

## **The Knights Templar**

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The origins of Freemasonry and most of the other Orders associated with it are, to put it kindly, shrouded in the mists of time. The rituals are based largely on legendary events surrounding historical themes of a biblical nature. Craft Masonry, for instance, takes as its central theme stories surrounding the building of the first Temple in Jerusalem by King Solomon and some have even suggested that these stories may have been passed down from ancient Egypt.

There is, however, one branch of Freemasonry which is based on an Order whose original foundation can be traced, more or less, to a specific period in time. That is the Order of the Temple or as it is more usually known, the Knights Templar. 1118AD is the generally agreed year that the original Order was founded in the Holy Land by one Hugh de Payens. This occurred during a turbulent period in history known as the Crusades. To understand why the Order was founded one must look at the background to these Crusades, of which there eight, between 1095 and 1272 AD ( plus the Peasant's Crusade of 1095 and the Children's Crusade of 1202).

The First Crusade was urged by the then Pope, Urban II in 1095 to free the Holy Land which had earlier been conquered by the forces of Islam. Islam is the religion founded by Muhammad, whose 'hijrah' or emigration from Mecca in Arabia to neighbouring Medina in 622 AD is year 0 of the Muslim era. When looking at the Crusades in these politically correct times they should be judged by the standards of the time. It should also be remembered that it was Islam, not Christianity, that from its inception promoted conversion through conquest. The growth of Christianity during its first three centuries, to encompass the whole Roman Empire (under Constantine I), was almost wholly peaceful. The perception of Christians from the time of the Prophet Muhammad's first 'razzia' or raid was that the wars against Islam were waged either in defence of Christendom or to liberate the lands that were rightfully theirs. Jerusalem, for instance, had been captured in 638 AD by Muhammad's successor the Caliph Umar.

Although the forces of Islam already controlled large parts of the Holy Land it was the defeat of the Christian Emperor of Byzantium at Manzikert in Armenia by the Muslim Seljuk Turks in 1071 and the loss of Asia Minor (later called Turkey) which precipitated the subsequent Crusades. Although the Byzantines were Orthodox or Eastern Christians with Constantinople as their capital it was to the spiritual leader of Western Christendom, Pope Urban II, that the succeeding Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnenus appealed for help in 1095. Pope Urban was enthusiastic and travelled to France to generate support for a Crusade. This led not to a force of knights and nobility being raised but to an army of untrained poor people led by Peter the Hermit. This Peasant's or People's Crusade reached Constantinople but after crossing the Bosphorus they were annihilated by the Turks near Nicea on 21 October 1096.

Two months later the first contingent of the kind of army that Pope Urban had envisaged began to assemble at Constantinople. This marked the beginning of the First Crusade proper. The following three years saw a series of victories including the taking of Nicea and Antioch and also many hardships but on 17 July 1099 Jerusalem, the city holy to Christians, Jews and Muslims finally fell to the forces of this First Crusade. The Muslim Governor Iftikhar and his bodyguard were allowed to escape but sadly the rest of the city's Muslim and Jewish inhabitants, men, women and children, were slaughtered. Four different Crusader states were established following the capture of Jerusalem, namely the Kingdom of Jerusalem itself, the Principality of Antioch, the County of Tripoli and the County of Edessa.

Collectively these Crusader states were known as 'Outremer' (over the sea). They were ruled over by a French aristocracy mainly descended from Vikings who had settled in northern France and who became known as Normans and also to a greater extent by the descendants of Germanic tribes who had conquered most of Gaul and were known as Franks. The first king of the new Kingdom of Jerusalem was Baldwin de Boulogne (Baldwin I) while the Papal Legate to the Crusade, Daimbert, Archbishop of Pisa became the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem.

As many of the Crusaders started to return home to Europe, shortage of manpower became endemic in 'Outremer'. So in 1118 when Hugh de Payens and another knight called Godfrey de Saint Omer proposed the incorporation of a community of knights who would follow the Rule of a religious order but devote themselves to the protection of pilgrims, it was eagerly approved by the then King of Jerusalem, Baldwin de Lebourg (Baldwin II) who was a cousin of the late Baldwin I. Thus on Christmas day 1119, Hugh de Payens and eight other knights, Godfrey de Saint Omer, Andre de Montbard, Payen de Montdidier, Archambaud de Saint Aignan, Geoffroi Bissot, Gondeмай, Rossal and Godfroi took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience before the Patriarch of Jerusalem in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Income for the group was to be provided by a number of benefices (profits from church property). King Baldwin also provided them with somewhere to live by finding room in the palace he had made out of the al-Aqsa mosque on the southern edge of the Temple Mount which was known to the Crusaders as 'Templum Salomonis' (the Temple of Solomon). Thus these nine knights became known as 'Pauperes commilitones Christi Templique Salomonis' (The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon) and the Order was successively known as The Knights of the Temple of Solomon, The Knights of the Temple, The Knights Templar. The Templars or simply The Temple.

For a number of years the membership remained small but it benefited by the enrolment of such powerful and wealthy magnates as Fulk de Anjou in 1120 and Hugh Count of Champagne in 1125. This latter recruit provided another connection, in that, some ten years before, he had given a tract of land in the Valley of Wormwood near Troyes in France to establish a monastery. The founder of this monastery was the Burgundian noble Bernard de Fontain les Dijon who changed the name of the valley to Valley of Light (or Clairvaux) and who himself became known as Bernard of Clairvaux (later Saint Bernard). So it was in 1127 when Hugh de Payens was sent by Baldwin II on a diplomatic mission to Western Europe he had two other objectives as well, firstly to gain recruits for the Order and secondly to obtain Papal sanction for its founding. Hugh was very successful in obtaining recruits and funds and to get the Pope's blessing, enlisted the support of one of the pre-eminent churchmen of his time, Bernard Abbot of Clairvaux, who would have known of the founding of the Templar Order from his friend and patron Count Hugh of Champagne.

Bernard had agreed to draw up a Rule for the Order to be presented at the Church Council at Troyes. Initially this Rule numbered seventy three clauses and was based on the monastic Rule of St. Benedict (with Cistercian overtones) which in turn was heavily influenced by the writings of St Augustine. These original seventy three clauses of Bernard seem to strive to make monks out of knights rather than knights out of monks, with such examples as the knight's dormitory being kept lit at night and them sleeping dressed in shirt, breeches, shoes and belt. These and the prohibition on washing may have been a precaution against "sexual sin". Hair was to be kept short but shaving was not permitted and like monks the knights had to eat in silence in the refectory and of course chastity and the renouncing of worldly possessions were strongly promoted. The early seal of the Templars showing two knights riding one horse was perhaps meant to reinforce the vow of poverty. Over time however these original clauses expanded to more than six hundred, covering every aspect of Templar life. Despite the commitment to humility, for example according to Rule 337 it became necessary for a Templar knight "to be the son of a knight or descended from the son of a knight". Knights were to wear white habits while the tunics of sergeants or squires were brown or black.

Within ten years Pope Innocent II would issue his bull 'Omne datum optimum' bestowing "every great gift" on the Templar Order and making them subject only to Papal authority. This bull also allowed the order to have its own priests as chaplains who were eventually distinguished by wearing green robes. Interestingly these chaplains (who of course handled the Communion bread) and the "mason brothers" were the only ones allowed to wear leather gloves. Soon Templar establishments known as Preceptories were being set up all over Christian Europe including the British Isles. They acted as provincial supply bases to support Templar operations in the Holy Land and started to form in response to Bernard of Clairvaux's call for gifts of land and money for the Templars. Often Preceptories had a chapel attached with the unusual (perhaps mosque inspired) round shape characteristic of Templar churches. Bernard's support for the Order was also reinforced by his writing of a treatise 'De laude novae militiae' (In Praise of the New Knighthood). In this treatise he justified the killing of the enemy by Templar Knights "whose pure motives transformed homicide, which was evil, into malecide, the killing of evil which was good". Thus they were differentiated from the ordinary way of knighthood for "how much more blessed are those who die for the lord"

From 1147, however things started to go badly for the Crusader states, with the fall of the County of Edessa to the Muslim leader Zengi. A new Crusade was called for in Europe with Bernard of Clairvaux as its chief advocate. It was during the lead-up to this Second or St. Bernard's Crusade that the then Pope, Eugenius III,

decreed that the Knights Templar would wear a special red cross with wedge shaped arms called the Cross Patee on the left breast and left shoulder of their white robes. This cross was also incorporated into a banner known as the 'Vexillum Belli'. The Templar war banner consisting of a black square with a white square beneath it had originally been called the 'confanon baucon' but became known as the 'Beausant' from the Templar battle cry which meant "be noble" or "be glorious". The Templar Order in 'Outremer' gained a reputation for extreme bravery ( and sometimes foolhardiness! ) in battle. While the Beausant was held aloft no Templar could leave the field of battle and if cut off he was to regroup around another Christian banner. Breaking rank in battle, except for a few exceptions , resulted in the punishment of being sent back to camp on foot.

The Templars built and restored many castles in 'Outremer' probably under the direction of the "mason brothers". The most well known of these was Chastel Pelerin (Castle Pilgrim ) on the coast near Haifa. The Templars also recruited units of mercenary native Syrian light cavalry called 'Turcopoles'. Despite the raising of a number of Crusades and the occasional victory like that of Richard the Lionheart at Arsuf in 1191, the Christians in the Holy Land were doomed when in 1187 the brilliant Muslim leader known to the West as Saladin, defeated the Crusaders at the battle of the Horns of Hattin. Saladin hated the Templars but respected them for their bravery and for always keeping their word. His Templar prisoners were nearly always executed as the Templar Rule forbade the payment of a ransom if captured. Later that year Jerusalem fell to Saladin and over the next few years, despite the occasional victory, the Christian presence in the Holy Land virtually ceased with the fall of Acre in 1291. One of the most deplorable acts committed by the Crusaders was the sacking of Christian Constantinople in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade.

After the fall of the Holy Land most of the remaining Templars sailed away to the island of Cyprus, which they had once owned, having bought it from Richard 1 ( the Lionheart ) of England, but had themselves sold it away to the Lusignans. The Templar navy with its distinctive skull and crossbones flag helped in the evacuation from the Holy Land. During this stay in Cyprus which was now ruled over by the Genoese the last Grand Master (the twenty third ) of the Temple, Jacques de Molay, was elected in 1293. In 1294 de Molay travelled to Europe to drum up support for the Templars and a new Crusade using the Military Orders. The new Pope, Boniface VIII issued a bull reiterating the privileges and exemptions of the Temple, now based in Cyprus. However no new Crusade to recover the Holy Places could be raised and without it the Knights Templar had no purpose and no reason to continue to exist.

Things started to go really bad for the Templars when King Philip IV of France. called "the Fair" ( for his looks not his sense of justice ) together with his Chancellor William de Nogaret, hatched a plan to help relieve Philip's debts. He would seize the perceived considerable assets of the Templars. Since their founding in 1118 the Templar Order had become the equivalent of a modern bank and had invented the medieval version of the cheque so that a merchant could deposit money with a Preceptory and claim it ( minus the fee) from another Preceptory, even in another country. This was facilitated by the issue of certain documents with special written and possibly verbal secret passwords. Therefore there was a general perception that the Temple possessed great wealth. Philip the Fair's plan finally took shape, when in 1305, a French Archbishop called Bernard de Goth. who was in Philip's power, was elected Pope ( after much underhand machination ) and took the name of Clement V.

Unaware of what was going on the Templar Grand Master was summoned to a Papal court in France in 1306. It took de Molay a year to attend, so that in early 1307 six Templar galleys sailed with him into the harbour at Marseille. When he appeared at the Papal court at Poitiers he expected to be arguing against the merger of the Templars with the Hospitallers, which had been proposed by Pope Clement. The Hospitallers or Knights of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem had been founded before 1113 in Jerusalem as a hostelry for pilgrims by Amalfi ( now in Italy ) merchants. In emulation of the Templars this Order became military in nature and along with a Templar offshoot from Germany called the Teutonic Knights, constituted, with the Temple itself, the main military Orders during the Crusades. Unknown to the Templar Grand Master de Nogaret had obtained a confession on the " wrong doings" of the Order from an ex- Templar called Esquin de Florian who had been demoted while a member of the Order and had possibly been expelled from it. De Nogaret also recruited a dozen men to seek membership of the Templar Order and report back on their initiation rites, as the secrecy of the Order was one of the criticisms levelled against it. When in July 1307 a good friend of the Knights Templar and the man who could have done most to thwart Philip's plans, King Edward I of England, died, the fate of the Temple was sealed.

The day Philip designated for the arrest of all Templars in France, Friday the Thirteenth in October of 1307 has ever after been regarded as unlucky and as their torture began that same day, it certainly was for the Knights Templar. The torture was under the direction of the Inquisition, staffed mainly by friars of the Dominican Order, and had previously been founded to root out heresy among the cathars of southern France. To extract confessions a wide range of medieval techniques were used, such as rubbing fat into the soles of the feet and placing them before a fire. A Templar priest from Albi, Bernard de Vado had his feet so badly burned that his charred bones fell out. Not surprisingly this type of torture did result in a number of so-called "confessions", such as the worship of a carved head or human skull that was said to be called `Baphomef. Anyone who made a confession under torture which they later retracted was burned at the stake! On 22 November 1307 Pope Clement V issued the bull 'Pastoralis preeminentae' which formally recognized the truth of the charges against the Templars and charged all Christian monarchs to arrest Templars in their domains and have them tortured for confessions of heresy. This directive was largely ignored outside of France and the Italian States, particularly in countries such as England, Spain, Portugal, Scotland and Ireland and there is much evidence that some Templars managed to escape France to those countries which had been lukewarm in their pursuit of the Templars.

As the Templar fleet had managed to escape from its base at La Rochelle and Philip's men found little in the Templar coffers, it has been speculated that most of their treasure in France went with this fleet. However much of the Templar lands and other possessions were passed by edict into the care of the Hospitaller Order. One of those who made a "confession" was the Grand Master Jacques de Molay who admitted to denying Christ three times during his initiation into the Order. However at subsequent Papal Commissions de Molay and the Preceptor of Normandy, Geoffrey de Charney, vigorously defended the Order of the Temple and eventually retracted their "confessions" after languishing in prison for several years. So on 13 March 1314 the last Grand Master was taken in chains for execution and like his Brother Knight, the Preceptor of Normandy, was dressed in the robes of the Order. After declaring to the crowd in front of the Cathedral of Notre Dame that the Order was innocent, Jacques de Molay and Geoffrey de Charney, who had made a similar speech, were both taken to a small island in the River Seine, called Ile des Javiaux and burned at the stake. It was later reported that the Grand Master, before he died, summoned King Philip and Pope Clement to appear at God's tribunal before the year was out. Pope Clement V died on 20 April 1314 and Philip IV on 29 November of the same year!

The legacy of the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon along with the myths and mysteries surrounding them, I shall examine in future presentations.

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