

Conclusion

M. Barber, *The Trial of the Templars*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2006)

Few people, surveying the events of the last century, can have any illusions about the capability of the state to oppress organisations, groups or individuals, indeed, even to effect a complete change in mental outlook in those in its power. Both the thirteenth and the twentieth centuries saw great revivals in the use of torture; in both periods it was justified on the grounds that it was needed because of exceptional circumstances. In the thirteenth century, this meant the spread of heresy.¹ It would now be difficult to argue, as some nineteenth-century historians did, that the Templars were guilty of the accusations made against them by the regime of Philip the Fair, or that the confessions demonstrate anything more than the power of torture over the mental and physical resistance of all but the most extraordinary persons. The serving brother, Ponsard of Gizy, who appeared before the papal commission in November, 1309, asserted that all the accusations were false, but nevertheless if he were tortured again he would say whatever anyone wanted.² The direct relationship between the confessions and torture can be clearly shown by a survey of the countries in which the trial took place. Where torture was not used as in Cyprus, Aragon and England, it was not possible to obtain confessions; the contrast is especially evident in the results of the proceedings in France and England, two countries which in so many other ways retained close connections in the middle ages. Little is gained by a minute survey of the confessions in a vain search for a consistency which might indicate guilt, or an inconsistency which might show proof of individual veracity, or vice versa, for such an approach is essentially circular, while the application of torture makes such an analysis inevitably inconclusive in any case. Nor is it likely that some Templars in some regions were guilty, while in others they were not. In Cyprus, for example, the brothers' claim that they were innocent was fully supported by non-Templars, including some who might be considered to have been their political enemies. These brothers, together with their receptors and

others present, were drawn from every Templar province, and represented experience stretching back to 1267. Moreover, the evidence of these outside witnesses confirms the common sense view of Peter of Bologna that none of the Order's distinguished members would have remained in their community had any of the accusations been true.³ Thus, the priest, Stephen of Safad, maintained that he would have not have entered an Order containing such errors and if he had found out afterwards he would have promptly left.⁴ Outsiders who had lived with the Templars for many years and observed them on a daily basis in places as far apart as Aragon and Cyprus had no doubts about the brothers' beliefs and probity, while the hostile secular witnesses in England were unable to do better than repeat rumours or stories that they had heard from others.⁵ The Templar of Tyre, who was privy to the most intimate workings of the Order in Palestine, was quite unconvinced. Commenting on the execution of James of Molay, he said: 'And if Almighty God, who knows and understands hidden things, knows that he and others who were burned were innocent of those deeds of which they were accused, then they are martyrs before God; and if they received what they deserved, they have been punished – but I may truly say that, to all appearances, I knew them for good Christians and devout in their masses and in their lives.'⁶

If the evidence of the depositions is unproductive, so too is the search for material evidence of guilt, for no idols have been found, nor a secret rule, despite the detailed inventories of the king's officers and the equally diligent investigations of nineteenth-century antiquarians and historians.⁷ An examination of the charges themselves is more fruitful for, if viewed within the wider context of the heretical accusations current in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they show the guilt of the Templars to be intrinsically unlikely. The implication that the errors came from contact with the Muslims is, of course, based on false premises about Islam in the first place, so it cannot be true that over-familiarity with the Saracens was the source of, for example, idol worship. Nor are the Cathar connotations very convincing either, reflecting as they do the mindset of the inquisitors rather than that of the Templars. Moreover, as Henry Charles Lea long ago pointed out, in contrast to the Cathars, not one Templar was prepared to be martyred for the heresies which members of the Order were supposed to have guarded so fiercely for so long, yet many, including finally the grand master himself, died asserting the Order's innocence.⁸

The issue of whether or not the Temple was an Order in decline at the beginning of the fourteenth century, as opposed to being heretical, is more complex and elusive.⁹ There is no doubt that extensive

preoccupation with administration and finance represents a major threat to the spiritual dynamism of any monastic Order, and that from an early date after the foundation, the Templars were especially concerned with such matters. Strictures from the papacy from 1179 onwards reflect the Order's concern for its lands and privileges, while in the course of the thirteenth century, there are signs of a growing general hostility to the arrogant conduct of some Templars. Indeed, some brothers were not unaware of such failings: neither of the men interrogated at Cesena in November, 1310, would admit any of the errors in the articles of accusation, but both agreed that pride in their strength and in the favours and privileges they had from the Church was greater than was seemly in monks and clerics.¹⁰ All monastic Orders run the risks of success, which brings a growing volume of donations and therefore responsibility for new lands, jurisdictions and dependants, and increased membership which may dilute the quality of the original zealots. On the other hand, the very nature of a military order demanded that it have an efficient backup organisation to provide finance for equipping soldiers, maintaining and building castles, and protecting pilgrims. So high were the costs of such activities, especially when the logistics of the crusades are taken into account, that this backup organisation needed to be very large, making it necessary for the Order to contain a much higher number of noncombatant members than actual fighters at any given time.¹¹ Moreover, the inventories made by the servants of Philip the Fair in October 1307 do not suggest that these noncombatant members had fallen into the ways of luxury.

Indeed, after the loss of Acre in 1291, while the Hospitallers took Rhodes and the Teutonic Knights consolidated their hold in Prussia, the Templars tried to stick to their original mandate which, as both the Rule and the reception ceremony stressed, demanded that they strive to conquer and defend the Holy Land. In comparison, the island of Rhodes, held by the Greeks, was an easy mark. Only hindsight revealed that the Latins would never regain their position on the Palestinian mainland; the Templars were not seen by contemporaries as obsolescent, and indeed they continued to attract recruits right up to the eve of the trial.¹² Even after the suppression, in Portugal in 1319, the Order of Christ, the linear successor of the Temple, was seen by the monarchy as having an important function, for the headquarters of the new Order was established at Castro Marim in the extreme south of the kingdom, close to the Gulf of Cadiz, thus orientating its activity towards maritime warfare in the same way as the Hospitallers had done on Rhodes. If the Temple had

become a refuge for the uncommitted, Matthew Zaccaria's description of the refusal of the Templars captured on the fall of Ruad in 1302 to apostasise, even under threat of death, is difficult to comprehend, while eyewitness accounts of the fall of Acre are in complete contradiction to William of Plaisians's claim that the Holy Land was lost because of their sins.¹³

These considerations do, however, suggest that the Templars were more vulnerable than more conventional Orders. The necessary military, financial and sometimes political functions of the Templars attracted men who would have been less suited to a more contemplative and studious Order. If the Templars were to live up to the ideals of their founders, then the designated role of the Order needed to be pursued with some intensity, for there was no other substitute. While some of the practices of the Cistercians or the Franciscans in the early fourteenth century may not have met with the approval of their founders and certainly did not always follow the spirit of their respective Rules, nevertheless they still performed useful functions in society and they still provided outlets for men to whom contemplation, education and community service were of solid value.¹⁴ But the Templars needed the Holy Land. In this sense, the seeking of new military outlets by the leaders of the Hospitallers and the Teutonic Knights proved to be shrewder than perhaps even they realised.

The internal organisation of the Templars increased the inherent risks of decline, especially in the West, for in the inventories taken in 1307 and 1308 it can be seen that the Templars rarely lived in monastic communities of any size in which they could participate in the full monastic life and in which the routines of a large community could impose discipline. Many Templar houses in the West were on a small scale, with perhaps two or three brothers only, a fact which must have encouraged a merging with the social environment until it was difficult to distinguish them from their secular neighbours. Research on female communities suggests that a minimum of eight nuns was needed for a proper conventual life; there is no reason to think that male communities were any different.¹⁵ Nor is there much evidence to suggest a powerful clerical influence within the Order. It seems probable that the Temple was not in a position to attract priests of talent and ambition, for Orders like the Cistercians or the Dominicans were better able to cater for both. The aspiring priest does not seem to have viewed the Temple as a means to a promising career in the Church hierarchy; possibly the dislike of other Orders and of the secular clergy encouraged them to block promotion from the Temple, for few Templar priests seem to have become prelates of the Church.

The problems which could stem from this are shown by the one charge which was pressed with some degree of success, that some Templars were not aware of the Church's sacramental theory concerning lay absolution; even so it is clear that the majority from masters to serving brothers understood the distinction between breaches of the Order's discipline and sinful acts requiring clerical absolution. It is noticeable that this did not form part of the justification in the original order for the arrests, but it fitted well with the image of an Order obsessed by secrecy and the need to cover up illicit activities. However, in the context of the original accusations of October, 1307, it makes no sense, since if the Templars did not believe in the Christian faith they would not have felt themselves in need of a general absolution for transgressing it. Even members who had been coerced into illicit acts, who might have sought a general absolution of this kind, would hardly have been comforted to have received it from leaders so manifestly anti-Christian. This inability to think outside the parameters of the Christian religion, even when confessing to its denial, is reflected elsewhere in the depositions: Geoffrey of Gonneville's receptor swears in peril of his soul that no harm will come to him if he denies Christ, while Hugh of Pairaud orders postulants to swear allegiance to 'the enemy'.¹⁶

There is here, however, little positive proof of internal decline: the elderly Arnold Calis of the preceptory of Mas Deu who could not remember what observances had been enjoined upon him at his reception, the mysterious 'sisters' of the Order described by Ponsard of Gizy, the occasional references to desertions, and the dissolute activities of some former Templars after the suppression might hint at problems, but they are not in themselves decisive evidence of the state of the Temple in general before 1307. To set against criticisms, it can be seen that although the first confessions were obtained rapidly enough, nearly six hundred Templars retained sufficient loyalty to their Order to support a vigorous defence early in 1310, and even after the burnings of May of that year, it cannot be shown that all of them were cowed or that their morale was completely crushed, for less than a fifth of the Templars who had offered to defend the Order can definitely be proved to have retreated from the defence after the burnings.¹⁷ Moreover, any such assessment needs to be put into perspective, for other contemporary Orders had their difficulties too; in the case of the Franciscans bitter debates over poverty had provoked a profound crisis of both discipline and belief evidently far more serious than anything which can be detected in the Temple. So divisive had the issue become that the Franciscans had split into two parties, the

Conventuals and the Spirituals, in which the former accused the latter of heresy. Previous attempts by the papacy to resolve the matter had failed and at Vienne Clement V was obliged to set up two commissions, resulting in the promulgation of two important constitutions later incorporated into the book of canon law known as the *Clementiae* (officially sanctioned in 1317). Nevertheless, Franciscan matters continued to trouble the papacy under John XXII, leading to the burning of four *fraticelli* in 1318 and culminating in the pope's declaration in 1323 that the idea of apostolic poverty was heretical.¹⁸

If the accusations of heresy are unproven and the evidence for internal decline difficult to assess, then this inevitably concentrates attention upon the motivation of Philip the Fair in causing the arrest and trial of the Templars in the first place. The most immediate and obvious reason was financial, for in both its general financial position and in the specific matter of the lack of specie to return to the 'good money' of Saint Louis, the monetary problems of the government are evident. Many contemporaries did not doubt this, especially in Italy, whose citizens had already experienced Philip's taste for confiscations when, in 1291, the 'Lombards' in France had been despoiled.¹⁹ When they could speak freely the Templars thought so too. The knight, Baldwin of Cery, the most experienced Templar in Cyprus, having been received as long ago as 1267, thought he knew what lay behind the allegations. 'Those who coveted the goods of the house of the Templars were the first to spread the word about their errors and idols defaming the Order, and these words had their origin with those who wanted to have their goods.'²⁰ William of Plaisians's denial that 'cupidity' had prompted the arrests shows that the French government was well aware that such an idea needed rebuttal.²¹ Here, Philip IV's 'uncompromising moralism' played a part for, as Elizabeth Brown has shown, the teaching of theologians on the morality of taxation undoubtedly had an effect upon the consciences of some French monarchs in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, even though their officials seem to have been largely immune to such ideas.²² The tension created by the rapid escalation of financial needs on the one hand, and the boundaries on the financial rights of rulers which the theologians tried to establish on the other, only served to put further pressure on a king such as Philip IV. In such circumstances, confiscations which could be presented as having a moral basis, such as those of the Jews and the Templars, were more acceptable than what might be seen as oppression of one's subjects.

However, this does not exclude the possibility that there were other reasons for the arrests. The Templars were a military organisation

responsible not to the king directly but to the papacy, and they possessed considerable immunities within the French kingdom. Possibly a man of Philip's temper saw them as posing a threat to his concept of the Capetian kingdom. At first sight this argument looks rather thin, if the numbers, age structure and social status of the largely unarmed guardians of the scattered rural preceptories are taken into account. Despite the exposure of the weaknesses of the French army at Courtrai and despite the fact that relatively small numbers of determined men, if well armed and properly motivated, could achieve considerable military success in the thirteenth century, it stretches credibility indeed to portray the Templars in France as a direct military threat to the crown. But, more plausibly, it could be suggested that the existence of any immunity of the kind represented by the Templars was objectionable to Philip IV's lawyers, and that what was at stake was a matter of principle rather than any military threat. If, as Joseph Strayer believed, Philip IV was striving to unite the two ideas of a sacred king ruling over a holy country as a basis for the concentration of the people's loyalty upon the French monarchy,²³ then the Templars, especially if portrayed as heretics and therefore as a dire threat to this holy unity, could justifiably be suppressed. In this context, the contemporary belief that Philip, as the heir to generations of crusading kings, wanted to take over the Order directly, would make sense.²⁴ The utterances of the government during the trial certainly support Strayer's view of the regime's image of itself, but in this affair it is to be suspected that this largely represents a high-flown justification for an action with more sordid motives. The Templars' position was not after all unique in France; the Hospitallers, for instance, were equally a privileged Order responsible to the papacy. However, the Hospitallers, like others whose wealth lay predominantly in landed property, had been adversely affected by rising prices while rents remained fixed; the liquid wealth of the Templars, deeply involved in banking as well as land, was both an affront and a temptation to the monarchy.

Finally, there remains the possibility that King Philip really believed in the accusations of heresy levelled against the Templars; this would distinguish the Templars from similarly placed elements within the kingdom such as the Hospitallers. The 'Most Christian King' displayed considerable powers of self-deception – even credulity – during his reign, while neither he nor his advisers can be so completely detached from their environment that they should be seen absolutely as its manipulators. The 'threat' of the Templars need not be seen in literal terms in the sense of deploying military strength, but rather as arising from the Order's alliance

with diabolical forces undermining the Christian community which the king had sworn to protect. In this sense the confessions were absolutely necessary to the king, not so much because of any information contained in them, but because he wanted the admissions of guilt for their own sake in order both to show he had defeated the forces of evil and to validate his own power.²⁵ In 1321 the evident belief of Philip V and his advisors in a non-existent plot by lepers to poison the wells and take over the kingdom, orchestrated by the Jews and financed by the Muslims of Granada, says much about the atmosphere at the court of the late Capetians.²⁶

The trial of the Templars can be explained in terms external to the Order, rather than through any of its internal failings: the financial needs of Philip the Fair, the weakness of the papacy after the defeat of Boniface VIII, the loss of Acre and its impact upon the attitudes of western Christendom, and the chance that led Clement V to request James of Molay's presence in France during one of the recurrent financial crises of Philip IV's government. However, while these practical circumstances were of immediate relevance, the social context of the trial should not be ignored. Contemporaries believed that the devil was constantly seeking to spread corruption throughout Christian society, and, by attacking the weak points of the structure, aimed to break down its functional unity. The task of the faithful was to be ever vigilant to this threat and when these evil activities were exposed, ruthlessly to cut out the canker, lest the whole be threatened. The arguments used against the Templars during the trial both play upon and reflect these fears. At Poitiers, Plaisians warned the pope that 'the devil comes as a robber for the purpose of breaking into your house';²⁷ the anonymous jurist of 1310 justified his view that the Templars should be condemned by reference to Scripture, for he pointed out that a whole city had been brought down because many of, although not all, its inhabitants, had committed the sins of idolatry and sodomy, which had also been proved against the Templars;²⁸ while at the council of Vienne, William le Maire had seen the course of action against the Order paraphrasing Matthew 5 and 18, 'If your right eye or right limb offend you, cut them off and throw them away. For it is better that one of your limbs should be destroyed than the whole body.'²⁹ The trial cannot therefore be viewed in the conventional sense of a test of guilt or innocence, but as a medieval tragedy in which society, by creating the circumstances which enabled the government of Philip IV to act as it did, crushed the life from an Order which it had once been proud to raise up.