

THE MYTHS AND LEGENDS OF THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR (PART ONE)

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In my previous paper "The Knights Templar" I concentrated on the historical facts surrounding this medieval order of warrior monks. In this paper I had intended to examine some of the more legendary aspects of the Templars, both during their 190 years of official existence and also after their suppression on the notorious, and afterwards unlucky, Friday 13th October 1307. However, once I started my researches I soon realized that this was such a large topic and so much had already been written on it, that I would have to devote several papers to it, just to scratch the surface. Consequently this will be part one in a series of papers I hope to write on the subject and it will cover some 'myths' that have arisen about the Templars, up to the time of Jacques de Molay, the last Grand Master of the medieval Order.

PRIORY OF SION

No one knows for sure why Hugues de Payens and eight other crusader knights decided to found the Poor Fellow Soldiers of Jesus Christ and the Temple of Solomon at Jerusalem in 1118. Ostensibly they were to give military protection to the thousands of Christian pilgrims who were flocking to the Holy Land since the founding of the Crusader States. These mainly Frankish kingdoms and principalities in Palestine, came into existence following the taking of Jerusalem from the Muslims, under their governor Iftikhar, by the forces of the First Crusade under Raymond of Toulouse, in 1099, and were collectively known as Outremer which means 'overseas'. However in 1956 a series of documents called the 'Dossiers Secrets' were allegedly discovered in Paris by one Pierre Plantard de Saint-Clair. These papers consisted of genealogies of the early kings of what is now mostly known as France, although their domain extended into parts of what later became other countries, such as Germany. This royal dynasty of Franks, who were of Germanic origin, were known as the Merovingians after their semi-mythical ancestor King Merovee, but their hold over the Franks was consolidated in the last part of the fifth century by the historical King Clovis. Their descendants later became the Holy Roman Emperors and also established the French monarchy. These kings will come up again, especially in the section on Reties le Chateaux in my next paper. But the most interesting papers found among the 'Dossiers Secrets' were those relating to a previously unknown secret society known as the 'Priore de Sion' or Priory of Sion. These papers claimed this order predated the Knights Templar and in fact that the Templars were founded by the Priory of Sion to be its military wing. The word Sion in the name of the order is a way of referring to the Holy City of Jerusalem and has certain religious connotations. Also among the documents was a list of some of the Grand Masters of the Priory of Sion, starting with Jean de Gisons in 1188 and finishing with Jean Cocteau in 1918. Among the Grand Masters on this list were such notable figures as Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton and the Irishman Robert Boyle. Some have claimed from these documents that the Priory of Sion was founded by Godfroi de Bouillon in 1090 some nine years before the conquest of Jerusalem, while others claim that the papers reveal the true founding date as being 1099 and at Jerusalem, shortly after its capture. The Order of the Temple has also been closely linked by some writers to another secret society, based on a group of families, who called themselves 'Rex Dens' or Kings of God. These writers claim that its origins go back to descendants of the Jewish priestly class, who officiated at the Temple of Jerusalem, and who lost their positions and became part of the Jewish diaspora following the destruction of the Temple, after the taking of Jerusalem by the Romans under Titus, in the year 70AD. These Judiac descendants were known as 'Belli am ites' and it is claimed that their real aim for Rex Deus was to rebuild the Temple and that they encouraged the formation of the Knights Templar to help achieve this dream. However there appears to be considerable overlapping on what has been written about these two secret societies and it is possible that if they did exist, the Priory of Sion was simply a successor to Rex Deus under a different name. Others have speculated that the Priory of Sion came into being to guard a secret and I will come back to this topical theory later.

BAPHOMET

One of the allegations of heresy made against the Templars, following the suppression of the Order in 1307 by King Philip IV (le Bel or 'the fair') of France, with the connivance of the then Pope, Clement V, was that they worshipped an image of, or even an actual, mummified head. The lower grades of the Order apparently only ever saw a representation of the head, while an actual head was used in the ceremonies of the highest grades of initiation. During their interrogation by the Dominicans who supervised the Inquisition, some Brothers of the Orders, such as Etienne de Troyes, admitted that severed heads formed part of the Templar ritual. Other Knights, under torture or the threat of torture, even gave a name to the head, calling it Baphomet. The derivation of this name is the subject of much dispute but the most likely, is that it comes from the Spanish Moorish word 'bufihimat' which is itself a corruption of the Arabic word 'abitrihametl, meaning Father of Wisdom'. Interestingly, recent work on the Dead Sea Scrolls has revealed the existence of a code, used by the Jewish Essene sect in the Dead Sea region of Palestine, around the time of Christ. This code is called the 'Atbash Cipher' and if applied to the word Ba.phomet it gives the translation 'Sophia'. This is the Greek word for the concept of Wisdom and was an important feature of an early form of Christianity known as Gnosticism, which was later deemed to be heretical by the orthodox Roman Church. It is interesting to note that the Templars themselves seemed to have incorporated some Gnostic principles into their belief system, as alleged in the charges of heresy brought against them by the Inquisition. Another possible explanation for the word Baphomet is that it is a corruption of the name of the founder of the Islamic religion, that of the Prophet Mohammed himself. This is entirely possible given the fact that the Templars, while in Palestine, often negotiated truces with their Muslim neighbours and even allowed Saracen emissaries to pray to Allah in their chapels, much to the chagrin of their less tolerant compatriots. An eighteenth century learned French Masonic commentator, Nicolas de Bonneville, wrote that even the great Saracen leader Saladin had been received into the Order of the Temple, before his reconquest of Jerusalem, by the Knight Hugo of Tiberias and that Templar initiates recognised an affinity with Islam with the supposed cry of 'Yah Allah'. Also at one stage the Templars formed a close association with a fanatical sect of Shia Muslims known as the 'hashashim'. They were named from the narcotic taken to induce a trance, which is thought to have made them oblivious to danger, and they are also the origin of the old English word assassin. In 1173 the Templars made a pact with the leader of the 'assassins', Sinan ibn Salman ibn Muhammad, also known as 'the Old Man of the Mountain' and the Templars even received an annual tribute of 2000 besants from the sect. As the assassins had a structure very similar to that of the Templar Order it is not inconceivable that the Templars, not only studied their form of Islam, but actually absorbed parts of it into their own beliefs.

At the trial of some Aragon Templars it was claimed by the King of Aragon's Vicar, Ferrario de Bigletto, that his uncle, who was a Templar priest, wore a cord outside his shirt, from which hung a silver bearded head. This to him confirmed that the rumour of head worship among the Templars was true. This rumour was strengthened by the finding of carved heads in Templar chapels, such as the one described during the testimony of Hugues de Bure as being "wrought in silver and gold". However modern historians have used as evidence of head worship, the existence of the painting of a head, with a long haired bearded face, on the wall of a church at Templecombe in Gloucestershire. This church was formerly a Templar chapel attached to the nearby Preceptory and the image can still be viewed there today. Who Baphomet was meant to represent and to whom the real severed head belonged, if it existed, is also the source of much speculation. As St. John the Baptist was the patron saint of the Order and is known to have been revered by the Templars, could it have been his mummified head? Even more controversial is the blasphemous assertion by some authors that it is that of Jesus Christ Himself, calling into doubt the central tenet of Christianity, the Resurrection itself.

GUARDIANS OF THE GRAIL

The Order of the Temple has become intricately linked to the legend of the Holy Grail. This came about chiefly due to the publication of a new Christian version of the Arthurian legend, by a twelfth century cleric and poet from the Languedoc region of what is now southern France, which he called 'le Conte du Graal' or the Story of the Grail. The writer's name was Cretien de Troyes and although a devout Christian, he is believed to have been of Jewish ancestry. Languedoc, also known as the Razes, was not only a Templar stronghold, containing the ancestral home of Bertrand de Blanche fort who was elected fourth Grand Master of the Order in 1156, but was also a centre of supposed heresy, as we shall see later. De Troyes and the

German Wolfram von Eschenbach, the author of another version called 'Parsivall' one hundred years later, were both at pains to praise the Templars in their writings. By clothing initiates in these Grail Romances in white garments with a red cross on the breast, the uniform of the Templars, both insinuated that the Knights Templar were the true Guardians of the Grail. Their link to the Holy Grail has been further strengthened by the recent finding of tombstones carved with the Grail in the form of a communion cup, inside of which was the eight-pointed cipher of the Templars. These carved stones were found at Rosslyn Chapel near Edinburgh, which, as we shall see in a future paper, has strong links to the Templar presence in Scotland. The Grail legends themselves may have drawn on much earlier pagan Celtic stories, involving magical bronze cauldrons, and several intricately decorated bronze ceremonial cauldrons, from the pre-Christian Iron Age period, have been unearthed by archeologists. However the true nature of the Holy Grail in the Christianised versions has been variously described as the cup from which Jesus and the Disciples drank at the Last Supper, the chalice in which Joseph of Arimathea caught the blood of Jesus as he hung on the cross or sometimes as a large golden bowl similar to that promised to the Merovingian king, Dagobert I, for assisting the Visigothic leader Sisenant in a war against his rival, Sumtilla of Spain. Recent writers have even suggested that the Grail was not a physical object but a secret heretical doctrine, involving a bloodline descended from a supposed marriage, between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Indeed some even suggest that Mary Magdalene herself was the Holy Grail, in the sense of being a biological holy receptacle, by carrying the progeny of Jesus in her womb! By implication, the Templars, as Guardians of the Grail, would have been the keepers of this secret doctrine, which they passed on, through the ceremonies restricted to their higher level Brother Knights. During the religious fervour of the Middle Ages such a doctrine would have been regarded as even more heretical than the present day and would have led to extremely punitive measures from the forces associated with the orthodox Roman Church.

THE CATHARS

The Cathars were a religious sect contemporary with the historical Knights Templar and were mostly concentrated in the previously mentioned area of southern France known as the Languedoc. The name for this region derived from 'langue d'oc', the language spoken in the southern part of France, which used 'oc' as its word for yes, as opposed to the north who spoke 'langue d'oïl' which originally used 'oïl' as its word for yes. The alternative name for the area is the 'Razes', which stems from ancient Rhedae, itself possibly being of Germanic origin, as the Visigothic presence there had been significant. Also, as previously mentioned, this region had perhaps the biggest concentration of Templar activity in Christendom, with many Templar castles and strongholds in the area, as well as Templar owned villages, farms and other businesses. In fact one of the alleged fears of Philip le Bel was that the Templars would set up their own independent state in southern France. The area had always been a fertile ground for religious unorthodoxy and also had a large Jewish population, dating from the Jewish diaspora, following the taking of Jerusalem by Titus in 70AD and again after the expulsion of Jews from the city, by the Emperor Hadrian, in 135AD. Several centres of the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalism flourished in the area, most notably at Troyes, which of course was the family seat of Cretien de Troyes, author of the Grail Romance.

The Cathars, who were also known as Albigensians, after one of their strongholds, the town of Albi in southern France, were savagely persecuted by the Roman Church for what it perceived as heretical teachings. However heresy is usually defined as a deviation from what are regarded as orthodox Christian doctrines. The name Cathar is thought to have been derived from the Greek 'katharos' meaning pure and they certainly had some aspects of Christianity incorporated into their beliefs, but they probably should be regarded as a separate faith. The main tenet of their religion was the belief in dualism and the creation of the world, and all material, by 'Rex Mundi' or King of the World, a Satan-like usurper god. Thus everything earthly was evil, while the "good" God's creation was entirely spiritual. Whilst some early Gnostic Christians had embraced the concept of dualism, its real origins stem from the Persian religion known as Zoroastrianism, which was pre-Christian and also known as "fire worship". Cathars also believed in reincarnation and their religion probably evolved from a succession of earlier dualist sects, starting with the Manicheans of the Middle East, through to the Bogomils of the Balkans and finally the Paulicans, who were contemporary with the Cathars and shared their beliefs. The Cathar Church itself was organised into two groups, the main congregation of 'credenti' or believers and a second body set apart from the credenti, known as the 'perfecti' or perfects. These perfecti were required to undergo a form of spiritual baptism called the 'consolamentum' or consolation. This

granted the recipient forgiveness of all sins upon death, immediate entry into the Kingdom of (the good) God, and eternal life. To avoid the possibility of reincarnation the ordinary credenti also had to promise to receive the consolamentum in extreme old age or as they lay on their deathbed. Perfecti were also required to be celibate, observe dietary restrictions and fasting, not own property and give a vow of pacifism. Thus they became known by the non-Cathars of the Languedoc region as the 'bons hommes' or good men. It was from the ranks of the perfecti that the clergy was drawn and eventually formed into three orders viz. 'Majors' (or Bishops), 'Presbyters' (or Priests) and Deacons. The creed of the of the evil nature of matter helps explain the Cathars loathing, of procreation and the use of various methods of birth control, then as now, anathema to the orthodox Roman Church. This led to persistent and often ridiculous accusations of sexual deviancy from the orthodox Church, accusations later made against the Templars. Although the Cathars appear to have led utterly blameless and extremely worthy lives, in poverty, chastity and simplicity, they became an object of rabid hatred by the Roman Catholic Church, who initially sent numerous preachers and missionaries to the Languedoc, to win back the hearts and minds of the Cathars. Even St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the great Templar patron who had given the Order its 'Rules', visited the region in 1165 to try and win them back to the Orthodox Church. Typically, St. Bernard was respectful enough of their way of life, to state in his report to the Pope that if one was "to examine their mode of life you will find nothing irreproachable". This liberal view, however, was not shared by others in the Roman Church and in 1208 Pope Innocent III issued his "Bull of Anathema" which led to the subsequent Albigensian Crusade, whose military operation was conducted by the fanatical 'Simon de Montfort. Commencing with the battle of Beziers in 1209, this horrific and extended period of brutality continued until 1244. The Albigensian Crusade culminated in the famous siege of Montsegur, a medieval European Masada, which lasted for ten months and ended with the burning alive of two hundred and five captured Cathar perfecti on March 16th 1244. However in January, three months before the siege came to its horrific end, some of the perfecti managed to escape by being lowered down the precipitous sides of the rocky peak, known as a 'pog' from the Latin 'podium' for elevated place. They probably received help from some of the locally recruited besiegers who were sympathetic to the Cathars. It is believed that the escaping perfecti took with them some form of treasure, either their collective wealth in the form of gold, silver or jewellery, their spiritual treasure of writings or knowledge, or even the Holy Grail itself. Also two days before the buntings the besieged Cathars conducted a ceremony, probably of Manichean origin., on the spring equinox. Alternatively it may have been a variation of the consolamentum used in the event of war and known as the convinenzar. Whatever the ceremony was, after it finished four more perfecti escaped, with what was left of their treasure. What this extra material was is not known, but presumably something required for the ceremony.

What then was the connection between the Cathars and the Knights Templar? It has been documented that the strong Templar presence in the area was sympathetic to the Cathar cause and that Templars actively assisted the Cathars to resist persecution by the Inquisition. Contemporary adversaries of the Cathars, in fact claimed that the Templars were "the secular arm of the perfecti" and that like the perfecti, Templar knights wore a cord under their garments, tied round the waist next to the skin. The Templars are also known to have absorbed into their tenets, some aspects of Eastern religious philosophy, during their sojourn in Palestine, and these may have included beliefs shared by the Cathars. Certainly both groups are known to have had strong Gnostic principles incorporated in their teachings. Most notable however is that the Templars, who had been so much to the forefront of the Crusades in the Holy Land, point blank refused to participate in the Albigensian Crusade. Having been credited as Guardians of the Holy Grail, could the Templars have deliberately protected the Cathars, as they knew the Grail was in their possession? Could the Templars then have taken the Grail, whatever it was, into their own care after the fall of Catharism? The Order of the Temple of Solomon may even have assisted in the escape of the two groups of Cathar Perfecti, from the fortress of Monsegur, in January and March of 1244.

THE LAST GRAND MASTER

The twenty-third and last Grand Master of the Order of the Temple of Solomon, Jacques de Molay, was born into a family of minor Lotharingen nobles in 1244 (to some historians de Molay was the twenty-second Grand Master as they do include the rule of Richard de Bure between 1244 and 1247). He was initiated into the Order at Beaume in Burgundy at the age of twenty-one, by the Master of the English Temple, Humbert de Pairand, assisted by Aimery de La Roche, Master of the Temple in France. De Molay arrived in Outremer

to serve the Grand Master, William de Beaujeu, around 1275, when he was about thirty years of age. In the Holy Land he gained a reputation for his bravery and was certainly very able in many ways. However, being objective, he was also described as being unimaginative, inflexible, politically naive and lacking in cunning, all of which did not help him during his later difficulties. After the fall of Acre in 1291 the Crusader States of Outremer had disappeared and the Order had lost its 'raison d'etre'. De Molay is known to have then visited England and some historians believe he became the Master of the Temple in England before becoming Grand Master of the entire Order in 1293. After his election as Grand Master he travelled extensively, first to Rome to meet Pope Boniface VIII in order to gain from him the same rights for the Templars on Cyprus, where they were now based, as they had enjoyed in the Holy Land. He then travelled on to France and England to drum up support for another Crusade to free the Holy Land, but without success. Returning to the island of Cyprus, which was becoming increasingly difficult to secure from Saracen pirates, he remained there to help oversee its defences. Then in 1306 he received a summons from the then Pope, Clement V, asking him to come to France along with the Grand Master of the Hospitallers, William de Vilarcton, to discuss the combining of the two military Orders.

De Molay arrived in France the following year and was staying at the Paris Temple, when he was arrested, before daybreak on Friday 13th October, along with the Preceptors of Normandy and Aquitaine, by William de Nogaret, one of the main instigators of the assault on the Order. The task of interrogating the Grand Master was given to the Chief Inquisitor of France, William Imbert, also known as William of Paris, who was under strict orders from King Philip not to kill de Molay. The interrogation was carried out in the oratory of a small chapel in the Paris Temple itself, which of course did not contain any instruments of torture. The resourceful Imbert, however, had come prepared with the necessary implements, including ropes, whips and large iron nails. Other Templars, such as Jean de F'oligny had already admitted under the persuasion of the Inquisition, that private "higher" Templar ceremonies took place in the chapel and that initiates underwent a ritual "death and resurrection" rite into their new life as full brothers of the Templar community. This ritual also involved a human skull, two cross bones and a white burial shroud. This, of course, had outraged Imbert and the other Inquisitors, who not understanding the true significance of the ceremony, believed it to be a blasphemous parody of the true resurrection of Christ. Under torture the Grand Master admitted to the charges of heresy levelled against the Order, but the method of torture used to extract this confession is a controversial source of speculation and conjecture. Several recent authors have suggested that Imbert, the Chief Inquisitor, subjected the sixty-three year old de Molay to a form of crucifixion, in a vengeful version of the Templar's own ritual, supposed to have been practised at the Paris Temple. These writers claim that after being crucified in a manner similar to that of Jesus, the injured de Molay's morbid fluids, consisting of sweat, and blood with high lactic acid content, ran freely over his entire body. Being naked during his crucifixion, Imbert ordered that de Molay be wrapped in the white linen shroud he had found in the Templar chapel, as a further re-enactment of the passion of Jesus and of course the Templar ritual. Amazingly de Molay survived this horrible ordeal but had no family in the area to call in and look after him. However his fellow prisoner and subordinate, the Preceptor of Normandy, Geoffrey de Charney, had a brother, Jean de Charney nearby. The theory is that the de Charney family were called in to care for both men and that they removed the shroud and dressed the wounds of de Molay. Forty-six years later, in 1353, the widow of another de Charney, also called Geoffrey and possibly the Preceptor of Normandy's grandson, found a shroud bearing the image of a bearded and apparently crucified man among her dead husband's belongings. This shroud is now known as the Shroud of Turin and has been venerated for centuries as that which wrapped Jesus Christ. However in 1988, carbon 14 dating of the linen cloth used in the shroud dated it to between 1260 and 1390AD. This and the remarkable resemblance of the face on the shroud to the contemporary descriptions of Jacques de Molay's features have been used as evidence that the image is that of the Templar's last Grand Master. De Molay remained in prison until March 18th 1314 when he and three other imprisoned senior Templar officers, were placed on a platform outside Notre Dame Cathedral before a huge crowd, to face a Papal commission. As the confessions were being read out by the Bishop of Alba, he was interrupted by de Molay, and thinking that the Grand Master was going to personally confess to the crowd, he was astounded when de Molay instead retracted his confession, which he said had been given under torture, and proclaimed the complete innocence of the Order of the Temple. When King Philip was informed of this he ordered his immediate execution and either that evening or the following morning, Grand Master Jacques de Molay and the Preceptor of Normandy, Geoffrey de Charney were taken to a small island

on the Seine, opposite Notre Dame, called Ile de Javiaux' and slowly roasted to death. Legend has it that de Molay cursed both Clement and Philip and summoned them to "appear before the Supreme Judge within a year". Pope Clement V died on April 20th 1314 and Philip IV followed him to the grave on November 29th of the same year. However Jacques de Molay has not been forgotten in the many years since that ill-fated day in France. For example, his memory was commemorated in a now lost "higher degree" of Freemasonry called the "Grand Commander of the Temple", which used the initials JBM on its regalia and ritual items, these letters standing for Jacques Burgundus Moia. His name is also still remembered in the Masonic-sponsored organisation for boys, of which former United States President, William Jefferson Clinton was a member, the Order of De Molay. It is, I think, appropriate to finish my first part, with the story of Jacques de Molay's courage and faithfulness to his convictions, which since his tragic death on a river island in Paris, has become an inspiration to all mankind down through the centuries.

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