

THE RISE AND FALL OF A MILITARY ORDER

Who were the Templars?

The idea of the Knights Templar looked good on paper. Have knights from across Europe join a monastic order that would defend the Holy Land from non-Christians. They would be devout warriors fighting on behalf of God, an example for all of Christendom. What could go wrong?

By *Peter Konieczny*

In the decades following the First Crusade, the European arrivals had a tenuous hold on Jerusalem and the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. In the first two decades of the twelfth century the Crusaders had their share of victories against their many enemies in the Middle East – the Seljuk Turks, Syrians and Egyptians – but would also see a devastating defeat at the Battle of the Field of Blood in 1119. Meanwhile, the territory outside of crusader strongholds was often hostile and lawless, with groups of Christian pilgrims being attacked and captured as they travelled through the Holy Land.

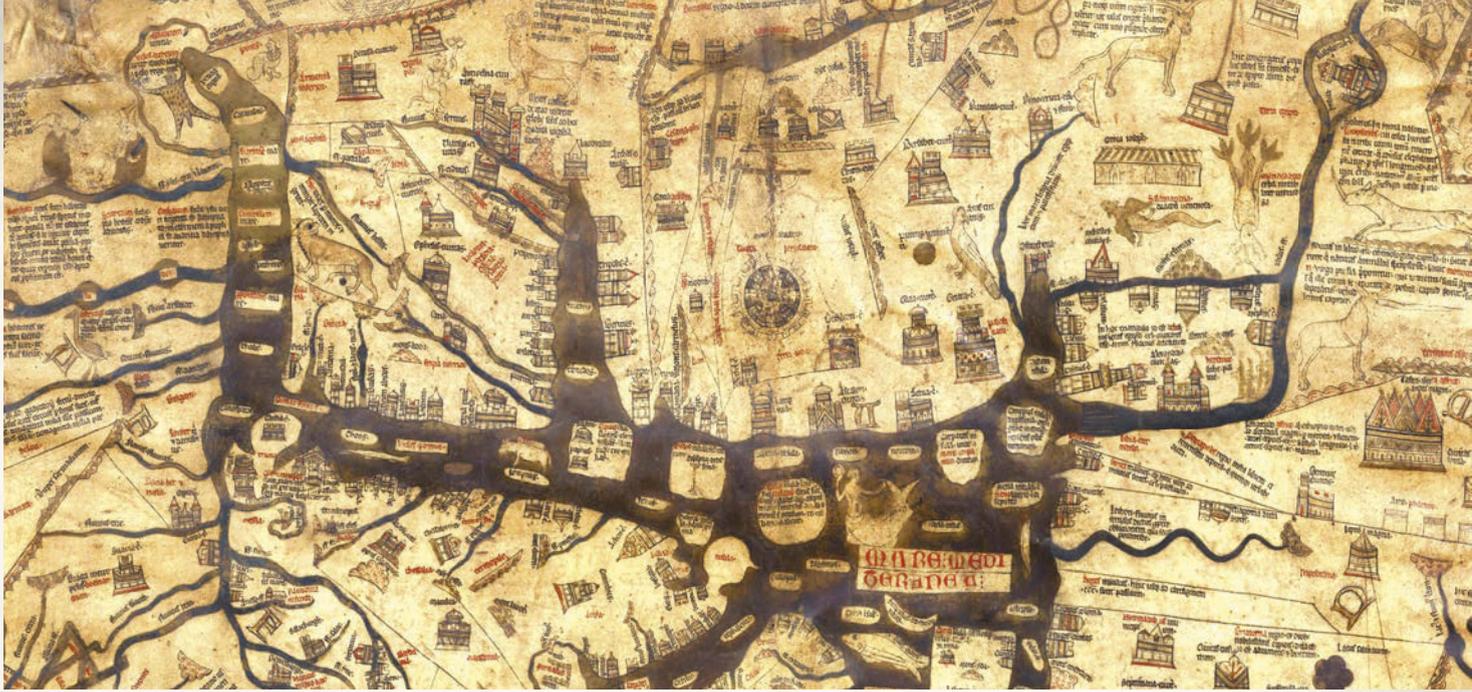
It was around the year 1119 that a new group emerged, led by a French knight named Hugues de Payens. There are a few stories that explain how they came to be – in one version, Hugues, Godfrey de Saint-Omer and seven other knights joined together, while in another version Hugues had arrived in Jerusalem with thirty knights. They met with Baldwin II, King of Jerusalem and Warmund, the city's patriarch, and proclaimed, in the words of one chronicler, that "they would renounce the world, give up personal goods, free themselves to pursue purity, and lead a communal life wearing a poor habit, only using arms to defend

the land against the attacks of the insurgent pagans when necessity demanded."

A later chronicle gives this account of how this group came to be: these knights were in Jerusalem and said to themselves, "We have left our lands and our loved ones, and have come here to raise up and exalt the law of God. So we rest here eating and drinking and spending, without doing any work. We do not perform any deed of arms either, although this country has need of that. We obey a priest, and so we do no labour of arms. Let us take advice, and with our prior's permission we shall make one of us our master, who may lead us in battle when necessary."

The king and the patriarch liked what they heard and gave them a property in Jerusalem to use as their base of operations. This happened to be the Al-Aqsa mosque, built in the seventh century and considered to be the third holiest site in Islam. However, the crusaders believed that this place was the ruins of the Temple of Solomon, and in honour of this site the group of knights called themselves the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon, or "Templar" knights.

This issue of Medieval Warfare examines the Knights Templar: who they were and their impact on the Crusades. The Templars are one of the most famous organiza-



tions from the Middle Ages, and often one of the most mythologised. Despite being disbanded over 700 years ago, they are still viewed as one of the greatest combinations of military strength and religious faith.

The rise

It seems that the first years of the Templars were lean ones, with the group remaining small and poor. Chroniclers noted they had to wear hand-me-down clothes and supposedly had to travel with two knights riding on one horse. They would guard the roads in and around Jerusalem, protecting pilgrims from bandits and marauders.

Their big break came about ten years after their creation, when Hugues de Payens went on a tour of Europe in order to raise money and recruit new members. He gained an invaluable supporter in Bernard of Clairvaux, a Cistercian monk living in France. Bernard was what we could call an influencer – his opinion mattered within the church and with monarchs across Western Europe. As Andrew Holt describes in his article “The New Knighthood”, Bernard loved the idea of the Templars. He would go on to write about them, and provide the justification for their existence. It could be said that this monk was more responsible for making the Knights Templar than the Templars themselves were.

With Bernard’s help, Hugues and his followers got to meet with the elite of Western Europe – kings, bishops, counts, abbots – and they showered the Templars with gifts, money and property. In the late 1120s and early

1130s this military order were what we might call trending, growing from a small group of poor knights into an international powerhouse. It must have been a very exciting time to be a Templar, as they quickly had to set up an organization that would manage donated lands scattered across Europe, and bring in new soldiers to fight in the Holy Land.

While most observers were big supporters of the Templars, there were also voices that did not like this order or what they represented. They complained that real Christians, and monks in particular, needed to live a contemplative life which focused on improving one’s soul. Instead, this new order would be dedicated to an active life, spending most of their time fighting a war. They feared that trying to be both a monk and a warrior would not work, and that it would only end with the Templars being corrupted.

Hugues de Payens addressed these criticisms in a letter to his fellow Templars:

We have heard that some of you have been alarmed by certain indiscreet persons, as if your profession – in which you dedicate your life to bearing weapons against the enemies of the faith and of the peace and for the defence of Christians – as if that profession was illicit or harmful, a sin or an obstacle to greater progress! This has happened because, as we have already said to you, the devil does not sleep: for he knows that if he tries to persuade you to sin, you will not listen and will not consent.

A detail from the Hereford Mappa Mundi, created around the year 1300, showing Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

© The Hereford Mappa Mundi is displayed at the Hereford Cathedral, England.

So he does not say to you, 'Get drunk, sleep around, get into fights, slander'. You have nullified his first aim by rejecting sin. You have also destroyed your adversary's second aim: for in peacetime you fight your own body with fasts and abstinence so that when he suggests you should feel pride in your virtuous work, you resist and overcome him just as you fight with weapons in battle against the enemies of peace who injure you or wish to injure you.

The Templars were soon able to use their newly gained wealth to build up forces and take command of some castles back in the Holy Land. We can learn much about how this order organized itself through its monastic rule, and that is the focus of John Howe's article 'The Rule: Military Secrets of the Knights Templar'. He examines this lengthy document, which set out the regulations of the Templars so they could live like monks and also be able to effectively conduct military operations. It is not surprising that when they followed the rigid discipline of their rule, combined with the courage coming from their religious zeal, the Templars could be among the best warriors of the Middle Ages. For example, read the words of this twelfth-century pilgrim, who left us a vivid account of the Knights Templar going into battle:

The Templars are excellent knights, wearing white mantles with a red cross. Their bicoloured standard which is called the 'baucant' goes before them into battle. They go into battle in order and without making a noise, they are first to desire engagement and more vigorous than others; they are the first to go and the last to return, and they wait for their Master's command before acting. When they make the decision that it would be profitable to fight and the trumpet sounds to give the order to advance, they piously sing this psalm of David: 'Not to us Lord, not to us but to your name the glory'; couch their lances and charge into the enemy. As one person, they strongly seek out the units and wings of the battle, they never dare to give way, they either completely break up the enemy or they die.

The fall

While we can read of some of their successes on the battlefield, the sources from that period also tell us a different narrative about the Templars - that they were acting more for their own interests than to help the Christians defend the Holy Land. William, Archbishop of Tyre, our main source for events in the Crusader territories in the twelfth century, complains that they had "forgot[ten] about humility" and reports on instances where the military order failed to work with their allies, and even deliberately thwarted other Crusaders.

His criticism would be followed by others. They would accuse the Templars (and other military orders) of failing in their duty to protect the Holy Land, of being soft, and even of collaborating with the Muslim enemy. Many of these complaints were coming from Western Europe, and they were reactions against the disasters that were taking place in the Holy Land. On July 4, 1187, the Ayyubid Sultan Saladin inflicted a huge defeat on the Crusaders, including the Templars, at the Battle of Hattin. Three months later the city of Jerusalem was retaken by the Muslims, a humiliating loss for the Europeans.

This would be the first of many setbacks for the Crusaders - the whole of the thirteenth century, with a few exceptions, was a series of losses. William Welsh's article, "The Battle of La Forbie: Crusader Catastrophe" details one of the worst defeats for the crusaders. It should be noted that the Knights Templar were just one component of the Christian forces, and there were many others who could share the blame for what was happening in the Holy Land. But it seems that the Templars and the other military orders were the ones being scapegoated. For example, listen to the angry remarks made by Robert, Count of Artois in 1250, where he accuses them of wanting to lose the Holy Land:

For the Templars and Hospitallers, and their associates, fear that, if the country is reduced to submission to the Christian power, their domination, who fatten on its rich revenues, will expire. Hence it is that they poison, in diverse ways, the

An illustration from a late 14th century manuscript which shows Templars being burnt at the stake.

© British Library MS Royal 20 CVII f. 44v



Christians who come here ready for the cause of the cross, and, confederating with the Saracens, put them to death by various treacherous means.

In 1291, Acre, the last major Crusader port, fell to the Mamluks, ending the European presence in the Holy Land. The Templars and the other crusaders had failed in their mission, but by this time the military order had grown into a Europe-wide organization. The lands and wealth they had gained in their early days had only increased over time, making them a powerful group. Moreover, the Templars had formed important relationships with many rulers, including serving as bankers to the kings of France and England. In other places they were acting as supporting troops for other royal governments, even fighting other Christians.

In the early years of the fourteenth century the Templars were still an important and affluent force, but without a mission. Their reputation as failed warriors would make them vulnerable, and it would be Philip IV, King of France, who would strike first. The French ruler was all too willing to believe rumours about heretical behaviour among the Templars. Perhaps he was also motivated by the fact that he was in debt to the military order. In any case, on October 13, 1307, his orders were carried out to have every member of the Knights Templar arrested in France.

The purge would soon spread across Europe, with trials being held to determine if the Templars were carrying out secret, heretical practices. The accusations against them were often strange, including charges that they would dress up cats or urinate on crosses. Historians generally believe that with the possible exception of some minor infractions, the Templars were innocent of these charges, but King Philip was determined to see the order destroyed. Either by torture or the threat of such, many Templars would make confessions to these so-called crimes.

On March 22, 1312, the Papacy sent out an official order suppressing the Knights Templar, ending the organization after nearly 200 years of existence. Most of the remaining members would be retired



and live out the rest of their lives in monasteries, but some refused to accept these decisions. Dozens of Templars, including Jacques de Molay, its last Grand Master, were burned at the stake for heresy.

After the fall

It has been over 700 years since the Knights Templar were crushed. However, they remain one of the most recognized organizations from the Middle Ages, the topic of countless books and websites. A lot of myths have been told about the Templars, with some people trying to find evidence that somehow the group survived their purge and carried on its existence. In reality, the Templars have only survived in novels, movies and video games. Danièle Cybulskie looks at these fictional warriors in her article “The afterlife of the Templars: From fighting injustice to trying to rule the world”, which shows the many different incarnations of the military order, as forces both of good and of evil.

We begin our look at the Templars with a personal essay from Helen Nicholson, who is perhaps the world’s leading historian of medieval military orders. She has written dozens of articles and books about them, and here she tells us how these warrior monks captivated her and led to a career of researching them. [MW](#)

Peter Konieczny is the editor of Medieval Warfare magazine.

The Church of San Bevignate in the Italian town of Perugia was built by the Templars in the mid-13th century. Many of its frescoes from the period survive, including this one depicting the Templars in battle.

© Comune di Perugia / Wikimedia Commons