

## **A Brief Mediation upon the Fall of the Knight Templars**

By Lord Sir Paul de Marseilles

The myth or superstition of Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> as an unlucky day has numerous potential explanations. Some believe that the superstition originates from Norse mythology (the feast of the Norse Gods with Loki being the 13<sup>th</sup> guest who caused the death of Balder the Good) while others point to Christian mythology (the great flood of Noah allegedly occurred on a Friday). What cannot be reasonably debated is that Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> has a special significance for those who study the history of the Military Orders since it is a date tied to the destruction of one of the most powerful crusading orders ever seen in Europe.

### **The Rise and Fall of The Knights Templar**

Hugh de Payns, a French Knight and a veteran of the First Crusades (1095-1099), together with Godfrey de Saint-Omer and several other Knights, swore allegiance to the Patriarch of Jerusalem and promised to protect Christian pilgrims traveling throughout the Holy Land in 1119 or 1120. They took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. King Baldwin II of Jerusalem gave these knights a headquarters which was located near the Dome of the Rock, allegedly the site of the Temple of Solomon. This small group formed the nucleus of what would later become known as the Knights Templar. The Templars were officially and formally organized into a Military Order, an order dedicated to both a religious and military life, at the Council of Troyes in January of 1129. The explosive growth of the Order was, in no small part, fueled by the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the prominent Church theologians of his day, in the 1130s. These writings included *De laude novae militiae* or "In Praise of the New Knighthood" which portrayed the Templars as spiritual warriors dedicated to the eradication of evil. Between 1139 and 1145, the Pope issued three bulls (*Omne datum optimum* on March 29, 1139, *Milites Templi* on January 9, 1144, and *Militia Dei* on April 7, 1145) which granted the new Order a wide variety of special privileges including making the Templars answerable only to the Pope, exempting the Order from secular taxation and tithes, and permitting the Order the spoils of plunder from war. For Knights who had been trained for battle since childhood, admission into the Order was an attractive proposition. These privileges would later cause considerable disagreements and animosity among the Kings and Princes of Europe.

The Templars became one of the most powerful and wealthy of the Military Orders with outposts throughout the Near East, the Middle East, and Europe. They protected pilgrims and fought to defend the Latin Kingdoms in the Holy Land. They also invented several ingenious banking practices and became one of the first international banking institutions. After the fall of the city of Acre and the last Christian outposts in 1293, the Templars came under increasing criticism over their inability to keep the Latin Kingdoms intact in the Holy Land and there were

calls for the abolishment of the Order or its unification with other Military Orders such as the Knights Hospitaller.

### **The Arrest of the Templars**

King Phillip IV (also known as Phillip the Fair) became the King of France in 1285. The French Kings had utilized Templars as the treasurers at Paris to oversee the Kingdom accounts. At the time of his reign, the treasury of France was heavily burdened with debt from its wars with England, Flanders, and Aragon. King Phillip and his family owed money to the Templars from prior loans. King Phillip also lived beyond his means. He collected taxes on the French clergy (amounting to as much as 1/10 of their income) twenty-four times in 1285 to 1314. He engaged in “forced loans” from merchants and local communities in 1294-1297. In July of 1306, he ordered the confiscation of the monies and property of those of the Jewish faith within his Kingdom and had them expelled from France. He imprisoned and seized the property of Italian bankers from various Italian city-states (the “Lombards”) in 1291 and continued to seize their properties throughout the 1290s. He had them arrested and legally erased his debts to them in 1311. The Templars, as bankers, had considerable liquid assets and wealth in negotiable assets such as land throughout France. They were an attractive target.

On Friday, October 13, 1307, King Philip IV of France issued an order to arrest all Templars on several charges, including, among other things, the charge of heresy. If that charge were proven, the Templar properties in France could go to the Crown and thus to King Phillip. The Templars in France were arrested, interrogated and tortured. During their imprisonment, King Phillip enjoyed the use of the confiscated properties. Many Templars would remain imprisoned for years while others simply disappeared from prison rolls never to be seen again. Fifty-four Templars who allegedly confessed and then subsequently proclaimed that they were innocent of the charges were burned at the stake in a field outside of Paris as relapsed heretics on May 12, 1310. Although documentary evidence is scarce, it appears that other Templars met similar fates in various locations in France during the same year. The trial of the Templars in France arguably didn't seek to discover the truth but to prove the charges of heresy.

Pope Clement V, who resided in France, bent to King Phillip's wishes and allowed the prosecution to proceed both in France and in other countries. In those Kingdoms and Countries where torture was not allowed as a state policy such as Germany, England, Ireland, Scotland, Cyprus, and Portugal as well as in the Spanish Kingdoms of Castile-Leon and Aragon, the Templars were generally found to be innocent. In any event, Pope Clement ultimately issued the order (a bull called “*Vox in Excelso*”) which formally dissolved the Templars on March 22, 1312 because the reputation of the Order had sustained so much damage in Europe. In an ironic turn of fate, the “Chinon Parchment” was recently discovered in the Vatican Archives.

This document had never been published before and had been lost for more than 600 hundred years. It demonstrated that the Templars were absolved of the charges of heresy in 1308. Heresy or “relapsed heresy” was the very crime for which many of the Templars had been tortured and burned at the stake.

On March 18, 1314, Jacques de Molay, the Grand Master of the Templars, and Geoffroi de Charney, the Preceptor of Normandy, were burned at the stake on a small island in the River Seine near Paris, France. Legend has it that de Molay called out, in his dying moments, for both King Phillip and Pope Clement to join him within a year and a day to answer to God for what they had done. History reveals that Pope Clement died by illness on April 20, 1314. King Phillip the Fair died in a hunting accident on November 29, 1314.

While the destruction of the Templars did manage to erase King Phillip’s debts to the Order, it achieved little more to ease his financial situation. In yet another ironic turn of fate, Pope Clement issued the bull *Ad providam* on May 2, 1312 which gave the properties of the Templars to the Knights Hospitaller, with the exception of their properties in Spain, thus denying King Phillip of the prizes he sought.

The fall of the Knights Templar is the stuff of legend. There are those who, even to this day, believe that hidden treasures of the Templars were secreted away prior to their arrest and persecution and await discovery. There are others who believe that the origin of the superstition about Friday the 13th comes from the order issued by King Phillip to arrest the Templars on Friday, October 13, 1307. Whatever the case, history provides that one of the most powerful Military Orders ever to exist in Europe was destroyed by a King who sought its wealth and failed to obtain it.

**Sources:** Malcolm Barber, *The New Knighthood: A History of the Order of the Temple* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); Malcolm Barber, *The Trial of the Templars* (Cambridge University Press, 1978); Helen Nicholson, *The Knights Templar, A New History* (Sutton Publishing, 2002); Piers Paul Read, *The Templars, The Dramatic History of the Knights Templar, The Most Powerful Military Order of the Crusades* (Da Capo Press, 1999); on line archives of the *Daily Telegraph* Newspaper (October 5, 2007 edition), the *New York Times* Newspaper (October 13, 2007 edition) and the *BBC News* (the October 15, 2007 edition).