

# The Persecution of the Templars

*Scandal, Torture, Trial*

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translated from the French by

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I can easily rank among the plots against a whole society the ordeal of the Knights Templar. This barbarity was even more atrocious because it was committed through the judicial system. This was not at all one of those furies that sudden revenge or the necessity of self-defence might seem to justify; it was a deliberate project to exterminate a whole order which was too proud and too rich. I can well imagine there were young members whose debauched behaviour merited some punishment, but I will never believe that a grand master and numerous knights, including princes, all venerable by their age and their services rendered, could be guilty of the absurd and pointless villainies of which they were accused. I will never believe that a whole religious order in Europe could have renounced the Christian religion, for which it fought in Asia, in Africa, and for which many still languished in the chains of the Turks and Arabs, preferring to die in their dungeons than to abjure their religion.

Indeed I can easily believe in more than eighty knights, who, dying, swore to God their innocence. Let us not hesitate to rank their proscription among the grievous effects of a time of ignorance and barbarity.

Voltaire, *Concerning Conspiracies against Peoples, or Proscriptions*, 1766<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**he trial of the Templars, sometimes known as the ‘Templar Affair’, continues to intrigue through its sheer magnitude: here was a religious order with a military vocation – powerful, international, protected by the pope – being accused of heresy by the king of France, Philip IV the Fair. On 13 October 1307 the Templars in the kingdom of France were arrested and imprisoned, and their possessions seized and impounded on the orders of the king. Tortured and interrogated in the months of October and November 1307, they confessed to appalling acts: when knights entered the Order, they renounced Christ, trampled or spat on the cross and engaged in sodomy and other lewd acts; their priests didn’t consecrate the host during the Mass; and they held their chapter meetings at night, in secret.

This is how the Templar Affair began.

### The Order of the Temple (1120–1307)

The Order began with a handful of knights who offered to defend the Holy Land of Jerusalem, the city of Christ and the Latin states that had been established following the First Crusade (1095–9): the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, the County of Tripoli, the Principality of Antioch and the County of Edessa, which soon disappeared. These states needed men, weapons and money to defend themselves against the Muslim kingdoms of the region, which, having survived the shock of the First Crusade, were regrouping and attempting to regain the territories they had lost. Help came regularly from the West in the form of the constant Crusading expeditions during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but it also came from the resources of the states themselves, which had feudal-type armies similar to those in the West. This was not enough. A few Christian knights, led by Hugues de Payns, a knight from the Champagne

region, began to assist the canons of the Holy Sepulchre. The knights felt that their talents were being wasted, and sought to establish themselves as a religious order, subject to a Rule and to religious vows of obedience, chastity and poverty, under the direction of a master. In 1120 they received permission from the king of Jerusalem, Baldwin II, and from the patriarch of the holy city. They just needed the recognition of the Roman Church and the pope. This wasn't a foregone conclusion, because their proposal was novel, indeed almost revolutionary: they would be a new religious order whose vocation was not, like Benedictine monasticism and its Cistercian variant, meditation and contemplation but action – and furthermore military action. Their proposal was thus violent, involving the possibility of killing and of being killed.

This official recognition was, however, granted, in January 1129 during a council assembled in Troyes under the direction of a papal legate and in the presence of Bernard, the Cistercian abbot of Clairvaux (the future Saint Bernard). The new religious-military Order very quickly found supporters among the lower and mid-level aristocracy, and attracted the interest of the powerful. There was an increase in recruits and donations, ensuring the new Order the human and economic means necessary to carry out its dual mission on the 'front': the protection of pilgrims who were going to Jerusalem and the defence of the Latin states.

On the Iberian Peninsula, the Aragonese, Castilian and Portuguese rulers, who were actively involved in the Reconquest of the small Muslim kingdoms that had emerged from the dismemberment of the Caliphate of Córdoba, quickly understood the importance of the Order of the Temple. They increased their donations of castles and territories to the Order, in exchange for the Templars' protection, but also to glorify these holdings and encourage people to live there.

The Order derived its name from the location of its headquarters in Jerusalem, in what was believed to be the ancient temple of Solomon. It was, in fact, the site of the palace of King Solomon, on which the victorious Arab Muslims had constructed the al-Aqsa mosque. The Order's full, official name was: *pau-perum commilitonum Christi Templique Salomonici* (Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon), which was shortened to the Order of the Temple. By the 1130s the Order had grown considerably, and needed stricter organisation.

A Templar lived in a 'house' (*domus*); houses were grouped together in commanderies or preceptories, which were in turn grouped in provinces: France,

Provence, Poitou-Aquitaine, Auvergne, England, Germany, Italy, Sicily, Aragon, Castile and Portugal. At the top of the hierarchy the Order was governed by a Master or General Master (although modern historians tend to refer to 'Grand Masters') and a dozen or so dignitaries (marshal, grand commander, draper, turcopolier and others).

The Order comprised three categories of brothers: knights, the only ones who wore the white mantle bearing the red cross; sergeant brothers; and priests or chaplains. The many sergeants were subdivided into sergeants-at-arms, who fought, and brothers with skills, whose duties involved daily labour, farming the estates and working in trade.

Borrowing the Templar model, other religious-military orders were created in the Holy Land and in the European regions where Christians were threatened by Muslim 'infidels' (Spain) and pagan hordes (Slavs and Prussians from the Baltic regions): these were the Iberian Orders of Calatrava, Alcántara, Aviz and Santiago, and German Orders on the borders of Prussian territories. The Teutonic Order, established in the Holy Land at the end of the twelfth century, quickly took root in Prussia and in the Livonian region. The Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem was an order apart: at the beginning of, and even before, the First Crusade a hospital was founded in Jerusalem to lodge, feed and, if necessary, take care of ill or wounded pilgrims. With the success of the Crusade it became the leading Order in a network of houses in the West. Recognised as an order of hospitallers, it became militarised during the twelfth century and became the equal of the Temple, its partner and rival.

In the Holy Land, with their energy and effective military strategy, the Latin states were initially successful in containing their Muslim adversaries, who were, in any case, quite divided among themselves. Around 1160, although the County of Edessa had disappeared, the three other Latin states enjoyed their largest territorial expansion. But the Muslims joined forces: Nur al-Din (who died in 1176) united northern Syria and Damascus; his successor, Saladin, continued his efforts and became the ruler of Egypt. In 1187 the Latins were defeated at Hattin and were forced to abandon Jerusalem. The kingdom was reduced to a few scattered territories, including Tyre. And it was from this port that the Latins set off to besiege Acre. With the support of the Third Crusade, led by Richard the Lionheart, they gradually reconquered the coastline and rebuilt a new kingdom of Jerusalem, reduced to a long coastal strip, of which Acre became the capital: in fact, Jerusalem itself remained in the hands of Saladin and his successors in

the Ayyubid dynasty. The county of Tripoli and the principality of Antioch, although damaged, survived.

The balance of power between the Latins and the Muslims was eventually completely reversed. Once this happened, the religious-military orders, thanks to the means at their disposal, played an increasingly important military and political role and became the true masters of the Latin Orient. As guardians of imposing fortresses, which they alone were able to maintain and secure (the Hospitallers' Krak des Chevaliers or the Templars' Castle Pilgrim, for example), they became responsible for the defence and survival of the Latin states. These states endured until 1250, when their demise began with the rise of the Mamluks, an army corps originally made up of Turkish slaves, who seized power in Egypt and conquered Muslim Syria.<sup>1</sup> The Mamluk offensives, sometimes slowed by the hostile advances of the Mongols from Persia, gradually consumed the Latin territories, and the fortresses fell one by one. In 1291 the fall of Acre forced the Latins to abandon the last of their coastal retreats; they fled to Cyprus, where they hoped to join forces with the Mongols in order to take back the Holy Land. Despite the fact that both the Templars and the Hospitallers transferred their 'convents' – their central headquarters and military apparatus – to the island, they never abandoned the hope of one day reconquering Jerusalem.

At the end of 1306 Jacques de Molay, Grand Master of the Temple, and Foulques de Villaret, his Hospitaller counterpart, set off from Cyprus for France to meet with Pope Clement V, who had summoned them expressly to discuss preparations for a new crusade and plans to combine their two Orders.

De Molay was never to return.

## The trial of the Templars (1307–1314)

My intention in this book is not to write a new history of the trial of the Templars. There are many such histories, and I refer the reader to Malcolm Barber's work, the most comprehensive of them all.<sup>2</sup> My goal is different: to reveal what must have been the actual everyday lives of the Templars of the kingdom of France during an affair that spanned five years, from the arrests in 1307 to the suppression of the Order at the Council of Vienne in 1312. (The affair did, however, continue another two years for the dignitaries of the Order, until the execution of Jacques de Molay and Geoffroy de Charney in March 1314.) Nor will I attempt to explain the reasons for the trial, or to continue the distorted

debate on the guilt or innocence of the Templars, or to retrace once again the confrontation between the pope and the king of France, which was central to the affair. However, to provide context for what follows, I will present an overview of some of the most important elements of the affair. A brief presentation of the available documentary sources will be helpful before discussing the contradictory positions historians have taken.

### *The trial records*

There are abundant documentary sources for the affair, in the Vatican Archives and in the Royal Archives of France and elsewhere. Of these sources, the records of the interrogations of the Templars during the various proceedings are essential, but difficult to interpret. Many historiographical debates revolve around the question of the reliability of sources of this kind. I will present the sources here in sequence, according to the chronological development of events.

The first period (October/November 1307) involves only France. The Templars of the kingdom were arrested on 13 October and interrogated by royal agents and inquisitors. We have records for Paris, Caen, Cahors, Carcassonne and Nîmes. It should be noted that only a very small number of Templar depositions have been found.

The pope had not been informed of the king of France's intentions or of the actions he took in October. The pope protested, and, to emphasise the authority of the Church throughout Christendom, he reacted on 22 November 1307 by ordering the arrest of Templars throughout the West and in Cyprus. In doing so he believed he was regaining the upper hand in the matter. Afterwards, and at the cost of a harsh confrontation with Philip the Fair and his advisers, the pope was allowed to interrogate seventy-two Templars (some of whose testimonies have been preserved), and in July/August 1308 he was able to initiate dual proceedings, against individual Templars and against the Order as a whole. The first would be carried out on the diocese level by episcopal commissions which also included inquisitors; the second would be on the state level, by papal commissions set up by the pope. This first, investigatory phase would be followed by one of judgement, which would occur on the provincial (archbishopric) level, in provincial councils for individuals and in an ecumenical council for the Order. The French Archives contain the diocesan investigations of Clermont (June 1309) and Nîmes (August 1310 and 1311); a further document is truncated in

such a way that it can neither be dated nor placed – it is probable, however, that it involves the Dauphiné and a part of Provence (regions that at the time were not part of the kingdom of France); and I am not including that of the diocese of Elne in Roussillon, which at the time belonged to the kingdom of Majorca.

Outside France the two sets of proceedings were often carried out in parallel, and we have more or less complete records of the interrogations held in Cyprus, England, Italy, the Iberian kingdoms and Germany. The proceedings did not begin until 1310 or even 1311.

In France the proceedings against the Order got off to a difficult start in November 1309 and continued, with a hiatus of several months, until May 1311. Known to us thanks to two manuscripts (one in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, the other in the Vatican Archives in Rome), the depositions given by the Templars in the trial are by far the most detailed and the most specific that we have: in addition to the interrogations of 224 Templars and six non-Templar witnesses, they contain a great deal of valuable information about issues tangential to the sessions and about the attempts at resistance by Templars in the kingdom of France in the spring of 1310.<sup>3</sup>

Before addressing the question of the reliability of these depositions, some facts need to be pointed out. First, torture was systematically used to obtain confessions from the Templars. Second, although the interrogations carried out by the papal commission of Paris involved 224 Templars, there were more than 650 Templars who appeared before the commission to defend the Order; they did so in an increasingly confident manner and often collectively, presenting the commissioners with well-argued ‘memoranda’. This resistance was swiftly suppressed by a forceful takeover by the archbishop of Sens (under whose domain the bishopric of Paris fell), who on 11 May 1310 assembled the council of his ecclesiastical province to pass judgement against the individual Templars of his province: the following day, 12 May, 54 Templars were burned for relapsing into heresy. On 19 May, 44 Templars (out of more than 600) withdrew their support for the Order. Some of them appear among the 224 Templars whose depositions we have, but not all of them. And so we must be careful not to argue only from the depositions we possess, because that would be to ignore a (probable) majority of Templars whose positions we are unable to know.

While bearing these points in mind, we will now look, first, at the reliability of the Templars’ depositions and, second, at the reasons for and the causes of the Templar Affair.

*Can we believe the Templars' confessions?*

There are three possible responses to this question: 1) yes, they represent the truth; 2) no, they are pure and simple fabrications; 3) maybe; they don't justify the trial brought against the Templars, but they do contain an element of truth.

In other words, to the question: 'Were the Templars guilty?' the historian might respond: 'Yes,' 'No' or 'No, but ...'.

For those who answer 'yes', the accusations are true: the Templars who were interrogated were unable to hide their scandalous practices, and we must take their confessions seriously. There are only differences of nuance, at best, between someone like Pierre Dupuy, a seventeenth-century author and loyal royalist for whom the motives of the king of France were beyond question, and Jean Favier or Joseph R. Strayer, recent historians of Philip the Fair, who admit that, although the affair may not have involved heresy, there was a lot of laxity in the Order and its unpopularity was not without reason. Philip the Fair didn't have to expend much effort in constructing his accusations. As for torture, it was a common practice at the time, and no one thought to question its use (which isn't entirely true, as we will see).<sup>4</sup>

The idea that the practices denounced by the prosecution were the result of the corruption of the brothers and the negligence of their leaders fits perfectly with the idea of the unpopularity of the Order that is proposed by many historians (and which distorts historical reality): the Temple was no longer fighting, it was overseeing its banking network; it was no longer involved with the Holy Land and had transferred its headquarters from Cyprus to Paris; its members, at loose ends, were behaving like delinquents, frequenting taverns and brothels. Jonathan Riley-Smith uses these arguments and essentially answers in the affirmative to the direct question that serves as the title of one of his articles: 'Were the Templars Guilty?'<sup>5</sup> Riley-Smith, an eminent historian of the Crusades and of the Order of the Hospitallers of Saint John of Jerusalem, contrasts the disorder reigning in the Temple to the good governance of the Hospital during the same period. The same comparison, unfavourable to the Temple, is used by another great historian of the Hospital, Anthony Luttrell, who does not even mention the trial.<sup>6</sup> Here we find the theme, widespread among historians of the Hospital, though never fully debated or verified, of the contrast between the blinkered and unintelligent Master of the Temple, Jacques de Molay, and the brilliant and astute Master of the Hospital, Foulques de Villaret. This is meant to explain in part the misfortunes of the Temple in 1307, but it is a somewhat simplistic explanation.

According to those who would answer ‘no, but ...’, the trial was fabricated by the king and his counsellors. The accusations of heresy contained in the arrest order and repeated in the proceedings issued by the pope were drawn from a manual that had been gradually developed by the inquisitors in the thirteenth century. That manual was also used for other trials initiated by Philip the Fair against Pope Boniface VIII and the bishops Bernard Saisset and Guichard de Troyes; the use of torture was expressly recommended in such manuals, and it was used on the Templars to obtain confessions that matched the accusations.

This is all true. But didn’t the Templars invite criticism and defamation by allowing stupid and tasteless practices to take root in their Order, practices resembling initiation ceremonies, which in themselves weren’t heretical but which could provide the king of France with enough evidence to merit an accusation which, though completely fabricated, would then appear true?

Many historians of the Temple – and I was one of them – albeit with some slight differences of opinion, have adopted this argument: the renunciation of Christ, spitting or trampling on the cross, ‘obscene kissing’, being encouraged to engage in sodomy, may all have taken place. Moreover, almost all the Templars admitted to these acts: yes, they renounced their faith, but from their mouths, not their hearts; yes, they spat, but next to the cross, not on it; the encouragement to engage in sodomy, yes, that happened, but the encouragement was not acted on.<sup>7</sup> Anne-Marie Chagny-Sève rejects as unfounded the stories about worshipping a cat, the omission of the words used to consecrate the host, the encouragement to homosexuality, and sacrificing to idols, but adds: ‘Nonetheless, the renunciation and the spitting on the cross are a problem.’<sup>8</sup>

Were these isolated individual events or collective practices based on the statutes of the Order, as some Templars maintained in their defence? Nothing along these lines has been found in the statutes, which has led Barbara Frale to suggest the existence of a *codice ombra* (initiation code), discreet if not secret, introduced as an adjunct to the perfectly orthodox admission ritual, which was meant to test the new recruit upon his entrance into the Temple. The existence of this ritual, which was never performed outside the admission ceremony, might thus have co-existed alongside beliefs and religious practices in keeping with the Catholic faith.

I will admit that this argument seduced me and that, abandoning the caution I showed in *Vie et mort de l’ordre du Temple*, I adopted it in both *The Last Templar* (2002) and *Les Templiers* (2005).

This ‘no, but ...’ leaves certain questions unanswered, though. The secrecy of the Temple’s internal deliberations (chapter meetings, the admission ceremony) was standard and not at all unique to the Order. If blasphemous rites such as renouncing Christ and spitting on the cross were general practices, surely this would have been known about outside the Order, given that many Templars, for example, admitted that, in the days following their admission ceremony, they had confessed to priests of the Order and also to secular preachers or brothers of the mendicant Orders, Franciscans or Dominicans, or even to the pope? Alan Forey has legitimately raised the question (and answered it in the negative): is it possible for all of this to have gone on in secret for decades without being discovered?<sup>9</sup> Still examining the ‘no, but ...’ position, this side-steps the question of torture. The geography of the confessions corresponds exactly to that of the use of torture; no one denies this. In France, where torture was used routinely from the beginning of the proceedings, the use of torture was not meant to elicit *the* truth from the Templars regarding practices they wished to hide but was intended to obtain confessions from them that conformed to *a* truth that had been established in advance by their accusers.

Outside France, where torture was not used, there were no confessions: how is this compatible with a generalised implementation of a *codice ombra*? I originally explained this discrepancy by suggesting that the Templars outside France, knowing what was going on in the Capetian kingdom, would simply have avoided making trouble for themselves by denying the existence of an ‘initiation code’ (especially since there was no torture). On reflection, this explanation now seems to me a bit feeble.

The ‘no, but ...’ or, to borrow a phrase from Julien Théry, ‘I know, but even so’ doesn’t hold up.

And so it must be ‘no’: there is no truth in the confessions. As Théry writes, ‘it is impossible to attempt to separate truth from falsehood’ in the reports, and ‘nothing, beyond the arrests and forced confessions, leads us to believe that the Templars were guilty’.<sup>10</sup> For Sean Field, who analyses the case of the Templar Mathieu de Cressonessart, ‘however closely they may read testimony such as that, historians will never find anything but a predetermined “truth,” forcefully imposed through royal imperatives.’<sup>11</sup>

This categorical ‘no’ isn’t new. The same position was held by a certain number of nineteenth-century historians (not including Michelet), whose arguments were supported with the publication of sources from the trial. The

position is also shared by many current historians of the Temple who have based it on solid research and documentation: Malcolm Barber, Helen Nicholson, Alan Forey, Julien Théry and others. I consider myself part of this group, and in the pages that follow I hope to provide additional material, not derived from the trial records, which further supports our position.

## How can the Templar Affair be explained?

Everyone knows the saying ‘There’s no smoke without fire’. When one runs out of proof for something, it is very useful. Historians sometimes fall back on it, forgetting to ask the essential question, ‘Who lit the fire?’

In this case, the response is clear: the king of France and his counsellors. It is not in the history of the Temple, in its real or assumed weaknesses, that we will find the reasons for its demise. To quote Julien Théry again:

The fate of the Temple was sealed within the logic of a story that was not its own, but rather that of the French monarchy: the story of the confrontation between Philip the Fair and the pope; the story of privileged ties formed on that occasion between God, France and its ‘Most Christian King’.<sup>12</sup>

In view of this, there is no need to return to what I argued in *Les Templiers*: ‘It is through an analysis of the king’s reasons that we can find a plausible explanation for the Templar Affair.’<sup>13</sup> We must exclude financial motives (the expected gains from the collapse of the Temple were just a side-effect) and see the actions against the Temple in the context of the confrontation between the king and the papacy under the pontificate of Boniface VIII (1295–1303) and its aftermath. The king of France went so far as to accuse the pope of heresy and wanted to have him deposed and judged by a council. Boniface VIII was attacked and held prisoner for a time in his residence in Anagni shortly before his death in 1303. The Templar Affair had not been premeditated for very long; the king merely seized an opportunity that was offered to him to put pressure on Pope Clement V (1305–1314) to condemn the memory of Boniface VIII and thereby justify his action and the violence perpetuated against Boniface in Anagni. I use the word ‘opportunity’ because, as we will see, the king did not initiate the rumour against the Templars; he simply took advantage of it to create the affair. It is important to highlight the difference: the rumour was a reality, but what it contained was a

lie. Throughout the Templar Affair, the condemnation of the memory of Boniface VIII remained the king's chief preoccupation and, because of that, the chief occupation of Pope Clement as well, who, of course, refused to countenance it.

To erase the Anagni incident and its aftermath was, however, only one of the reasons for the king of France's attack against the Temple. There were others, which related to faith, beliefs, the mystical leanings of the king and of his closest advisers. I have analysed those causes previously, with the help of the work of Robert-Henri Bautier and Malcolm Barber. Bautier's study focuses on the king's personality; Barber attempts to uncover Philip the Fair's 'world view'.<sup>14</sup>

The mysticism of the Most Christian King made the purification of the kingdom his primary objective; the expulsion of the Jews in 1306 and the destruction of the Order of the Temple in 1307 were his means.<sup>15</sup> The Templar Affair was also intended to make the king of France – the 'angel of God', according to his faithful adviser Guillaume de Nogaret – a 'pope in his kingdom'. By attacking the Temple, Philip the Fair was not simply challenging the authority he felt the pope had over the bishops and the clergy of his kingdom: he was also challenging the pope's right to intervene in matters of faith (here, the 'heresy of the Templars') and to act for the good of all Christendom. In the end, appropriating the model of the Church for himself, he tried to turn the kingdom of France into a mystical body of which he, Philip, would be the head and the Church a limb in the same capacity as any other.

And so, one year after the expulsion of the Jews, the king attacked the Templars, originally housed in the Temple of Solomon, accusing them of crucifying Christ a second time by renouncing him and defiling the cross on which he had been martyred. The Order of the Temple had to be destroyed so that the new alliance between the king, Christ and the people of the kingdom could be formed.

The average Templar knight was quite removed from all this. On 13 October 1307 the sky, and the heaven he believed he deserved through his acts of bravery in the service of the Church and Jerusalem, crashed around his head. It is this man, and the way in which he experienced his persecution on a daily basis, that I will follow in this book.