

# The Changing Face of the Templars: Current Trends in Historiography

## Abstract

Until the 1970s, there was little interest in the Knight Templar from either scholars or the general public. Most saw them as an obscure medieval knightly secret society. Over the last three decades, the enormous growth in scholarly research and publication on the history of the Templars has changed their image almost beyond recognition. Modern research reveals the Templars to have been a religious order, protected by the pope. They were also a military order, which fought against Islam in defence of Christian pilgrims and Christian territory and played a key role in the crusades. Their leading members were knights, but most of their members were not warriors, and included priests and women, who served God through prayer rather than by fighting. As well as castles and estates in the Middle East, they had property throughout Europe; they served kings and popes as diplomats and advisors. Far from being secretive, they opened their churches to local people and lodged travellers in their houses. They were pious men who shared the same faith as the Christians they protected. Historians disagree over where the initiative for the order came from – was it the idea of the first Templars themselves, or did Churchmen suggest it to them? They also disagree over the causes of the trial of the Templars (1307-12) – some insist that what the Templars said under torture must have some truth in it, while others reject torture evidence as unreliable and look at the political context of the trial.

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Who were the Templars? Scholars have been slow to answer this question. Despite popular myths to the contrary, the Templars were a Christian military-religious institution, founded in the early twelfth century in the wake of the first crusade, and dissolved by the pope in 1312. The Templars' vast but scattered records have proved a serious barrier to research. Being neither monks nor courtly knights, they have fallen between the conventional areas of historical study – overlooked by monastic historians for not being monks, and by historians of chivalry for being members of a religious order. A great deal of research into the religious orders of medieval Europe has been done by modern members of those orders, but as the Templars no longer exist, they have no modern representatives to investigate them. However, in the 1970s revisionist scholarship at last caught up with the Templars. Over the last thirty years, the 'face' of the Templars has changed almost beyond recognition.

Since 1980, the Templars have wavered between being an institution which evolved naturally from the religious and military culture of its day, to a revolutionary movement. They have become religious men with a serious spiritual vocation; an effective military force whose regulations reveal a sound grasp of military organisation and strategy; a complex institution organised to promote its aims and objectives, and an economic force in Catholic Christendom. Even the definition of their institution has changed from being a 'military order' to a 'military-religious order'. The trial which ended the order has also come under scrutiny, and the questions of why the order was attacked and why it was dissolved continue to rage.

Much of this research has drawn on the evidence gathered during the trial. Ever since the trial itself, commentators and historians have questioned the value of the so-called confessions taken from the Templars through torture or the threat of torture, but recently the question has been reopened with the suggestion that some Templars were in fact guilty of some of the charges brought against them. A few scholars have considered the opposite extreme, that all the evidence given by the Templars during the trial is unreliable, because it was all taken under duress. As Malcolm Barber, one of the leading historians of the Templars, has asked: ‘how do we tell truth from lies?’<sup>1</sup>

This article will concentrate on three areas of recent historiography on the Templars: the origins of the order; the order’s organisation and operations; and the trial of the Templars.

### **The origins of the Templars**

Perhaps the most significant advance in the last three decades is Rudolf Hiestand’s redating of the Church Council of Troyes and the foundation of the Order of the Temple. Rudolf Hiestand was already well known to historians for his editions of papal documents relating to the Templars and Hospitallers.<sup>2</sup> In 1988 he published a detailed study of Cardinal-bishop Matthew of Albano, papal legate at the Council of Troyes – the council at which the Templars received official papal acknowledgement as a religious order of the Catholic Church, and were given an official religious rule and habit.<sup>3</sup> Hiestand concluded that the council must have taken place in January 1129, not in January 1128 as stated in the opening paragraphs of the Templars’ rule.

The cause of the confusion over the date is that the scribe at the council, Jean Michel, was following the contemporary French practice of starting the year on 25 March, rather than on 1 January.

Jean Michel stated that the Council took place in the ninth year of the order's existence. If that were so, then the order began in January 1120. In January 1120 a Church council had met at Nablūs in the kingdom of Jerusalem. Hiestand suggested that this would have been the most likely occasion for the knights who founded the order of the Temple to have won approval from the patriarch and the king of Jerusalem.

Although now agreed on when the Templars were founded, scholars have not yet agreed where the concept came from: was the order was primarily inspired by the ideals of the Church reform movement of the eleventh and twelfth centuries? Or was it the knights' own idea, inspired by the piety of the knightly class, as depicted in contemporary epic poetry such as *La Chanson de Roland*? The debate centres on the Templars' original Rule, approved in 1129;<sup>4</sup> a twelfth-century pseudonymous letter to the Templars written in Latin by a man calling himself *Hugo peccator*, 'Hugh the Sinner';<sup>5</sup> and a letter from Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux to Hugh de Payns, first master of the Temple, in support of the Templars' vocation: 'Liber de laude novae militiae'.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Archbishop William of Tyre, who wrote what is generally agreed to be the best account of the order's beginnings even though it was written around half a century after these events, indicated that the original concept was the brainchild of the patriarch of Jerusalem,<sup>7</sup> making the Templars a Church institution from its beginnings.

In 1982 the Spanish historian Elena Lourie suggested that, given Christianity's doctrines of non-violence, the concept of the military-religious order must have

derived from Islamic thought rather than Catholic Christian ideals. She drew a parallel between the concept of the Templars and the Muslim religious-military institution of the *ribāt*.<sup>8</sup> Few historians agree with her. Maurice Keen, in his great work on chivalry (1984), saw the Templars and other military orders as institutions of the Church, representing ‘a real fusion of ecclesiastical (as opposed to simply Christian) and martial ideals’, but also developed from the secular knights’ conviction that the Christian knight’s ‘way of life was one pleasing to God’.<sup>9</sup> Malcolm Barber, drawing on contemporary chivalric literature as well as chronicles and other documents, argued that the Templars were a natural product of their society.<sup>10</sup> Alan Forey and Marcus Bull argued that by the second decade of the twelfth century, when the Templars were founded, Catholic Christians had already accepted the concept of holy war which carried a spiritual reward, most recently in the form of the First Crusade.<sup>11</sup> More recently, Luis García-Guijarro Ramos has argued from the letter of *Hugo peccator* – whom he identifies as Hugh de Payns – that the first Templars stood firmly in ‘the context of the changes on the path to spiritual perfection which the papal reform movement channelled’. He agrees that ‘inner social forces’ were the stimulus for this and other religious movements of the day, but emphasizes that they were all dependent for success on the guidance of ‘the Roman Church’.<sup>12</sup>

Other scholars have emphasized the Templars’ status as laymen rather than clerics. In 1996 Anthony Luttrell, best known for his work on the Hospitallers, published an article on the early Templars.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on the account of the Templars’ origins recorded in the *Chronique d’Ernoul et de Bernard le trésorier* – written perhaps more than a century after the Templars began – he argued that the Templars originated as lay associates of the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem: pious knights who lived in the church complex and followed a religious lifestyle but had not

taken religious vows. According to the *Chronique*, these knights realised that the kingdom of Jerusalem needed active military men, and went to the king of Jerusalem (rather than the patriarch as in Archbishop William's version) to obtain approval to form a military force which would help to protect the kingdom.

Luttrell argued from this account that the formation of the Templars was not influenced by the theoretical concepts: 'there was no mention of debates about any Christian militia, the just war or the theoretical contradictions between military and religious ideas ... many such matters were certainly in the minds of contemporaries by 1120 but they did not necessarily influence the founding Templars'. He argued: 'What seems certain about the earliest Templars is merely that a few military individuals in Jerusalem wished to live a poor, religious and perhaps penitential life while also fighting the infidel.'<sup>14</sup> Simonetta Cerrini, drawing on her studies of the Templars' original rule and *Hugo peccator's* letter, has emphasized the Templars' lay status to an even greater degree, claiming that the Templars were revolutionary because the order was based around laymen rather than clergy, and was non-noble. At the same time, they were close to the 'people' and shared their religious practices.<sup>15</sup> Other scholars do not agree that this made the Templars revolutionary.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Templars' activities and organisation**

Archbishop William of Tyre claimed that the order of the Temple was formed to keep the pilgrim routes safe for pilgrims; the *Chronique d'Ernoul et de Bernard le trésorier* claimed that the founding knights intended to defend Christian land. Both these writers, however, often criticised the Templars' actual activities. Although scholars

acknowledge that the archbishop's history is not always objective or strictly accurate,<sup>17</sup> and although his accounts of certain incidents – particularly the Templars' role at the siege of Ascalon in 1153 – have been discredited,<sup>18</sup> Archbishop William's version of events is still the most widely used by historians.

The traditional view of the Templars was that after initial enthusiasm the order attracted increasing criticism, which finally culminated in the trial and dissolution of the order. Helen Nicholson's detailed study of 1993 found that this was not the case: criticism increased between crusades but fell during crusades as westerners saw and appreciated the real problems with which the order had to contend, and after 1250 recorded criticism decreased.<sup>19</sup> Other studies have supported the conclusion that the dissolution of the Templars was not the result of long-standing criticism or of unpopularity.<sup>20</sup> This leaves the question of what the Templars had actually been doing, in the Holy Land and in the West.

The Templars' role in warfare in the states founded by the crusaders and settlers from Western Europe has been widely discussed, mostly as part of wider studies of crusader warfare, with only the occasional study focussing on the Templars alone.<sup>21</sup> Again, studies of the Templars' fortifications in the Holy Land usually form part of broader studies,<sup>22</sup> but a recent book by Adrian Boas focuses on the military orders.<sup>23</sup>

The spiritual side of the Templars' lives is attracting increasing attention, with a growing recognition that the Templars were pious men whose lives had a significant spiritual dimension. Chapels, art, religious relics, liturgy and liturgical objects all provide evidence.<sup>24</sup>

It was the Templars' piety, linked to their courage in the battlefield which their piety inspired, which won them the respect of all levels of society in Catholic

Christendom and led to individual brothers being given positions of trust. The order itself was entrusted with the care of valuables, loaned money to king and nobles, transported cash for pilgrims, and acted as royal treasurer in France. The Templars have been credited with being Europe's first bankers, but Alain Demurger, the leading French historian of the Templars, argues that this is a misnomer: the Templars' financial services were passive rather than active.<sup>25</sup> The well-established image of the Templars as faithful servants of kings and princes has not changed in recent years. However, scholars are now more inclined to see role as a problem for the Templars: their service for secular rulers and for popes brought them conflicts of interest which, as an order with property in most states of Catholic Christendom, they could not avoid. In addition, it led to their involvement in damaging political crises.<sup>26</sup>

One of the most interesting developments of recent years has been a series of historical and archaeological studies which have opened up the history of the Templars within Europe.<sup>27</sup> These regional studies reveal the Templars' close relations with the communities around them. Outsiders could associate themselves with the orders of the Temple and Hospital through various forms of affiliation.<sup>28</sup> The Templars' charitable activities have also been examined. Scholars agree that the Templars gave alms, but disagree over how far the Templars cared for pilgrims in Europe. One problem is that Templar houses do not seem to have had separate buildings for lodging travellers. Instead, evidence from the Templar house at Arles and from England indicates that visitors were lodged within the main Templar house; there was no separate hospice for outsiders.<sup>29</sup> Increasingly it appears that the secretive commandery, closed off from the local community – as alleged during the order's trial – was a myth. The Templars as an aggressively all-male warrior community also



appears to be a myth: not only were most members of the order not warriors, but the order also included women and priests.<sup>30</sup>

Many detailed studies of the military orders' lives have appeared over the last three decades. These range from specific areas – recruitment, novitiate and instruction, education and learning, punishments and desertions – to the organisation and personnel of the Hospitallers' and Templars' central administration.<sup>31</sup> The Templars' management systems are now much better understood. What is surprising is that although the Order of the Temple was an international institution, very few members actually left the country where they originally joined the order.<sup>32</sup>

The condition of the Order of the Temple at the end of the thirteenth century has recently been a focus for debate, as the evidence from the trial of 1307-11 can be interpreted to suggest that it was in a state of near-collapse.<sup>33</sup> Other evidence, however, presents a different picture. Alan Forey has concluded a detailed analysis of the order's organisation with the view that: 'the problems it faced were not very different from those encountered by the Hospital ... it may certainly be questioned whether the Temple was in any more parlous a state at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries than other leading military orders.'<sup>34</sup> Jochen Burgdorf has also considered the case in detail, concluding that: 'any suggestion that the Templars were somehow becoming outdated is hard to sustain'.<sup>35</sup> The crux of this debate is the question of how historians should interpret the evidence from the Templars' trial.

## **The Trial of the Templars, 1307-1312**

Since 1980 many documents from the trial of the Templars have been published, others are currently in preparation, and studies of the trials in various countries have appeared.<sup>36</sup> Study of the trial is now easier than it has ever been.

The roles of the leading personalities in the trial continue to be a topic of debate: was the trial simply a propaganda exercise by King Philip IV of France, either to acquire the Templars' wealth (as contemporaries alleged) or to discredit the papacy, a deliberate step on the path to French royal absolutism? Was Pope Clement V to blame for sacrificing the Templars to the French king's wishes, or did he salvage the best deal he could from the crisis? Was Grand Master Jacques de Molay to blame for weak leadership, or was he betrayed by the French king and the papacy?<sup>37</sup>

Malcolm Barber, a leading historian of the trial, has long maintained that King Philip's main motivation in bringing charges of heresy and blasphemy against the Templars was his pressing financial needs, although Philip may also have believed the charges.<sup>38</sup> Barber has examined the charges against the Templars in the light of the accusations brought against other groups accused of heresy, and has concluded that these were standardised charges regularly used against political enemies.<sup>39</sup> This conclusion had already been reached by Norman Cohn in his study of the development of the witchcraft trials of the early modern period.<sup>40</sup>

Studies of heresy trials in Europe have demonstrated that inquisitorial records do not show what the accused actually believed, but the 'truth' which the inquisitors wished to impose on those they interrogated. Hence the testimonies are very similar, full of circumstantial detail, and support each other – because the inquisitors ensured that they did. Having confessed, the accused could not go back on their confessions because they would be judged to be unrepentant heretics, and burned at the stake.<sup>41</sup>

Although some scholars of the Templars' trial point out that evidence extracted by torture or the fear of torture is likely to be distorted,<sup>42</sup> very few have attempted to get to grips with the scientific evidence on the effects of torture. Those few argue that the modern scientific studies are extremely valuable in assessing the value of Templars' evidence and understanding their actions during the trial.<sup>43</sup> Yet these studies also indicate that none of the evidence given by the Templars can be relied upon – not even the everyday details which had nothing to do with the charges.

At the same time, other historians are uncritically using the Templars' testimonies as the basis of new, or not-so-new, theories about the trial. In 2001 Barbara Frale, archivist at the Vatican archives, discovered a document containing the full testimonies given at Chinon in August 1308 by the five leading Templars in France.<sup>44</sup> She noted that after the leading Templars had confessed their heresies and had abjured all heresy, they were absolved by the pope. Apparently unaware this was normal procedure in heresy trials, she argued that the pope's absolution shows that he did not regard the Templars' crimes as serious, and concluded: 'it is possible to sketch out what Clement V and his advisors probably understood: the strange profession ceremony was simply an entrance ritual'.<sup>45</sup> She produced no other evidence for this entrance ritual except the sweeping statement that it was 'a custom which was common (with variations) in every military group since early antiquity'.

Frale did not consider that torture or duress would have affected the value of the Templars' testimonies. She also overlooked the fact that in his bull *Faciens misericordiam* the pope described the crimes confessed at Chinon as extremely serious heresies.<sup>46</sup> His detailed instructions for investigations into this heresy throughout the rest of Christendom were not the action of a man who thought he was dealing with only a harmless entrance ritual.

As historians of the Templars were already aware of the existence of these confessions and the papal absolution,<sup>47</sup> and because it was clear from later events that the pope had not in fact forgiven the Templars, few greeted Frale's theory with enthusiasm. Alain Demurger agreed that the Templars were not guilty of heresy, but thought that they were guilty of not eradicating corruption.<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Riley-Smith, however, after analysing the trial testimonies in detail, concluded that 'in some commanderies blasphemous demands were being made of postulants at the time of, or shortly after, their reception into the order'. He admitted that 'torture was employed quite extensively in France and in parts of Italy', and that 'it is impossible to establish when or why such odd behaviour could have crept into a great and powerful order of the Church'.<sup>49</sup>

This study did not consider the scientific evidence of the results of torture: as the Templars who confessed to this 'odd behaviour' had either been tortured or threatened with torture, their evidence is unreliable. Further, this study did not take into account other scholars' studies of inquisitorial methods, nor the standard accusations of heresy discussed by Norman Cohn and other historians. It did not discuss the fact that, even under torture, most Templars had no explanation for the alleged blasphemous reception ritual, and those few who did could not agree on its purpose. This would be surprising if the practice did exist, but not if it was the invention of the Templars' accusers. No one complained about such a practice before the allegations which initiated the trial. All of this indicates that the allegation was a myth.

Meanwhile, the question of why King Philip IV attacked the Templars remains open. It seems unlikely that there is a simple explanation, but that the king's financial

crisis, religious piety, interest in the crusade and desire to control the Church in France all played a part.

## **Conclusion**

The Templars are now far more familiar than they were 30 years ago. Their organisation and normal practices have been studied in detail, and many of their documents have been published, some available in English translation.<sup>50</sup> Their religious credentials are now well-established, although monastic historians are still inclined to leave them out of their general surveys of religious orders. Their membership is also under investigation, and prosopographical information is slowly being assembled.<sup>51</sup> The Templars' trial of 1307-12, a major European heresy trial, continues to arouse great controversy. It would be advantageous if more scholars from related areas – such as those who have studied the trials of the Cathars, or who have studied the effects of harsh interrogation techniques – could bring their skills to bear on the evidence produced during the trial. For too long the history of the Templars has been the preserve of crusade historians and Templar specialists; as the order was involved in everyday life across medieval Europe, the history of the Templars should be of interest to all historians of the European Middle Ages.

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<sup>40</sup> N. Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: the Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (London: Pimlico, 1993), 79-101

<sup>41</sup> J. H. Arnold, *Inquisition and Power: Catharism and the Confessing Subject in Medieval Languedoc* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 7-15, 76-8, etc.; J. Given, 'The Inquisitors of Languedoc and the Medieval Technology of Power', *American Historical Review*, 94 (1989), 336-59; B. Hamilton, *The Albigensian Crusade*, Historical Association Pamphlet, G. 85 (London: Historical Association, 1974), 25-7.

<sup>42</sup> Barber, *New Knighthood*, 306-7; Barber, *Trial of the Templars*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 68-72, 308-9; Demurger, *Les Templiers*, 503-7; Bellomo, *The Templar Order in North-west Italy*, 201.

<sup>43</sup> Exceptions include W. C. Jordan, *Unceasing Strife, Unending Fear: Jacques de Thérines and the Freedom of the Church in the Age of the Last Capetians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 53, 122 n.133, using the work of José Saporta of



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the Psychiatry department in Harvard Medical School, and Bessel van der Kolk, medical director and founder of the Trauma Center of the Justice Resource Institute, Brookline, Massachusetts; Nicholson, *Knights Templar on Trial*, 28-31, using the work of Gisli H. Gudjonsson, a clinical psychologist.

<sup>44</sup> B. Frale, *Il Papato e il processo ai Templari: L'inedita assoluzione di Chinon alla luce della diplomazia pontificia* (Rome: Viella, 2003), 198-219; B. Frale, 'The Chinon Chart: Papal absolution to the last Templar, Master Jacques de Molay', *Journal of Medieval History*, 30 (2004), 109-134.

<sup>45</sup> Frale, 'Chinon Chart', 125, 127.

<sup>46</sup> Barber, *Trial of the Templars*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 125-6.

<sup>47</sup> Demurger, *The Last Templar*, 224.

<sup>48</sup> Demurger, *Les Templiers*, 489-93.

<sup>49</sup> J. Riley-Smith, 'Were the Templars Guilty?' in Ridyard, *Medieval Crusade*, 107-24.

<sup>50</sup> For example, M. Barber and K. Bate (eds.), *The Templars: Selected Sources* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

<sup>51</sup> E.g., Burgdorf, *Central Convent*, 462-695.