakim had been made to destroy all Christian churches and Jewish synagogues in Jerusalem. For nearly 90 years, Christians had been barred from entering into the holy land.

On November 27th of 1095 AD, at the request of Christian kings and leaders, Pope Urban the 2nd summons a meeting of major Christian clergy and clerics to Clermont, France. At this meeting, Pope Urban II declared that Christians must rise up as one against the Islamic incursion and retake the holy land (Crusades). The call to arms was not particular to only specific groups of fighters and included everyone from laymen to wealthy land owners. The Pope decreed that prisoners and criminals could also join the fight and receive an indulgence. In one of several versions of his speech, Pope Urban II was quoted as having said "let those who have been robbers, now become knights." Criminals could effectively have their slates wiped clean and restore their names (Decoding the Past, 2005). Tens of thousands of Christians responded to the call and took to the sword. The Christians in the West, aligned with their Christian brethren in the Byzantium Empire to the East, begin to erode away at the Muslim insurgence. What results is nearly three years of violent bloodshed. With significant infighting between the three Muslim factions, the Christians are able to swiftly drive through the region until they finally conquer and recapture Jerusalem in 1099. The Christian fighters regain control of the holy land.

The Order of Poor Knights of the Temple of Solomon:

Christian travelers were previously banned from visiting Jerusalem for over 90 years. With the city now firmly in the hands of the west, Christians from all over flocked to Jerusalem. Loyal Christians wanted to visit all the sites within the old city that held special significance to the religion. Unfortunately, however, within the next ten years following the recapture, many if not most of the soldiers had returned to their homelands in Europe. Jerusalem lay relatively unprotected outside its city walls making it increasingly difficult for travelers to safely visit. This would all change in 1119 with the emergence of a wealthy French nobleman, Hugues de Payens (Decoding the Past, 2005).



Fig. 1 – Hugues de Payens
(Templiers, <http://templiers.net/>)

By 1119, the situation in Jerusalem had deteriorated considerably. During an Easter pilgrimage, more than seven hundred Christian travelers were attacked. Three hundred of them were killed and sixty of them were sold into slavery. On Christmas day, 1119, Hugues de Payens and eight of his closest allies swore vows of poverty, chastity and

obedience to a cause. In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, King Baldwin II allowed them to stay. As it was built over the old ruins of King Solomon's temple, they named their cause the Order of Poor Knights of the Temple of Solomon. This spot became the location for their Templar headquarters. These knights were to become a premier group of religious knights protecting the visitors of Jerusalem. Although there were other knights and smaller orders created during this same period for very much the same task, no group became as renowned and highly regarded as the Knights Templar (Hodge, 2004).



Fig. 2 – The Knights Templar
(Secrets of Masons, <http://www.secretsofmasons.com/>)

Though the primary purpose of the knights was to protect travelers to and from Jerusalem, they were given several quests early on by King Baldwin II. Because nine Templar Knights could actually protect very little on their own, they needed to increase their numbers. De Payens returned to Europe, completed his quest for King Baldwin II,

and petitioned the Pope at Troyes to recognize the order. On January 13th of 1128, de Payens introduced and described the order to an assembly of clergymen. He explained of their piety and sacrifices (Martin, 2004). After much discussion, the Council of Troyes drew up what was known as the *Latin Rule* of the Templars. This code of ethics decreed the way by which all knights were to live their lives and outlined how and who could be recruited. Now appointed as the Grand Master, de Payens and his knights began one of the most successful recruitment campaigns in history. The Knights Templar was an exclusive order and not just anyone could join. A potential recruit needed to be born from nobility, already be a knight, and be willing to donate all of his worldly possessions to the order. Many still did not support the Templar's movement however. The ideology of a knight killing for Christ did not sit well for many Christians. They believed it went against the beliefs of Christ. De Payens sought help from his friend Bernard of Clairvaux to defend the order. Bernard wrote a treatise called "In Praise of the New Knighthood." This document stated that the acts of defensive violence from the knights was not homicide, but instead called "malecide"; the killing of evil.



Fig. 3 – Bernard of Clairvaux – *In Praise of the New Knighthood*
(United States Naval Academy, <http://www.usna.edu/>)

Templar Innovation and Growth:

As the size the order grew, so did their popularity. They began protecting and patrolling several new areas including the mountainous region north of Antioch. They were given castles throughout the entire stretch from Jerusalem to Europe. By 1130, there were in excess of three hundred elite Templar Knights and thousands of operations supporters throughout the land. In order to simplify and ease the protection of travelers to and from Jerusalem, they created what became widely known today as the first official banking system. Travelers would visit a Templar location early in their travels and deposit their monetary valuables. They would be given a promissory note which could then be used to redeem money at another Templar location near their destination. These notes were effectively worthless to potential thieves because they were encoded using a protected encryption that only the Templar Knights knew. If money was needed along the journey, they could redeem finances from a nearby Templar site, and a new note would be issued. The consistently increasing flow of money meant that they were also no longer poor knights as their original name would suggest. Despite this increased income however, the Templar Knights continued to live a life of self-denial. Although they owned numerous extravagant castles, the conditions in which they actually resided were nothing more than basic practicality. The additional wealth did have its perks for the order, however. The Knights had gained significant prominence throughout Europe and even in Muslim territories. They began offering loans to Kings and rulers. This gave them a great sense of power and reverence among leaders. They began building churches and other structures throughout Europe in Templar themed architecture, much of it gothic in nature. Some of the most famous Templar structures in Europe still remain to this day.

Battles and the Eventual Decline of the Order:

The Knights of Templar saw some of their most significant failures during the second and third crusade in battles against the Muslim leader, Saladin (Salah Al-Din Yusuf Bin Ayub). Under the leadership of Louis the VII and King Conrad the II, the second crusade resulted in a bitter disaster which led to the near destruction of the German army, and a failure to successfully seize the city of Damascus. Support for the Crusades had waned when news reached Europe. No one could quite understand how such involvement could result in such failure. Stability in the holy land continued to depreciate for the next decade. The turning point came quickly when in 1187, Saladin of Egypt lead an assault in the desert beyond the Sea of Galilee. This battle forever became known as the battle of Hattin (Decoding the Past, 2005).



Fig. 4 – Salah Al-Din Yusuf Bin Ayub
(Nashville Kurds, <http://www.nashvillekurds.com/>)

Under the command of Grand Master Gerard de Ridenfort, the Templar Knights led an assault towards Saladin's troops despite significant protest from the Knights council. In the dead heat of a summer afternoon, with the blazing sun and no water, the troops

became disoriented and weak. Saladin seized the opportunity and attacked Gerard's forces. By burning the brush around them, it disoriented the troops further and allowed Saladin to crush the Templar Knights. Grand Master Gerard de Ridenfort was captured and all surviving Templar Knights were subsequently executed by the sword (Hodge, 2008). The failure at the battle of Hattin had massive repercussions in the morale of the order. Several more battles were lost and Gerard was again captured and finally beheaded. By the end of the year, Saladin was able to retake Jerusalem. Despite several attempts to regain Jerusalem, most resulted in failure. One final battle lead by Richard the Lionheart is temporarily successful, however. Shortly thereafter the Turks retake Jerusalem in 1244, and the holy land was effectively lost forever (Decoding the Past, 2005).



Fig. 5 – Battle at the Horns of Hattin
(History of Jihad, <http://www.historyofjihad.com/>)

Conclusion:

With growing lack of support and significant financial debts owed to them by France the inevitable end of the Knights comes to fruition in 1307 AD on Friday the 13th of October. King Philip the IV of France arrested nearly two thousand members of the order in a single day. They were charged with crimes ranging from sodomy to heresy. They continued to be subjected to arrests for the next few years. In 1314, all land and property owned by the Templar Knights were seized by the King, and all remaining members were burned alive at the stake. With little outside support, Pope Clement V succumbed to the demands of the King and the Order of the Knights Templar was crushed (Dwyer, 1985).

Despite the horrific end to what was once considered a very noble cause, the Templar Knights will always hold a significant chapter in human and Christian history. The contributions of innovation, culture, and architecture still maintain a strong presence in today's society. The Knights Templar still continues to exist today as a charity fraternal organization of devout Catholics with chapters throughout the world.



Fig. 6 – Seal of the current Knights Templar, USA Chapter.
(Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA)

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