

# THE TRIAL OF THE TEMPLARS

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and Philip was obliged to issue letters confirming that this execution did not in any way prejudice their rights on the island.<sup>108</sup>

The heroic deaths of the two leaders quickly gave rise to a series of legends. Pope Clement died in the early hours of the morning of Saturday 20 April.<sup>107</sup> Philip the Fair died on 29 November in the same year.<sup>109</sup> It was said that Jacques de Molay had called them both to appear with him within the year before the tribunal of God.<sup>106</sup> Giovanni Villani was equally picturesque.

And the King of France and his sons had afterwards much shame and adversity, both because of this sin and of the capture of Pope Boniface. . . . And note, that the night after the said Master and his companion had been martyred, their ashes and bones were collected as sacred relics by the friars and other religious persons, and carried away to holy places.<sup>110</sup>

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## CONCLUSION

Few people, surveying the events of the twentieth 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. 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 direct relationship between the confessions and torture can be clearly shown by a survey of the countries in which the trial of the Templars took place; the contrast is especially evident in a comparison between the results of the trial 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 widespread application of torture makes any such analysis inevitably inconclusive. If the internal 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 accusations represent an attempt to play upon the deep-seated fears of contemporaries, especially concerning unexplained forces in the world around them. These fears were often focused upon an 'out-group' such as the Jews. In the case of the Templars the accusations were calculated to exploit a certain degree of residual hostility to the Order after the disasters of 1291, so that the Templars too became an 'out-group'. However, as H. C. Lea has 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,<sup>2</sup> yet many, including finally the Grand Master himself, died asserting the Order's innocence.

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. 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. All monastic Orders run the risks of success, which brings increased 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 back-up 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 back-up organisation needed to be very large, making it necessary for the Order to contain a higher number of noncombatant members than actual fighters at any given time. 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. Even the lack of flexibility of the Order after the loss of Acre in 1291 is not really a ground for condemnation, for 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 unaware of their obsolescence, and indeed they continued to attract recruits right up to the eve of the trial.<sup>3</sup>

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 functional 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.<sup>4</sup> But the Templars without the crusades were an empty Order, having no substance, no inner life, which could carry them through difficult periods and perhaps provide a foundation for a later reformation. 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 these supposed monks from their secular neighbours. The problems which stemmed from this are shown by the one charge which was pressed successfully, that some Templars were not aware of the Church's sacramental theory concerning lay absolution. The changes which had taken place in the Church's position on this issue since the first half of the twelfth century should have been made evident to the Templars by their priests, yet this does not seem to have been the case. The likely reasons for this support the belief that the spiritual life of the Temple was not as strong as that of many other Orders. 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 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.

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 de Gizy, 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 fate 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.<sup>5</sup> In any case, whatever problems may have beset the Temple, other contemporary Orders had their problems too,<sup>6</sup> problems which might have assumed a different significance to historians had any of these Orders been unlucky enough to fall foul of the regime of Philip the Fair.

If the accusations of heresy are unproven and the evidence for internal decline impossible 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 motive 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. However, while this remains the prime reason for the attack on the Templars, it does not exclude the possibility that there were other factors in 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 and age-structure of the largely unarmed guardians of the scattered rural preceptories are taken into account. Despite the exposure of the fragility 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 Professor J. R. Strayer believes, 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,<sup>7</sup> then the Templars, especially if portrayed as heretics and therefore as a dire threat to this holy unity, could justifiably be suppressed. The utterances of the government during the trial certainly support Professor 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 Hospitaliers, for instance, were equally a privileged Order responsible to the papacy. Perhaps it is enough to say that the Templars were particularly obnoxious to Philip the Fair as a wealthy, exempt and predominantly aristocratic enclave in a country whose king had made considerable progress towards subduing the pretensions of the

feudal nobility. Whereas the Hospitaliers, 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 Philip and his government really believed in the accusations of heresy that they levelled against the Templars; this would distinguish the Templars from similarly placed elements within the kingdom such as the Hospitaliers. Despite the propaganda element in the charges this cannot be ruled out completely. The 'most Christian king' displayed considerable powers of self-deception 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 trial of the Templars can be explained in terms of factors 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 Jacques de 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';<sup>8</sup> 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;<sup>9</sup> while at the Council of Vienne, Guillaume Le Maire had seen the course of action against the Order in 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.'<sup>10</sup> 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.