

The Knights Templars

Professor Malcolm Barber explores the rise and fall of the Knights Templars

The military imperative

The master of the Temple was a good knight and stout-hearted, but he mistreated all other people as he was too overweening. He would not place any credence in the advice of the master of the Hospital, Brother Roger des Moulins, nor in that of Brother James of Mailly, who was the marshal of the Temple, mocking him and telling him he was speaking like a man who wanted to flee. At which the marshal replied that he would not flee from the battle but would remain in the field like a noble, and that he [Gerard] would flee like a wicked man and an apostate. Then the master of the Temple and the knights who were with him went forward, so that they struck at the Saracens, and the master of the Hospital also. The Saracens received them gleefully, surrounding them so that the Christians disappeared among them. For the Saracens had more than 7,000 armed knights there, and the Christians had only 140. There the master of the Hospital was decapitated, and all the knights of the Temple as well, except for the master of the Temple who alone escaped, together with three knights. And the 40 knights who were in the garrison on behalf of the king were all taken.¹

This passage is taken from a chronicle written in Old French, which was probably patched together in about the mid-thirteenth century. However, there is good reason to believe that this particular section is close to a narrative composed by a man called Ernoul, who was a squire of Balian of Ibelin, one of the most prominent members of the leading baronial family in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem in the 1180s. He is describing a battle which took place at the Springs of Cresson, about two miles north-east of Nazareth in Galilee, on May 1, 1187. As Balian and Ernoul arrived at Nazareth within hours of the events, Ernoul was able to gather detailed information about the circumstances almost immediately. The image of the Templars which he presents is one which has endured over the centuries: proud Christian knights ready to fight the forces of Islam whenever they found them and whatever the consequences. In *Ivanhoe*, published in 1819, Sir Walter Scott describes the Templar, Sir Brian de Bois-Guilbert, in the following way. "Nothing could be more gracefully majestic than his step and manner, had they not been marked by a predominant air of haughtiness, easily acquired by the exercise of unresisted authority." The master at the Springs of Cresson, Gerard of Ridefort, particularly fits this stereotype; when Raymond, Count of Tripoli, was told of

the battle, Ernoul says that he was "very grieved and very angry at what had happened the day before, and all through the pride of the master of the Temple".

Gerard apparently learned nothing from the disaster despite being badly wounded himself. Barely two months later, on the night of July 2, it was the master who urged King Guy to lead the Christian army from its position at the springs of Saffuriya, just to the north of Nazareth, to the relief of Tiberias, threatened by Saladin's forces, some fifteen miles to the east. As Ernoul presents it, Gerard was motivated by his hatred of Raymond of Tripoli, who had just given the king the opposite advice. When, as a layman, Gerard had first come to the east, Raymond had agreed to give him 'the first good marriage' which came available within his lordship, only to renege on that promise when he received an offer from a wealthy Pisan named Plivain. However, if Ernoul's perception of the man has any validity, it is likely that Gerard would have urged the same course on the king in any case. Gerard's anger with the count was not simply a consequence of the loss of the heiress; rather it arose from the fact that he regarded Plivain as a *vilain*, a low-born person, and was therefore insulted. "For those of France", says Ernoul, "hold those of Italy in contempt. However rich an Italian was, he could not be so noble that they will not consider him a *vilain*. For most of the men of Italy are usurers, corsairs, merchants, or sailors, and because the men of France are knights they despise them."² For a man like Gerard, the adoption of a purely passive strategy in the face of Saladin's constant provocations was intolerable, for it contradicted the very ethos of his class. Unfortunately for the master and the whole Christian army, they were unable to reach Tiberias and, on the morning of July 4, were surrounded on the slopes of the Horns of Hattin, overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Gerard of Ridefort was among those captured and 230 of his knights were beheaded, adding to the 60 killed at the Springs of Cresson, a figure which came close to the entire fighting force of Templar knights in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Saladin's victory at Hattin enabled him to sweep through the Latin states, capturing most of the key cities and castles, including Jerusalem and Acre, the most important port.

Had he lived, William, Archbishop of Tyre, the major chronicler of the Latin states down to 1184, would have agreed with Raymond of Tripoli that it was 'all through the pride of the master of the Temple'. In the archbishop's view, the original Templars had been motivated by humility. As he described them, they had begun as a small group of knights who vowed to defend pilgrims making their way along the dangerous route up from the port of Jaffa to Jerusalem. By the



The Temple platform from the south, in a lithograph made from a drawing by David Roberts in 1839. The Templars occupied the al-Aqsa mosque on the left, to which they added their own complex of buildings. A large church was planned to the west of the al-Aqsa, but it was unfinished when Saladin captured Jerusalem in October, 1187. Beneath the Temple platform in the centre of the lithograph were 'Solomon's stables', where the Templars kept large numbers of horses and camels.

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time William wrote, however, in the 1170s and 80s, he believed that they had abandoned their earlier selflessness and, instead, were driven by the archetypal aristocratic vice of pride. William never mentions Gerard of Ridefort, who may not have become master before the archbishop's death, but he was particularly hostile to Odo of Saint-Amand, his predecessor but one as master. William recounts how in 1173, Templars had attacked and killed an envoy of the schismatic Muslim sect of the Assassins, thus wrecking a possible alliance which King Amalric had been negotiating. The king's fury was exacerbated by Odo of Saint-Amand's refusal to hand over the Templars involved, claiming that they were outside the king's jurisdiction and responsible only to the pope. Six years later, in a battle at Marj Ayun, a hill above the Jordan in north-eastern Galilee, Christian forces, in which Odo of Saint-Amand was prominent, after an initial success, were routed by Saladin. Odo was captured and apparently died in prison, regretted by no one, according to William of Tyre. The archbishop held Odo's arrogance responsible for both these failures, his bitterness intensified by the fact that his brother Ralph had been killed in the engagement.

On the face of it therefore Sir Walter Scott's fictional portrait of a Templar, both wilful and arrogant, is firmly grounded in the opinions of well-informed contemporaries. No chronicler, however, writes from a position of neutrality, and both William of Tyre and Ernoul had their own agenda. Both were partisans in the factionalised world of the Latin Kingdom, for William generally favoured King Amalric and Raymond of Tripoli, while Ernoul owed his position to the Ibelin family, themselves close allies of the count of Tripoli. Moreover, as archbishop, William believed that his rights had been adversely affected by the papal privileges granted to the Order between 1139 and 1145, privileges which conceded to the Templars a large degree of independence from ordinary

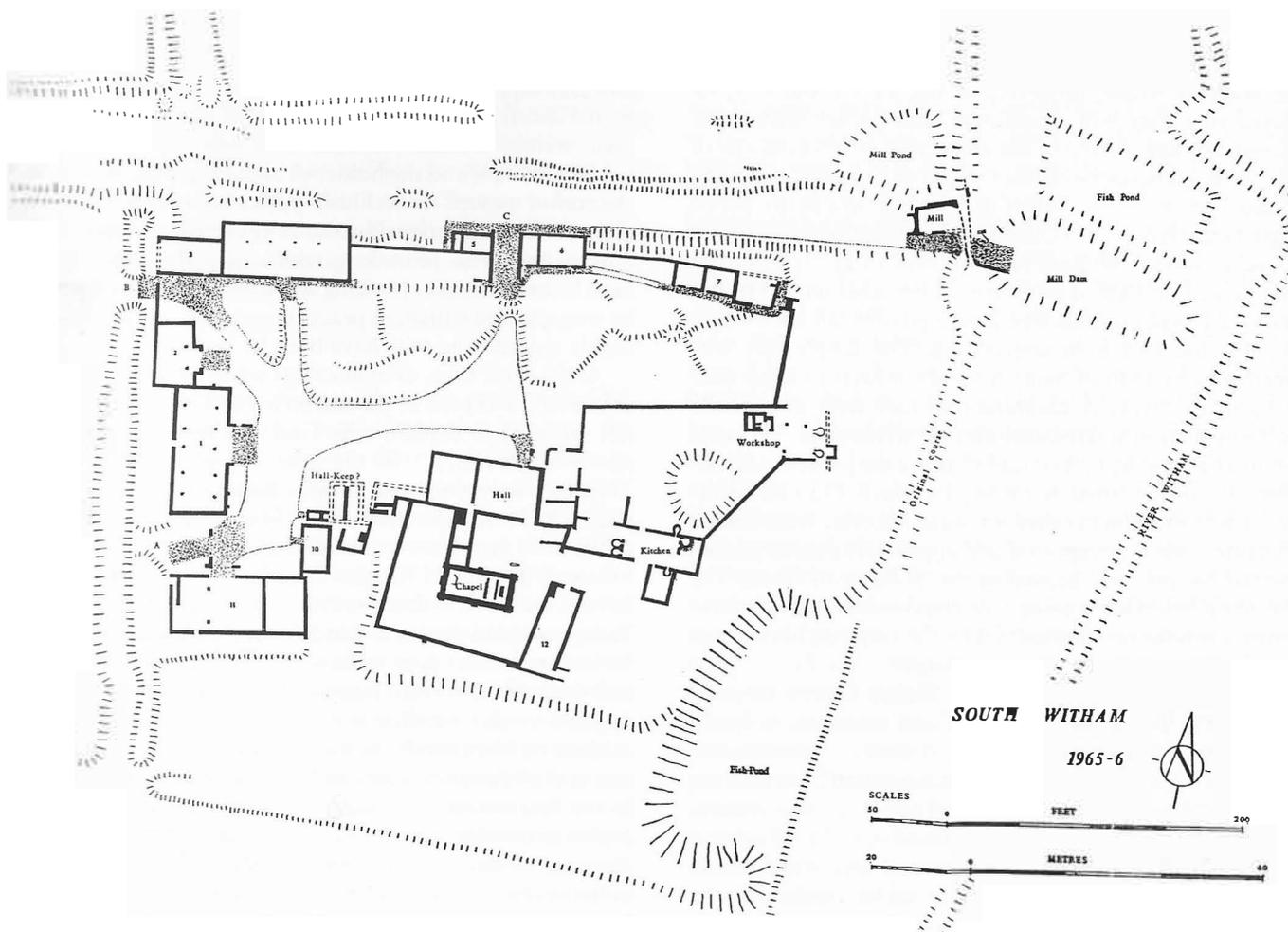
diocesan supervision. Their views, too, may have been coloured by the social attitudes displayed by men so overtly proud of their status. William of Tyre was a highly-educated and intelligent man, and the holder of high office, for he had been chancellor as well as archbishop, but he was in origin little different from the *vilain* Plivain, as he came from a non-noble, burgess family in Jerusalem, which may also possibly have been Italian in origin. Nothing is known of Ernoul except that he was a squire which, in practice, meant a servant, however highly regarded he may have been by his lord.

At the same time, even in an age when the will of God was commonly accepted as the reason for success or failure, most felt the need to explain why God had deemed a particular outcome necessary. In the case of military disaster, the Templars were the most obvious target for blame, for their wealth and status derived directly from their role as defenders of the Holy Sepulchre and leaders of the holy war against the Saracens. By the 1170s the Templars and the Hospitallers formed the backbone of the Frankish armies in the east. The Templars could deploy about 300 knights in the Kingdom of Jerusalem and as many again in the northern states of Tripoli and Antioch. They had possibly three times that number of sergeants, who fulfilled a variety of roles from mounted soldiers to blacksmiths and cooks. Manpower on this scale meant that they were entrusted with the guard of vital castles in the Latin states, through which they were beginning to evolve an overall strategy of frontier defence running from the Amanus Mountains in the north, along the borders of Tripoli in the centre, down to the desert fringes in the south and east. Frontier castles were supported by a developing infrastructure: when Gerard of Ridefort rode out to battle at the Springs of Cresson, he first gathered extra forces from the Templar supply depot at the castle of La Fève in central Galilee, about five miles south of Nazareth.

Origins and growth

Unlike the Hospitallers, the Templars had from the beginning a defining military role. The founders, two French knights, Hugh of Payns (from Champagne) and Godfrey of Saint-Omer (from Picardy) seem to have been lay associates of the Priory of the Holy Sepulchre, but who broke free from this dependence in 1119-20 when they formed a more active group, dedicated to the protection of pilgrims. They received the approval and material support of King Baldwin II and the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Warmund of Picquigny, both of whom perceived their potential, for at least they could complement the Hospitallers, who were already offering pilgrims shelter and medical help on a substantial scale. At some time during the 1120s the king moved his residence to the Tower of David on the western side of Jerusalem and the knights were able to take over the al-Aqsa mosque on the Temple platform, thought to have been the residence of King Solomon, and formerly occupied by the king. When, in 1127, Baldwin II sent a delegation to Anjou to complete negotiations for the marriage of his eldest daughter, Melisende, to Count Fulk, Hugh of Payns accompanied them. During the next two years he visited northern France, England and even Scotland, promoting the new concept of a celibate knighthood dedicated to fighting the enemies of the Christian faith. At Troyes in 1129 they were officially recognised by the Church and received a quasi-monastic Rule.

Although there were a few voices raised in protest at the sight of this strange hybrid, the monastic knight, the concept rapidly captured the imagination of the military classes, from which were drawn the material donations and recruits which formed the core of the hundreds of preceptories established in the west from the 1130s onwards. These were the base upon which the Order rested; without them the ceaseless need for more money and new men demanded by the eastern wars could never have been fulfilled. Ultimately, however, this remained a matter of perception. Just as the Hospitallers needed to astonish visiting pilgrims with the sight of their huge 'palaces of the sick' at Jerusalem and Acre, so too did the Templars need to convince their fellow Christians that they were fulfilling the ideals upon which they were founded and for which they had been given their wealth. In fact, much of their military advice and activity in the east was characterised by a rather conservative assessment of the military and strategic situation, but caution was not good propaganda. In the 1130s St Bernard had presented them with a shining vision. "With what glory the victors return from the battle! With what sanctity the martyrs die in the battle!" Not everybody therefore saw Gerard of Ridefort in the same light as Ernoul. When the master died in October 1189, in the fighting outside Acre, the anonymous author of the *Itinerarium* (who is thought to have been an English crusader) presented him in just this manner. 'It is a happy man on whom the Lord



Plan of the Templar preceptory at South Witham, Lincolnshire, in the mid-thirteenth century. This was a large preceptory, which acted as a collecting centre for the produce of smaller dependent houses. This was a typical pattern of exploitation of the Order's European resources.

confers such glory as the crown of laurel, which he had merited in so many wars, for he gained admission to the college of martyrs. When he saw the slaughter of his men on all sides, and was encouraged by those around him to flee so that he would not perish, he said, "God forbid that I should act in a manner which would bring shame and scandal on the Templars, for if I fled it would be said that I had saved my life and left my fellow knights to die."³ He could indeed have escaped if he had wished, but he was cut down and died with the others who were cut down.' Some Templars, as William of Tyre says of Odo of Saint-Amand, may have had the spirit of fury in their nostrils but, in the context of their Order, their actions were not so demonstrably perverse as they have sometimes been presented.

In fact, despite the catastrophe at Hattin, the Latin states survived; with the help of the Third Crusade between 1189 and 1192, a substantial part of the lost territories was regained, although this did not include Jerusalem. Acre now became the chief city of the thirteenth-century Kingdom of Jerusalem, and here the Templars built an impressive new headquarters along the north shore. During the century between the Third Crusade and the fall of Acre to the Mamluks in 1291 (which ended the Latin presence on the Palestinian and Syrian mainland) their military role became even more crucial. Weak and absentee rulers and a nobility increasingly impoverished by the costs of defence left the military orders as the most obvious guardians of the Latin presence. The truncated nature of the remaining territories forced the Templars to reconsider their overall strategy. It was now most important to secure the coast, a commitment emphasised between 1217 and 1221 when they built a huge new castle at Atlit, the so-called 'Pilgrims' Castle', which utilised a spur of land jutting out into the sea just to the south of Haifa. Inland, the Templars still held Safad, high in the Galilean hills but, probably as a result of attacks on it during Saladin's period of ascendancy in the 1180s, it was in poor condition. Its rebuilding from the early 1240s was the result of the persuasion and enthusiasm of Benedict of Alignan, the visiting bishop of Marseille who, when on pilgrimage to the monastery of Surdenay, near Damascus, had realised how valuable Safad would be to protect Galilee from Damascene attacks. The Templars were very proud of both castles, taking care to ensure that news of their size, cost, and function, was disseminated in the west. Safad, for example, enabled pilgrims to regain access to the holy sites of the region, demonstrating in a very public way that the Templars had not forgotten their original role. In the end, it was not enough. From the beginning, when the crusaders had captured Jerusalem in 1099, the logistical and demographic problems of the Latin states had been immense and, in retrospect, it is perhaps surprising that the Latins lasted as long as they did. Safad was lost in 1266 and Atlit abandoned in August 1291, after the Mamluks had conquered Acre in May, leaving the Templars facing a massive challenge to their credibility.

Structure of the Order

Odo of Saint-Amand and Gerard of Ridefort are remembered because of the striking portraits left of them by the chroniclers. Yet to see the Templars simply in terms of such flamboyant personalities would be to take in only one part of the picture. The master ran the Order by means of a hierarchy of officials, most importantly those who acted in Chapter with him, where the major decisions were made. The functions and powers of these men were set out in a French version of the Rule, which

the Templars began to develop in the 1160s as a means of taking account of the many matters which the fathers at Troyes, limited as they were by their largely monastic experience, had omitted. The Chapter was made up of the seneschal, the marshal, the draper, and the commanders of the kingdom of Jerusalem, of the city of Jerusalem, and of the counties of Tripoli and of Antioch. At the regional level the Order was divided into provinces, each with a master, overseen in the thirteenth century by the visitor, an official who became as powerful in the west as the master was in the east. These provinces included Iberia, where the order had received grants from the late 1120s, and where they contributed to the 'second front' of the Christians in the Mediterranean, providing soldiers for the royal armies and garrisoning important castles.

It was in these provinces that most of the Templars lived; over two-thirds of an estimated membership of about 7,000 in the late thirteenth century never saw the east. These men serviced the Order's vast network of preceptories, all of which sent responsions (that is a proportion of their revenues) directly towards the war effort. Cartularies and inventories of individual houses, and depositions from the trial in 1307, show stewards, toll-collectors, and vendors of produce, agricultural labourers, including shepherds, ploughmen, and millers, and craftsmen like carpenters, all of whom were members of the Order, as well as other non-Templar staff and various dependents, often attached to a house to which they had made a donation in return for a pension or other form of sustenance. Most of these men were either middle-aged or in their teens, for those considered suitable for fighting were usually sent to the east to replace losses.

There was no typical Templar preceptory. The largest, like the great complexes in Paris and London, were heavily staffed and acted as financial and organisational centres, while the smallest were often no more than a collection of farm buildings, set in an isolated rural environment, and run by perhaps two or three Templars, none of whom would have been knights. It was the custom of the Templars to establish an important local preceptory around which developed a collection of subsidiary houses. A good English example is that of South Witham in Lincolnshire, an area where the Templars were strongly represented. More is known about this than most others as it is the only Templar preceptory in England to have been fully excavated. In appearance this was neither a monastery nor a manor, but nevertheless borrowed features from each, for its buildings were grouped around a central space not dissimilar to a cloister, while the whole area was enclosed by earthworks. The Order began to receive grants here as early as 1137, and sometime after 1164 built a large aisled hall and a water-mill. Between c.1220 and 1240 the hall was replaced with a more elaborate version, connected to a two-storied chapel on its south side, glazed and decorated with wall paintings. Domestic buildings, including a kitchen and a dairy or brewhouse were also constructed at this time, situated on the south-eastern side, while agricultural buildings and fishponds were established on the north and west. Five barns were available to collect the grain brought in from the dependent houses. Although in many ways the preceptory must have appeared similar to an aristocratic manor, the discovery of a fragment of a jar in Raqqa ware, which was pottery made in Syria in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, offers an intriguing glimpse of its eastern connections. Either personnel from this preceptory had themselves been to the Latin states or South Witham had been visited by one of



Twelfth-century sculpture from the chancel arch of the Temple church at the preceptory of Garway, Herefordshire. There was no distinctively Templar style, but instead the decoration of their churches reflected the characteristics of the region in which they were built.

the Order's officials, or lay patrons who had been resident there on crusade or pilgrimage.

The Order also needed professionally-trained specialists, such as lawyers, administrators, accountants, and priests. Although the Hospitallers and Teutonic Knights probably paid more attention to their political and legal representation, in the course of the thirteenth century the Templars nevertheless did realise the wisdom of this. Peter of Bologna, a priest trained in canon law, was the 'Procurator of the Temple at the Papal Court' in the later part of the century and, during the trial in 1310, mounted an impressive refutation of the charges against the Order. Financial experts were equally important, for the Templars had been providing loans to crusaders and pilgrims since the 1140s. During the thirteenth century they had developed large banks in Paris and London, so that the appointment of the Treasurer of the Temple at Paris became a crucial matter for the French king, as he was virtually a royal official. Men like John of Tour, arrested at Rouen in 1307 while auditing royal accounts in the bailliage, was the last in a long line of treasurers. The Order also had its own priests, allowed to it from 1139 onwards. They conducted services, heard confessions, gave absolution for certain offences, buried the dead, and supervised the care and use of the Order's relics, many of which had been gathered in the east and were associated with persons and places of particular potency. According to the Rule, the priests were to be treated with special honour; even so, few made their mark outside the Order, in contrast to the Cistercians and the friars who were often called to fill important bishoprics or lead the fight against heresy as papal legates or inquisitors.

The trial

Few contemporaries would have conceived that such a powerful order of the Church could be brought down by the French monarchy. The arrest of all the members in France by French officials on October 13, 1307, therefore came as a profound shock, and led many to consider whether the relationship between the papacy and secular rulers was in the process of changing in a quite fundamental way. The king's lawyers claimed to be acting on behalf of the Inquisition, alleging that the Templars were guilty of 'heretical depravity', which took the form of the denial of Christ, spitting on a crucifix, indecent kissing, institutionalised homosexual practices, and the worship of idols. In fact, although the arrests had indeed been authorised by William of Paris, the papal inquisitor in France, the pope, Clement V, had not been consulted, and he was initially outraged at what he saw as the flouting of his authority. However, confessions were quickly extracted, in many cases by torture, and James of Molay, the master, who had been visiting France at the time of the arrests, publicly announced his own guilt and that of the Order, thus pre-empting Clement V's protests. It seems likely that the king and his counsellors intended that the proceedings should last no more than a few months and that the Order would then be abolished, presumably to the profit of the French Crown in whose territories lay two-thirds of the Templar preceptories.

If this was the outcome they had anticipated, they were mistaken. The proceedings lasted almost another five years until, at the Council of Vienne, in March, 1312, Clement V at last decided that the Order was too defamed to continue and dissolved it. He granted its properties, which had been

accumulated in the cause of the crusade, to the Hospitallers, who were continuing to fight against the infidel from Cyprus and from Rhodes, the conquest of which they had completed two years before. The Templars themselves were mostly foisted upon other monastic orders as frequently unwelcome guests. The proceedings had been prolonged because the French government met unexpected resistance, both from the Templars who recovered from the initial shock to mount a spirited defence in 1309-10, and from an ailing Clement V (often perceived by historians as a weak pope, but in this matter at least surprisingly resourceful and obstinate). Once the first confessions had been publicised it was impossible to reverse the process, but the pope could at least take over what he rightly claimed was 'an affair of the Church'.

The pope therefore ordered a general arrest of the Templars elsewhere, while the leaders were to be examined by papal representatives. Once removed from the presence of the royal officials, however, they retracted their confessions, and the pope suspended the whole process. Only concerted pressure on Clement at Poitiers in May and June, 1308, where he was harangued by the king's ministers and threatened by French troops, restarted the trial. Two forms of inquiry were created, a papal commission to examine the Order as whole, and a series of episcopal investigations into the guilt or innocence of individual Templars. The need to convene and conduct these investigations was inevitably time-consuming, but what was worse for the French Crown was the opportunity it gave to the Templars to organise a defence. An attempt to intimidate the defenders by burning selected groups of Templars in certain dioceses in May, 1310, met with only limited success. Although some obviously terrified brothers did appear before the papal commission immediately after, the majority of those pledged to the defence were only silenced because they were held in royal custody and prevented from appearing in public again. At Vienne the leaders of the Order were reserved for papal judgement; when it eventually came, nearly two years later in the form of a cardinals' commission, James of Molay and Geoffrey of Charney, the preceptor of Normandy, denied their guilt and that of the Order. Within hours they were taken by royal officials to the Ile des Javiaux in the Seine in the centre of Paris and burnt to death as relapsed heretics.

Many contemporaries, especially those outside France, believed that the motive for the trial was the desire to acquire the Templars' wealth, taking advantage of the fact that the fall of Acre in 1291 had undermined their obvious functional role. In 1308, William of Plaisians, Philip the Fair's minister, cunningly played upon contemporary sensibilities in an attempt to discredit them by paraphrasing Matthew, 7, v.16, 'Ye shall know them by their fruits', a quotation at once recognisable as an allusion to heretics since it had been commonly employed for this purpose since at least the tenth century. The Holy Land had been lost, he said, because of the deficiencies of the Templars, which included collusion with the sultan. Military failure had made them vulnerable. It is obvious though, that the government of France under Philip IV was in almost continual financial crisis and was constantly forced into palliative measures ranging from coinage debasement to the seizure of the property of the Jews in order to supplement a deficient regular income. The attack may, however, have also been driven by a superstitious, even credulous king, who did not need much persuading that the Templars really were guilty of the heresies and blasphemies alleged, and that therefore he was entitled to confiscate the goods of such enemies of Christian society.

If the accusations had been true, it would have been difficult to find any Christian in the early fourteenth century who would have denied the necessity for drastic action, but it is patently clear that many contemporaries found them quite impossible to believe. They had good reason. As the anonymous author of what appears to be an open letter, probably circulated in Paris early in 1308, said:

Brothers of the order, [to the number of] around a hundred, as I believe, are still in prison in Egypt, choosing to die in this penury that they might acquire eternal life rather than to do anything against the faith; and if they wished to turn against the faith, they would be honoured by the Saracens and have wives, horses, and arms, and be placed among the nobles; but they prefer to finish in obedience to the order rather than lose eternity for the transitory things of life.

For him the reason for the confessions was plain. "It is hardly astonishing that they say what the torturer wishes, when to speak the truth kills them and to tell lies frees them from death."⁴

References

¹ *La Continuation de Guillaume de Tyr* (1184-1197), ed. M R Morgan (Documents relatifs l'histoire de croisades publiés par l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres) (Paris, 1982), paragraph 25, p. 39.

² *Ibid*, paragraph 28, p. 41 (first quotation); paragraph 33, p. 46 (second quotation).

³ *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi*, ed. W Stubbs (Chronicles and Memorials of the Reign of Richard I, vol I) (London, 1864), liber I, cap. XXIX, p. 70.

⁴ C R Cheney, "The downfall of the Templars and a letter in their defence," in *Medieval Miscellany presented to Eugene Vinaver*, ed. F Whitehead, A H Diverres, and F E Sutcliffe (Manchester, 1965), pp. 74-5.

Translations of Morgan's text in *The Conquest of Jerusalem and the Third Crusade: sources in translation*, tr. P W Edbury (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 32, 34, 39, and of the *Itinerarium* in *Chronicle of the Third Crusade. A Translation of the Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi* by H J Nicholson (Aldershot, 1997), p. 79. Both are in the Crusade Texts in Translation series (Ashgate Publishing).

Further reading

For a wider context, Alan J. Forey, *The Military Orders. From the twelfth to the early fourteenth centuries* (New Studies in Medieval History, Macmillan, 1992), and for the story of the Order's strange 'afterlife', Peter Partner, *The Murdered Magicians. The Templars and their Myth* (Oxford University Press, 1981). There is a translation of the French Rule by Judi Upton-Ward, *The Rule of the Templars* (The Boydell Press, 1992), which includes an important article by Matthew Bennett, 'La Règle du Temple as a military manual, or How to deliver a cavalry charge'.

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