

History of the Crusades.
Episode 23.
The Crusader States: The Knights Templar, Part 2.

Hello again. In last week's episode, we saw the establishment of the Knights Templar. Just before we get back to the Knights Templar, we will take a quick diversion to look at the establishment of another military order, the Knights Hospitaller.

The Order of the Hospital of Saint John started around 1070, when a charitable group of Italians established a hostel in Jerusalem to care for sick and impoverished pilgrims. The Egyptians were governing Jerusalem at the time, and they allowed the Italians to choose a suitable site for their hostel. The Italians took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and adopted as their patron saint the little known Saint John the alms-giver, a Patriarch of Alexandria from the seventh century. The influx of pilgrims increased after the Latin Christian conquest of Jerusalem, and the order of the Hospital of Saint John, or the Hospitallers, as they were known, increased as well in both size and status. They wanted to attract international patronage, and, as a sign of their growing prestige, they upgraded their patron saint, dumping St John the alms-giver, in favor of the better known and more popular Saint John the Baptist. The Hospitallers watched the establishment of the Knights Templar with interest, and decided that there was room within their order for a military function. Not only would they care for sick and poor pilgrims, they would also fight to keep the pilgrim routes open. The Order still contained brothers whose function was to remain in Jerusalem and care for the sick, but increasingly they welcomed into their order knights, whose role was to fight on behalf of pilgrims. Eventually, this was to become their main function and the Knights Hospitaller would join the Knights Templar as a formidable fighting force. The Knights Hospitaller were identified by a white cross they wore on a black tunic over their armor, which distinguished them from the Knights Templar, who wore a Red Cross on a white tunic.

Unlike the Knights Templar, the Order of the Hospital of Saint John evolved over time, and plays a prominent role in public life today, in the form of the Order of St John, which runs the St John's Ambulance Service. This service provides volunteer first aid at events and emergencies in many countries around the world.

Right, enough of the Knights Hospital and back to the Knights Templar.

Now, to say that the life of a Templar knight was different to that of an ordinary lay knight is a major understatement. Your average knight spent their time fighting, plundering, and chasing women, using their fighting skills to gain wealth and prestige for themselves and celebrating their victories at every opportunity by feasting and drinking. Not so the knights of the military Orders. They were bound by the rules which had been endorsed by the Church Council at Troyes. All property was kept in common, and prayers said seven times a day. Idle chatter was forbidden. Knights Templar were only allowed to venture into a town or city with express permission, and then they had to do so in pairs. The company of women was to be avoided, even that of close female relatives. Templar knights were only allowed to eat meat three times a week, and all their meals were to be taken in silence. In stark contrast to the fashion in Europe at the time, where men were clean shaven and let their hair grow long, the Knights Templar cut their hair regularly, but were not allowed to shave, so they all had beards. Their outfits were to be without unnecessary adornment. Shoes warranted a special mention in the rules, and I quote "We prohibit pointed shoes

and shoe laces and forbid any brother to wear them, for it is manifest and well known that these abominable things belong to pagans". A Templar Knight was expected to wear a white lambskin girdle at all times as a reminder of his vow of chastity.

Bathing was forbidden, as a brother was not allowed to be seen naked. While the total ban on having a bath seems pretty extreme to us, in medieval times, when personal hygiene was not really on anyone's list of priorities and we're having a regular bath to keep oneself clean was seen as eccentric and odd behavior, it wasn't really a big deal. The knights of the Temple slept in dormitories, where a lamp was required to be burning all night, and were required to sleep wearing their sheepskin girdle, a shirt, breeches and shoes. While this may have been to ensure that they were ready to get up and fight at a moment's notice, it also ensured that their vows of chastity were more likely to be kept.

Once in the Order, a Templar might be ordered to provide an armed escort for pilgrims, or to go to battle against Muslim forces, or to be stationed in a desert castle as part of a garrison watching for the enemy. Some of the castles were massive structures, able to accommodate thousands of people, with vast storage chambers designed to hold enough food to enable the people sheltering in the castle to withstand a siege for a number of years. We will look at these castles in more depth in a future episode.

While not deployed in the field, a Knight Templar followed a strict monastic routine. He rose at 4 a.m. and heard the rosary for the office of Matins, and then went to tend his horses, before eating breakfast in silence. The knights took part in prayers for the offices of Prima, Terce and Sext. Nones took place at 2:30 p.m., and during the evening, where they ate their meals in silence, bible readings were heard.

Now, with all these strict rules and the monastic way of life, I bet you're thinking "Why would anyone become a Knight Templar?" Well, they didn't really have any trouble attracting recruits, and there are probably two reasons for this. Firstly, you can't really overemphasize the obsession with sin at this time. Knights were always sinning, whether it was by raping, or pillaging, or killing when killing was unwarranted, and unrepentant sinners spent the rest of eternity in hell after they died, being tortured by demons. But it was really difficult to truly repent of your sins and then go back to being a knight, which basically entailed a lot of fighting, killing, raping and plundering. The only real way to continue in your chosen vocation, while also ensuring that you didn't sin, was to join a military order. So quite a few knights did exactly that.

Another pool of recruits came from poor knights, knights who had fallen on hard times, knights without funding. If the proceeds of your exploits were not enough to cover your expenses, such as the costs of having attendants or replacing horses, armor or weapons, then things were pretty grim. This didn't matter if you joined the Knights Templar. Upon taking your vows, you would be provided with three horses, clothing, a white robe, chain mail, a helmet, the necessary equipment for your horses, and weapons, comprising a sword, shield, lance, knife, battle axe, and mace. You would be allocated personal attendants and servants, as well as your bedding and eating utensils. This was a real attraction for knights who couldn't afford the equipment themselves.

The Knights Templar were unique in that they trained together as a military force, lived together, were supplied with military equipment, and were required to obey orders without question, much like in modern military units. This was a far cry from what was happening in other armies. There were no standing armies in Europe or the Middle East. Armies were

made up of knights and foot soldiers who responded to a call to arms, either to further their own interests or due to an obligation to their overlord who had decided to go into battle. They supplied their own arms and equipment and had no opportunity to train together. There was no real obligation to obey orders, and they weren't paid for their service, taking plunder and loot to cover their expenses. The ability to practice their martial skills and to participate in drills and group maneuvers made the Templars a formidable fighting force, and recruitment to the Knights Templar ended up going rather well.

Not only did knights sign up, but the Order also accepted Associate Members, who lived or fought with the Knights Templar for a short period in exchange for gifts of money or land. In fact, grants of land, military equipment and money began flowing in from all over Europe. Those who didn't fancy actually becoming a Templar knight could still share in the redemptive nature of the military order by donating whatever they could spare to the Templars. The Order grew increasingly wealthy and expanded, and it's just as well that it did. Building castles throughout the Holy Land, maintaining those castles, and keeping them manned and supplied was an expensive business. But the Templars were up to the challenge.

They came up with ingenious ways of making money and rose to rival the Catholic Church as one of the most powerful, wealthy and influential institutions in Europe. At the height of their power, they had bases, or "commanderies", throughout Latin Christendom, from Scotland, Ireland and England, down to Spain and Portugal across France, and into Croatia and Hungary. The Provincial Masters of the Templars in Europe became powerful figures, and quite a few of them must have been gifted economists as well.

Latin Christendom at this time was experiencing a period of stabilization, which led to an increase in trade. Roads were being built and improved. Fairs and markets were opening, and the mercantile classes were beginning to come into their own. The Knights Templar rode this economic wave for all it was worth. They turned much of their donated lands into productive farms, running them with military efficiency, and managing to turn even non-productive land into viable farms. They built vast barns to house their produce and used the proceeds to build churches and expand their influence in the region. They built ships to export their produce from Europe and, more importantly, to export material from the Holy Land to Europe. Europeans, whose clothing had been limited to items made of wool or leather, now found themselves able to buy fine cloth made of cotton woven in Mosul, which they called "muslin", and even finer, airy, loosely-woven cotton fabric woven in Gaza, which they called "gauze" - all thanks to the Templars. They also grew crops of sugar cane in the Middle East, which they processed and reduced to sugar. At Acre, they exported the sugar to Europe, where the citizens, used to sweetening their food only with honey, couldn't get enough of it.

They also used their ships to transport pilgrims from Europe to the Holy Land. Traveling with the Templars, the pilgrim's passage became much safer than it used to be, but there was still a risk of being robbed, particularly while traveling in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. So the Templars came up with a clever idea. Since they had safe deposits of money in many centers around Europe, the Templars, in exchange for a donation, offered the pilgrims a banking service. Instead of carrying money with them, they could deposit their 30 pieces of gold at a Templar treasure house before they left Europe, then present their receipts to the Templar treasurer in Jerusalem, where the money would be redeemed. The Templars ended up expanding their banking activities to include providing safe storage for valuables

and providing loans. At one stage, the Templars were the foremost banking house in Europe.

Well, I guess it was inevitable. With all this power, wealth, and prestige, things were bound to start going wrong, and they did. By the 13th century, Europeans noted the wealth that had been accumulated by the Templars, but they also noted that things weren't really going too well in the Holy Land. The Templars had justified the building of their economic base by saying that it financed their operations in the Middle East, keeping the Crusader states safe from Muslim incursions. Trouble was, the Muslims seemed to be gaining the upper hand, and the Latin Christian presence in the Holy Land was looking increasingly fragile. Rumors started spreading about corruption within the Templar order. It didn't help that the inner workings of the Order were clothed in secrecy. All Chapter meetings were held behind closed doors, usually at night, with Templar sentries guarding the door with drawn swords. It also didn't help that much of the nobility of Europe owed money to the Templars, which didn't exactly make them popular among Europe's elite.

So you guessed it, now we come to the downfall of the Knights Templar. The downfall is a complex event and could easily have its own episode or episodes, and it may well do so towards the end of this podcast series. But this is meant to be a summary of the Knights Templar and summarize I shall.

After the Fall of Acre, which pretty much signaled the end of the Latin Christian presence in the Holy Land, the Order elected a new Grand Master, Jacques de Molay. Jacques de Molay could see that things were not going so well for the Knights Templar. They had been blamed for the loss of Acre, and there were moves to merge the two military orders together so that the Knights Templar and the Knights Hospitaller would become one organization. Jacques, of course, did not want this to happen, so he left for Europe to go on a recruitment drive, determined to launch another Crusade to regain lost territory in the Middle East, and to win back the good name of the Templars.

He was shocked by what he found in France. Not only were there the usual whispers about the Templars, that they were corrupt and that they didn't do enough for charity, things had definitely ramped up a notch. Jacques heard rumors that the Templars were worshiping the devil during their secretive meetings, denying Christ, and engaging in acts of heresy and obscenity.

It's unclear exactly how these rumors started, but you could probably point the finger at one man, King Philip IV of France. Like many other powerful men, King Philip IV had racked up a sizable debt with the Templars. He owed them a lot of money. Things also weren't going so well economically for his kingdom. It's likely that he saw the immense wealth of the Templars in France and came up with an idea. Previously, King Philip had seized the assets of mercantile Jews and Lombards, and had expelled them from France. He came up with an ambitious and audacious plan to do the same to the Templars.

In September 1307 he sent a letter to officials across France, enclosing sealed orders that were only to be opened on the night of the 12th of October. Officials all over the Kingdom were told to organize their own military force to be ready to act on those orders. Military forces were gathered, the orders were read, and at dawn on Friday the 13th of October, 1307, almost every knight, priest, servant, and sergeant involved with the Order of the Temple in France was arrested and placed in chains, their assets seized, and placed in the care of the crown.

If you feel a sense of unease on Friday the 13th today, you are feeling the echoes of the terror, disbelief, and betrayal experienced by thousands of men associated with the Templars on that first Friday the 13th more than 700 years ago.

The men were subjected to hideous inquisitions and tortures, under which many of them admitted to heresies, for which they were executed. The Catholic Church, after initially coming to the Templars defense, took a step back and essentially left the Templars to their fate.

And so ended the Order of the Poor Knights of Jesus Christ and the Temple of Solomon. Or did it? There are people around today who call themselves Templar Knights. In fact, my father bumped into one in a car park a few weeks ago, but they're really just a bunch of ordinary people who meet for social reasons or to do charitable work. They don't take monastic vows, and they certainly don't take up arms and go into battle in the name of the Catholic Church. So why are there people who today style themselves as members of a military order that ended over 700 years ago?

Well, that brings us to the elephant in the room, the big question that I have managed to avoid until now. Popular thought in the 20th and 21st century's connects the Knights Templar with a range of mystical activities and conspiracies. So to complete an analysis of the Knights Templar, we should really ask ourselves these questions. Did the Templars find the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy Grail in Jerusalem and keep them hidden? Where is the Holy Grail now? Did the Templars discover a startling fact which would rock the foundations of the Church? Did the Order of the Temple evolve into Freemasonry? Did the descendants of the Knights Templar take a sacred item to America and hide it, either in an island off Nova Scotia or under New York City?

The answers to these questions are simple. They are “no”, “not applicable”, “probably not”, “probably not”, and “definitely not”. The truth is, the need to somehow vest the Knights Templar with some mystical quality and see them as guardians of something hidden and sacred, is really a phenomenon of modern times, mainly of the 20th century.

We discussed the role of relics in the early Middle Ages in episode 13. Religious relics were certainly seen as containing miraculous properties, and any individual or church owning a piece of the true cross or a head of John the Baptist rose in prestige and power. If the Knights Templar had found the Ark of the Covenant or the chalice used by Christ during the Last Supper, you can be sure they would have publicized the find and used it to increase their influence and standing within the Church. Much of the connection between the Knights Templar and the Holy Grail or some other sacred item or knowledge can be traced back to works of fiction from the 17th century onwards, and it's gradually worked its way into popular consciousness.

Probably the most influential nonfiction work to link the Knights Templar with secrets and with the Freemasons is the book “The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail”, written by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln in 1982, and its sequel “The Messianic Legacy”, which purports to answer such questions as “What links the Vatican, the CIA, the KGB, the Mafia, Freemasonry, Opus Dei, and the Knights Templar?” The books are well-researched and at times persuasive, but I think the historical basis for their assertions isn't proven. That didn't stop the author Dan Brown from taking theories from The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail and using them to form the basis of his popular novel “The DaVinci Code”,

without, you would have to say, appropriate acknowledgment. But while I'm not convinced, by all means read the books for yourselves and form your own conclusions. I'll post references to the books on the website at HistoryOfTheCrusades.webs.com.

Well, that brings us to the end of our first special interest subject, the Knights Templar. But we're not finished yet. There are more special interest topics coming your way. Join me next week as we take a closer look at what some people view as the Islamic equivalent of the Knights Templar, the Assassins.

For extra reading, if you want to delve further into the last days of the Knights Templar, you could read "The Last Templar, the Tragedy of Jacques de Molay, Last Grand Master of the Temple", by the French mediaeval scholar Alain Demurger. Until next week, bye for now.

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