

**The Templar Temptation:
The Knights Templar - Yesterday and Today**

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They came from the West to the Middle East, imposing themselves on the native population, and fending off insurgent attacks that were to last for generations. They were feared by many, hated by some, and lionized by others. No, I'm not speaking here of the U.S. and British forces in Iraq, but of the 12th century warrior-monks, the Order of Poor Knights of the Temple of Solomon, best known as the Knights Templar.

Now, at a time when the West is once again waging a war in the Middle East, a new fascination with the Templars has been growing. At first glance this fascination would seem to be all out of proportion to the actual track record of the order, which could be considered equal parts failure and success. But verifiable history has never been the focus of the Templar phenomenon. As long ago as the early 1700s the Order had already passed into the same realm of heroic myth as inhabited by King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Everyone loves a good heroic yarn, and the Templar myth has become one of the best.

While many readers may have first heard of the Knights Templar through references to them in Dan Brown's runaway best-seller, *The Da Vinci Code*, a revived interest in the Templars has been percolating in the collective unconscious for over forty years. In the 1960s, French authors such as Louis Charpentier and Gerald de Sede, building upon earlier installments of the myth, such as those of the 19th century occultist Eliphas Lévi, tied the Templars to the lost Ark of the Covenant, to alchemy, and to the construction of the gothic cathedrals.

By 1972, Henry Lincoln was authoring documentaries for British television on Templar-related topics such as "The Lost Treasure of Jerusalem." The Templars, along with every other secret society under the sun, made an appearance in Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson's popular *Illuminatus* Trilogy, circa 1974, while 1981 saw the publication of Peter Partner's *The Murdered Magicians: The Templars and their Myth*, an accessible history book that remains one of the better treatments of the order.

The following year, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln appeared, linking the Templars to the Holy Grail and the largely mythical Priory of Sion.¹ A further book by Baigent and Leigh, *The Temple and the Lodge*, and John J. Robinson's *Born in Blood* came out in 1989, both books alleging that some Templars

escaped their suppression and may have been a key factor in the rise of Freemasonry. Bit by bit, and book by book, the myth has grown until now alternative history books about the Knights Templar practically constitute a burgeoning publishing genre all by themselves. Meanwhile, as this is being written, there are two mystery novels involving the Templars in the Top Ten of the New York Times fiction bestseller list.

Clearly, the Knights Templar are the men of the hour, but before we discuss the significance of the Templar revival, we should briefly review what is most agreed upon by historians about the Knights.

Who Were the Templars?

The Knights Templar were first formed in Jerusalem in 1119 or so, in the wake of the First Crusade. A French noble, Hugh de Payens, had come to the Christian-held city along with somewhere between 9 to 30 men (accounts vary). The order's ostensible purpose was to help guarantee the safety of European pilgrims making their way to the Holy Land, particularly along the dangerous road from the seaport of Jaffa to the inland Jerusalem. Baldwin II, the King of Jerusalem offered quarters to the knights on Temple Mount near the spot traditionally ascribed to the Temple of Solomon.

The concept of a monastic order of warrior-monks was something new and by 1128 seemed to require a more formal "rule" to bring it in line with other monastic orders. This rule was provided by Bernard of Clairvaux, founder of the Cistercian order. Under the rule, Templar knights took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and committed themselves to a regular office of prayers and devotions. And perhaps most significantly, the order was recognized as an autonomous religious body answering only to the Pope.

Over time, as the Knights Templar attracted support and donations, they increased in wealth and property, an ironic situation for men who had taken vows of poverty.

The status of the various Crusader colonies was always touch and go, and by 1187 the Franks had been driven from Jerusalem by Saladin. With the fall of Acre in 1291, the Templars retreated to Cyprus and thence to their preceptories across Europe. Relieved of their task of protecting pilgrims and defending Crusader states, the Templars had already taken up the role of international bankers, lending money to Kings and protecting royal treasuries, collecting Papal taxes and disbursing funds for the Crusades, and enabling the movement of funds through letters of payment.

However, power and wealth bring with them the temptations of corruption, as well as envious accusations from others. The Knights Templar ran afoul of the French King Philip the Fair, who pressured his captive Avignon pope, Clement V, to unleash the Inquisition upon the order

in 1307, extract confessions through torture, and make the knights stand trial.

The Templars were accused of heresy, sodomy, desecration of the cross, and idolatrous worship of a head mysteriously named Baphomet, among other things. Just how many of these accusations had any basis in reality remains unclear as torture usually results in the torturers receiving the answers that they want to hear.

Indeed, the final Templar Grand Master, Jacque DeMolay, initially confessed to certain crimes, but later recanted his confession. This led to the culmination of the war upon the Knights Templar: DeMolay's burning at the stake in Paris in 1314.

Dazzling Possibilities

Most reputable historians would agree on the basic facts of the preceding summary. And even were we to leave it at that, the order's rise and fall still constitute a colorful chapter in Medieval history. However, the present fascination with the Templars derives not so much from such verifiable history as from the beguiling realm of legend and conjecture.

Did the Templars find a treasure through excavating beneath the Temple site in Jerusalem? If so, what became of it? Were any of the Inquisition's accusations about heresy and blasphemy true? If so, does this imply that the Templars had a secret doctrine, perhaps linking them to Gnostic sects or Ismaili secret societies? Was there some direct link between the Templars and Freemasonry? If so, does that shed light upon the rise of "speculative" (philosophical) Freemasonry in the 1600s in the British isles?

Most academic scholars wouldn't even ask these questions in the first place, because there is no concrete evidence pointing in their direction. From the perspective of traditional scholarship, the questions are non sequiturs conjured out of thin air. One might as well be asking whether there was really a monster under your bed when you were a child. It was the premise of the film *Monsters, Inc.* that there really were such monsters - in fact, a whole organized strata of them. But *Monsters, Inc.* was an animated feature, not a documentary - a significant distinction.

Of course one could argue that, in terms of the Templar *myth*, the verifiable facts are beside the point. A myth embodies an archetypal story from which people derive pleasure and inspiration. In this sense, the alternative historians and esoteric interpreters are more like storytellers around the campfire embellishing an age-old legend of bravery, hubris, martyrdom, and redemption.

That said, I believe it can still be interesting to consider the different elements of the Templar myth and to tease out what makes them so meaningful in our present time. If the Templars are back in vogue, there must be a reason. Let us see what that might be.

The Myth as Mystery

The Templar Myth in its present form goes something like this: While stationed in Jerusalem on Temple Mount, the Knights excavated beneath the former site of King Solomon's Temple and found something wondrous and invaluable. Perhaps the legendary lost Ark of the Covenant, perhaps the Holy Grail, perhaps some portion of Solomon's riches, or some cache of secret scriptures or teachings. While in the Holy Land they also made contact with, and imbibed secret wisdom from, local non-Christian sources: maybe Sufis or Ismaili "Assassins" or Johannite followers of John the Baptist, or perhaps the secretive Druze. Or, then again, perhaps Gnostic upholders of the Divine Feminine. When forced to leave the region, they brought their treasure and their heretical doctrines with them back to Europe.

The Order, having amassed immense wealth, in part from aristocratic members and patrons and in part from its resident alchemists, played a crucial roll in the sudden spurt of gothic cathedral building. In this they may have been assisted by masons brought back from the Middle East. When the Order was suppressed by King Philip and Pope Clement V, some Templars escaped to Scotland which was then ruled by Robert the Bruce who had been excommunicated by the Pope. They assisted him at the battle of Bannockburn in 1314, and then took cover under the guise of Freemasons.

Certain versions of the myth have the Templar fleet sailing to the New World a hundred years prior to Columbus, with William Sinclair giving clues to this through the sculpted décor at Rosslyn Chapel near Edinburgh. Another version has the Templar fleet transforming themselves into pirates plaguing the Mediterranean - quite a switch for an order of monks under vows.

But in any event, most versions of the myth culminate in the Freemasons being the successors to the Templars, which helps explain the Masons' fixation on Solomon's Temple (and even treasures buried beneath it) within their degree rituals.

It is possible to pick apart each and every component of this myth - something that Robert L.D. Cooper, Librarian and Curator of the Grand Lodge of Scotland has done at great length.ⁱⁱ But, for our purposes, we will view them as elements of a myth that has evolved and expanded over the course of the last three hundred years, with a particular spurt of growth over recent decades.

Crusading We Will Go

It is important to keep in mind that the Knights Templar's original reason for being, and the focus of their most celebrated years, was their participation in the Crusades and the occupation of the Holy Land by European Christians. While it is possible to view the Crusades as a

pious and moral enterprise triggered by oppression that Christians in the Levant were experiencing under Muslim rule, there is no question that the Crusades were experienced by the majority of local residents as a geopolitical incursion and expansion of European power. Certainly the final eviction of the Crusaders from the Holy Land (circa 1291) was seen by Europe as a traumatic shrinkage of its sphere of influence.

Hence, the root symbolism of the Templars, beneath all the later accretions and accusations, is that of a self-righteous European proto-Imperialism knocking heads with a rival Muslim empire (or series of empires). But as tidy as it might be to see the current popularity of the Templars as a result of an unconscious wish to re-fight the Crusades all over again, I don't think that this is what is at work here. After all, most of the Templar fascination has much more to do with treasure hunting or concealed heretical and esoteric doctrines than it does with actual battles in the Holy Land. For many Templar buffs, the things most interesting are those that are most tangential to the Templars as actual fighting knights: the Templars beneath the earth (whether excavating a treasure beneath Temple Mount or concealing one beneath Rosslyn Chapel), the Templars at sea (whether sailing to the New World or taking up piracy), the Templars as powerful bankers, and the Templars as heretics (be they secret Gnostics or covert magicians). Perhaps the Templars have become so popular, it would seem, because as their myth has evolved, it has drawn together the threads of numerous hidden and esoteric traditions into a rich tapestry of romance and betrayal.

Templars & Masons

The evolution of the Templar myth is intertwined with the evolution of the Freemasonic myth, a circumstance that has provided researchers with a double opportunity for speculation. At first glance, the gap of four centuries between the Templars' demise in 1314 and the rise of the first Masonic Grand Lodge in London in 1717 would seem to make any connection between the two organizations highly unlikely. And, in fact, there is no historical evidence linking the two groups. The Templars did employ stonemasons of course in building their preceptories and churches, but so did other monastic orders and Church bodies.

To complicate matters even more, any actual linkage between the medieval stonemasons and the "speculative" Freemasons of 1717 and later is tenuous at best. The new breed of symbolic Masons crafted rituals, lectures, and legends in the 18th century that implied an unbroken tradition of Freemasonry dating all the way back to King Solomon, (in fact even earlier to Adam himself!) But, as the saying goes, wishing don't make it so.

Nevertheless, it didn't take certain Masons very long before they added the Knights Templar to the Masonic family

tree. When speculative Freemasonry spread from the British Isles to the Continent in the decades after 1717, the French and German Masons set about improving upon the three basic "blue lodge" degrees of Masonry by inventing all sorts of ever grander "high degrees," including a Knight Templar degree.

Soon, orders conferring such degrees, such as the Rite of Strict Observance in Germany, were claiming the Templars had survived their abolishment by (pick one) either secreting themselves within Scottish masons' lodges or changing their name (to the Knights Elu, in one case) and later amalgamating themselves with continental Masons.

Exactly why, one might ask, would some Masons wish to claim descent from the Templars if it were not actually so? Why link themselves to a disgraced and controversial chivalric order when it would have been both wiser and safer to never raise the issue in the first place? It is from this genuine puzzle that all the speculation on a Templar-Masonic link has arisen.

Yet, interestingly enough, by the end of the 1700s, Masonic claims of Templar origins had largely subsided and the Masonic Templar orders that consolidated themselves for long-term survival (largely in the British Isles and North America) simply saw themselves as latter-day pious knights with hardly a whiff of heresy or revenge in the air.

The Neo-Templar Revival

However, claims of a Templar continuity didn't die with the subsiding of Masonic pretensions. Such claims simply shifted to wider circles, the best known being an Order of the Temple led by the notorious French esotericist, Bernard Raymond Fabré-Palaprat, circa 1804, whose bona fides were supported by a curious parchment document known as the Larmenius Charter, supposedly dating from 1324, but apparently fabricated by a doctor named Ledru. As Peter Partner describes the Charter:

The document contains a long and . . . fictitious list of the subsequent Grand Masters of the Order, different from the equivalent list of "Scottish" Grand Masters which had been fabricated formerly by the German Strict Observance Templars. [The forger] Ledru's Grand Masters obligingly left their autograph signatures on the document, which is an obvious forgery. Its language is that of eighteenth-century Masonry and not that of the Middle Ages; [. . .] Everything in the list of the supposed "Grand Masters" is garbled, even to the names and titles of the early eighteenth-century Grand Masters who were Bourbon princes. How such poor stuff managed to persuade noblemen whose family hobby was genealogy is very mysterious, but persuade them it did, perhaps because vanity makes men blind.ⁱⁱⁱ

Conveniently, the last signature on the Charter was that of Fabr -Palaprat! Were the Charter genuine it would have put the lie to claims of Templar survival via Scotland, as the Charter had DeMolay's supposed successor, John-Mark Larmenius, conveniently anathematizing the "Scottish Templars," thus tossing them out of the succession.^{iv} Alas, serious analysis of the Larmenius Charter found it to be a forgery, a conclusion that the descendents of Fabr -Palaprat's neo-Templars have chosen to simply ignore.

The 19th and 20th century saw scores of Neo-Templar orders founded and laid to rest. One of the most audacious was the Order of Oriental Templars (O.T.O.) established as early as 1906 but no later than 1912 in Germany by Theodor Reuss, a reputed police spy and fringe Mason.

According to Reuss and his more famous compatriot, Aleister Crowley, the O.T.O. was the repository of the wisdom and knowledge of no less than 20 bodies, including the Gnostic Catholic Church, the Order of the Illuminati, the Order of the Temple (Knights Templar), the Order of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, the Hidden Church of the Holy Grail, the Rosicrucian Order, the Order of the Holy Royal Arch of Enoch, the Rite of Memphis (97 degrees), the Rite of Mizraim (90 degrees), the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite (33 degrees), the Order of Martinists, the Hermetic Brotherhood of Light, among others.^v

In contrast to other Neo-Templars who cast the Knights as slandered Martyrs, the O.T.O. embraced the accusations against the historical Templars, avowing that the celebrated secret of their heretical ancestors (indeed, of all esotericism) was that of a quasi-Tantric sex magic. This beat out all other Templar claimants for sheer audacity, but it is worth noting that none of the other Neo-Templar orders founded either before or after Reuss's O.T.O. made any such claim. But perhaps they just weren't invited to the right parties.

The O.T.O. was but one of several Neo-Templar orders trawling for members in Germany at the time. Jorg Lanz von Liebenfels' Order of the New Templars added a racist/Aryan twist to the trend. According to historian Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Lanz described his O.N.T. as "an Aryan mutual-aid association founded to foster racial consciousness through genealogical and heraldic research, beauty contests, and the foundation of racist utopias in the underdeveloped parts of the world."^{vi} While Lanz's order probably never achieved more than 300 members, as Goodrick-Clarke notes, it was symptomatic of impulses bubbling beneath the German cultural surface that ultimately burst forth as the Nazi movement.

This is not to say that all Neo-Templar impulses were inherently reactionary - a perspective put forth by Umberto Eco in his novel, *Foucault's Pendulum* - but it is important to understand that the Templar myth is capable of sustaining both a leftist and rightist spin. For every New Age feminist arguing that the Templars were champions of the Divine

Feminine in their stated devotion to "Our Lady," one can find a Neo-Templar heralding the order as a spiritual fighting legion battling the forces of Darkness.

This latter impulse may have received its most dramatic expression in the tragic fate of the Neo-Templar group known as the Solar Temple in October 1994, when the bodies of a total of 53 people linked to the group were found in the cellar of a farmhouse in Cheiry, Switzerland and soon after in a Temple-related house in Canada. This mass "suicide," which included both people shot in the head and young children, was justified in documents the order sent to the media immediately prior to their deaths as a "transit to the future."

Seeing humanity as having rejected the transition from the Age of Pisces to Aquarius, and declaring that "All positive creative forces are strangled," the Solar Temple members insisted: "Having always belonged to the Kingdom of the Spirit, being incarnated without breaking the subtle tie that unites the Creature to the Creator, we return to our Abode."^{vii}

The archetype of the Knights Templar as holy martyrs thus found its most distressing echo some 680 years after Jacque DeMolay was burnt at the stake. It is doubtful that the deaths of either the Templars in DeMolay's day or those of the Solar Temple in our own era were really justified. But when one is dealing with romantic myths, especially those involving "warriors" or martyrs, common sense is sometimes in short supply. One only has to consider those contemporary self-declared "martyrs" in the Middle East, the suicide-bombers, to realize that it is all too easy to commit injustice in the name of justice.

Templarism Today

In recent decades Neo-Templar groups have proliferated like rabbits, with schisms and splits leading to ever more grouplets, with most of them claiming in some fashion to be the real inheritors of the Knights Templar. Objectively speaking, no present order can substantiate claims of direct descent from the original Templar order and the endless squabbles over legitimacy that some groups engage in are clearly a waste of time and energy.

Yet, despite such petty disputes, ever more men and women are attracted to the image of the noble Christian knights and, in joining one Neo-Templar order or another, hope to emulate the Templar myth. The mission statement of one of the latter-day orders expresses their hope: "To draw upon the great knowledge, wisdom, faith and strong charitable and ethical values embodied within the Order, to guide and protect humanity on the pilgrimage to the future."^{viii}

These are admirable sentiments, but in closing it must be asked whether a revival of the Templars at this time is really in everyone's best interests or not. When American

president George W. Bush made his famous ill-considered statement likening his declared "War on Terror" to a "Crusade," it only fanned the flames of resistance in the Islamic world.

Author Gaetan Delaforge, in his 1987 book *The Templar Tradition in the Age of Aquarius*, suggested that one task of the Templars might be to facilitate a better understanding between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. But in the post-9/11 world, with Muslim militants sensitized to any incursion by Western powers into Islamic cultures, it is hard to imagine that tromping around in a white Crusader's tunic with a red cross emblazoned upon it would gain anyone a fair hearing.

The archetype of the warrior-monk or soldier of God is a potent one, but it is all too easy for it to simply mirror the jihadis' militance back at them, with shadow warriors on both sides brandishing swords at each other. We already have such a closed loop of hostility at work between the Israelis and Palestinians, and it would be foolish for any present day Neo-Templars to think things could be made any better by injecting Christian "knights" into the center of things.

Nevertheless, as attractive as being dubbed a knight may be to some, most fans of the Templar myth are content to experience the order within the pages of speculative books offering sensational revelations. There's little harm in this as long as one doesn't confuse myth with verifiable history. Like their mythic cousins, the Knights of the Round Table and the Grail Knights, the Templars retain the power to inspire us across centuries, and that perhaps is the real Templar Treasure. [END]

Appendix:

This is a small sampling of some of the many Neo-Templar orders. Many of them have convoluted and confusing relations with each other that nearly defy comprehension. A listing here does not imply endorsement, nor does placement in the list imply relative ranking in relation to other groups both listed and not.

Ordo Supremus Militaris Templi Hierosolymitani (OSMTH) who claim the Larmenius Charter to be genuine and trace their lineage through it. (www.ordotempli.org)

Ordo Militiae Templi, founded in 1979 by Count Marcello Alberto Cristofani della Magione and headquartered near Siena, Italy (www.ordo-militiae-templi.org)

Sovereign Military Order Temple Jerusalem, Scottish Knights Templar (IFA-SMOTJ, SKT) Claims to be "the ONLY Non Masonic Knight Templar Order the only true inheritor of the true and historical original Templar Order in the World."
(www.geocities.com/Athens/Column/5833/)

International Order of Gnostic Templars - Recently founded "division" of the Scottish Knight Templars, headed by New

Age entrepreneur and alternative history author, Mark Amaru Pinkham. (www.gnostictemplars.org)

The Prince Henry St Clair Preceptory & Commandary, of Scottish Knight Templars – Led by Grand Prior Ian Sinclair, the order is headquartered in a former lighthouse at Caithness, Scotland. (www.princehenrystclair.org)

ⁱ See: Robert Richardson, “The Priory of Sion Hoax,” *Gnosis Magazine* No. 51, Spring 1999, pp. 49-55. (www.gnosismagazine.com)

ⁱⁱ See his paper “The Knights Templar in Scotland: the Creation of a Myth,” in Robert L.D. Cooper, *Freemasons, Templars & Gardeners*, (2005), published by the Australian and New Zealand Masonic Research Council, P.O. Box 332, Williamstown, Victoria 3016, Australia.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Partner, *The Murdered Magicians: The Templars and their Myth* (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: The Aquarian Press, 1985), p. 135-6.

^{iv} Partner, p. 135.

^v Ellic Howe and Helmut Möller, “Theodor Reuss: Irregular Freemasonry in Germany, 1900-23,” in *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, vol. 91, (London: QCCC, 1978), p. 39.

^{vi} Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: The Aquarian Press, 1985), p. 109.

^{vii} All quotes are from “The Solar Temple Dossier,” *Gnosis Magazine* No. 34, Winter 1995, pp. 87-96.

^{viii} See: “About the Order,” at <http://www.austemplar.org/>, website of the Sovereign Military Order of the Temple of Jerusalem, the Knights Templar of Australia.