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Aaron Wozniak  
*Clackamas High School*

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THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR: THE COURSE OF GOD AND GOLD

Aaron Wozniak

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Upon its formation in 1119 C.E., the Knights Templar was celebrated by both the Catholic Church and Christians throughout Europe for exemplifying the qualities of piety, selflessness, and faith. This makes the order's systematic removal in 1312 all the more surprising, as it was terminated based on accusations of heresy. Beneath the shroud of public arrests lies evidence that the motives for dissolution of the Templars were more political rather than religious. Examining the political, religious, and economic operations of the Templars clearly illustrates that changes in Templar activity strayed far enough from their original purpose to provide royals with the opportunity to exploit the order's financial assets, destroying it in the process.

The roots of the Templars lead back to Pope Urban II's call for Christians to embark on a holy war to take back Jerusalem from Muslim control. His address in November, 1095 C.E. was an attempt to unify the fragmented Christian world after the Great Schism and stabilize his position at the head of the Catholic Church. Urban's message described the campaign as a path to religious cleansing, with participating in violence in the service of God as a perfectly legitimate path for salvation.<sup>1</sup> The speech had a resounding effect on Christians throughout Europe and the Middle East, and instigated the first of many crusades in which soldiers and pilgrims traveled to Jerusalem to combat the Muslims who had maintained control of the city for approximately 450 years. Furthermore, it provided incentive in the form of cleansing one's sins

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<sup>1</sup> "Urban II, Pope." in *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*, ed. André Vauchez (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2005), <http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780227679319.001.0001/acref-9780227679319-e-2922?rkey=f3yIuF&result=1>.

through fighting and dying in battle against religious pagans. The radical ideal of religiously ordained violence provided a powerful unification between religious and militaristic disciplines.

Urban's holy orders were fully realized in the First Crusade in which a force of roughly 100,000 soldiers flocked to Jerusalem to engage the Muslims. His endeavor was eventually successful, and around 1099 the army captured the city, establishing several crusader territories to control Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. As a result, many Christians set out on religious pilgrimages to visit the holy city. These travelers faced a strenuous and dangerous journey as they traveled throughout several independent kingdoms in Europe, and provided easy targets for robbers.

To resolve the ensuing problem, a crusader, Hugh de Payens of France, proposed to King Baldwin II of Jerusalem the idea of a knight order solely in the service of God, with the purpose of protecting the faithful on their journeys. It is recorded that after Hugh de Payens, along with eight other knights, took a holy vow to protect pilgrims as they traveled to Jerusalem, Baldwin gave them the Temple of Solomon to serve as their headquarters.<sup>2</sup> After obtaining the king's official permission, Hugh de Payens established his order within a religiously significant structure in the city at the center of the Christians' focus. Here, the Templars were effectively positioned to uphold their service to the pilgrims, while also spreading the word of their mission back to Europe through returning travelers.

Despite the initial advantages of a headquarters in Jerusalem and the official approval of the King, the Knights Templar, formally titled "The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the

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<sup>2</sup> "Templars, (or Knights Templar)." in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. E. A. Livingstone (3rd Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), <http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780199659623.001.0001/acref-9780199659623>.

Temple of Solomon,” did not find notable success in their mission until they received acclaim from the Catholic Church itself. To obtain acknowledgement from the Church and Christians, the Templars relied on religious connections to the order’s leaders for political growth. Their practices were therefore directly praised by members of the Church as seen in St. Bernard’s writing “In Praise of the New Knighthood” published in the early 12th century. St. Bernard of Clairvaux was an abbot and friend of Hugh de Payens who wrote the piece to commemorate the order’s nobility and contrast it with other or “worldly” knights. The crusader mentality of repentance in warfare is reflected in his line, “Rejoice, brave athlete, if you live and conquer in the Lord; but glory and exult even more if you die and join your Lord. Life indeed is a fruitful thing and victory is glorious, but holy death is more important than either.”<sup>3</sup> This section highlights how Urban’s message of redemption continued to provide a source of hope and a decisive mission for Christian military forces, including the Knights Templar. The concept remained a cornerstone for sustaining and justifying the extended conflicts of the crusades while also contributing to the revered image of a soldier in the service of God.

Bernard firmly elevates the position of the Templars above those of normal knights in later chapters. In section four, “On The Life Style of the Knights of the Temple,” he clearly contrasts the practices of how the Templars apparently behaved with those of an average soldier. He depicts them as “... [The Templars] shun every excess in clothing and food and content themselves with what is necessary. They live as brothers in joyful and sober company, without wives or children... They foreswear dice and chess, and abhor the chase...”<sup>4</sup> Regardless if all

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, trans. Conrad Greenia (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, 5.

members of the order followed these guidelines, the image of steadfast, devoted, and most of all, pious warriors likely contributed to the success of the Templars through generating trust among the pilgrims they served. This representation is further reinforced in the lines “When the battle is at hand, they arm themselves interiorly with faith and exteriorly with steel rather than decorate themselves with gold, since their business is to strike fear in the enemy rather than to incite his cupidity.”<sup>5</sup> Bernard utilizes the order’s humble existence as a sign of their purity in this statement. The Templars’ relative poverty was not only emphasized in their official title, but also in their seal, which illustrates two knights on the back of a single horse<sup>6</sup>. In stressing their poor condition, the Templars fostered trust among pilgrims, leading to immense quantities of donations throughout Europe and volunteers of multiple social classes.

Through the approval of church officials, and eventually the Pope himself, the Templars swelled in influence and members. However, rather than increasing their military power, the Templars evolved into a highly developed financial institution by the 1200s, with a strong focus on banking and taxation. Through the central location of their headquarters in Jerusalem, the Templars used their military presence to obtain control of key territories and travel routes in the newly founded Crusader Kingdoms during the 12th century. The Templars, along with many other military orders, established networks of toll roads and charged fees for the upkeep and

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Andrew Archer and Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, *The Crusades: The Story of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1894), 176, [https://books.google.com/books?id=K70hAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=K70hAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false).

protection of their respective areas around Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> Although they may have originally protected travelers as a duty rather than an enterprise, some scholars believe that many crusader organizations, including the Templars, sought to make profits off the pilgrims in the Holy Lands. So long as the crusaders maintained a hold upon Jerusalem, money would pour in from across all of Europe, as “The major international shrines attracted pilgrims from all walks of life and had no apparent need to develop a specialized clientele.”<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the righteous image of the Templars made pilgrims much more inclined to give money to the order. Prior to the order’s creation, the Catholic Church attempted to decrease the exploitation of pilgrims through designating three specific uses for religious donations: maintaining the church, supporting religious communities, and providing accommodations to pilgrims. However, the policy did not specify the appropriate proportion of money that should be assigned to each activity.<sup>9</sup> With their positive image and optimal location, the Templars easily obtained more financial resources through tolls and donations and swelled their financial institutions. Additionally, while their monetary activities remained in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, these developments had the added protection by being virtually untouchable by external monarchs. Later, the accumulated funds allowed the establishment of the first major

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<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Kantor et al. “Crusaders in the Holy Land. Tourism in Judea and Samaria,” 7, no. 2 (2014): 47, [https://search.library.pdx.edu/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN\\_gale\\_ofa399109504&context=PC&vid=PSU&search\\_scope=all&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://search.library.pdx.edu/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_gale_ofa399109504&context=PC&vid=PSU&search_scope=all&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Kantor et al., “Crusaders in the Holy Land. Tourism in Judea and Samaria,” 63.

<sup>9</sup> Adrian R. Bell et al., “The Medieval Pilgrimage Business,” *Enterprise and Society* 12, no. 3 (2011): 616, [https://search.library.pdx.edu/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN\\_oxford10.1093/es/khr014&context=PC&vid=PSU&search\\_scope=all&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://search.library.pdx.edu/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_oxford10.1093/es/khr014&context=PC&vid=PSU&search_scope=all&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

international banking system that ensured pilgrims would have access to their finances even while traveling extensive distances and across borders. These banks solidified the financial influence of the Templars even after Muslims regained control of Jerusalem 1187, while still operating within the constraints of the Church.

Eventually the Templar's banking system gained enough importance to regularly deal with royal finances. The Templar bank's financial records illustrate their highly developed system for cataloging various transactions. Written in 1281, the document regarding a loan to the French noblemen Count Robert of Artois, decrees that after investment into his businesses the "... proceeds and income from these said places, they shall be had, received and enjoyed by the said treasurer of his representative annually from now on without break... full and complete satisfaction for the whole of the said debt shall have been made to the said treasurer..."<sup>10</sup> In signing this legal document, Count Robert agrees to pay income from mills, livestock, and rents to the Templar bank until completely repaying his debt. Several lengthy official documents like this one suggest that the Templars were not only regularly lending and holding money for the noblemen of multiple European countries, but also that these transactions sometimes took the form of legal contracts that could last many years. Long term agreements connected to the wealthy entrenched the Templars as a prestigious economic force throughout Europe while continuing to increase their political influence.

The unintentional effect of significant involvement within the European economy came in the form of King Philip IV's arrest and termination of the French Chapters. The official

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<sup>10</sup> Delisle, "Mémoires sur les Opérations Financières," in *The Templars: Selected Sources*, trans. Malcolm Barber and Keith Bate (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 209-210.

reasons for these abrupt actions were the discovery of heresy within the Templar organization that endangered Christian communities both within and outside of France.<sup>11</sup> Although frequent accusations of heresy against the Templars from priests and clergymen alike do not completely eliminate this rationale, other evidence points to covert royal ambitions: "... the arrest of the Templars in 1307 coincides exactly with a period of 'financial anarchy'... only the Templar bank possessed silver enough to salvage the state's failing currency. Clearly the means Philip employed to acquire this loot was remarkable, but they were not exceptional."<sup>12</sup> To solve his country's financial crisis, Philip ultimately saw the Templars as an efficient solution that could be masked beneath good intentions. However, in response to the order's continued detainment, Pope Clement V sent a letter to Philip in 1307 challenging his extreme actions with a lack of solid evidence, writing "... we had asked you to convey to us what you had discovered concerning this affair, you committed the said actions on the said persons and their goods which are under the direct jurisdiction of ourselves and the Church of Rome."<sup>13</sup> Despite the Pope's scrutiny, Philip continued trying Templar members, resulting in confessions of heresy that were primarily due to the heavy use of torture under royal interrogations. These confessions provided the necessary pressure to force the Pope into disavowing the order. In doing so, Philip skillfully

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<sup>11</sup> Julien Théry, "A Heresy of State: Philip the Fair, the Trial of the "Perfidious Templars," and the Pontificalization of the French Monarchy," 131.

<sup>12</sup> Hans Peter Broedel, "The Debate on the Trial of the Templars (1307-1314)," *The International History Review* 34, no. 4 (2012): 912, [https://search.library.pdx.edu/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN\\_tayfranc10.1080/07075332.2012.745245&context=PC&vid=PSU&search\\_scope=all&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://search.library.pdx.edu/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_tayfranc10.1080/07075332.2012.745245&context=PC&vid=PSU&search_scope=all&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>13</sup> Clement, "Clément V, Phillippe le Bel et les Templiers," in *The Templars: Selected Sources*, trans. Malcolm Barber and Keith Bate (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 249-250.

avoided direct opposition to the Pope, along with the bulk of public criticism for seizing the order's financial assets.

Following the execution of the order's grand master, Jacques de Molay in 1314, the Templar's branches in other countries subsequently collapsed for multiple reasons, ranging from the influence of Philip, the lack of support from the Pope, the presentation of evidence from the trials, and the perceived value of the order's property.<sup>14</sup> Other rulers possibly pounced on the opportunity to gain extra wealth, while employing the Templars' conviction as heretics as a shroud for their true intentions. The fate of the Knights Templar was sealed after losing the support of the Catholic Church. While the order originated from a humble mission, their accumulation of wealth made their assets too tempting for royals to resist.

Another possible explanation for the order's destruction is that the Templars were indeed heretical. Over the course of its existence, the Templar order received accusations of heresy that only increased in frequency over time. During the extended periods of fighting abroad and operating with little intervention from the Catholic Church or national governments, the Templars may have deviated from their original principles. The rumors of iconoclasm within some Templar chapters became so extreme that one such "... group was accused of heresy, including the desecration of the Crucifix... Yet some Templars may have been influenced by the Muslims... their trial testimony indicates that they regarded wooden sculptures of Christ on the cross as mere pieces of wood cut by human hand."<sup>15</sup> When combined with the fall of the

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<sup>14</sup> Hans Peter Broedel, "The Debate on the Trial of the Templars (1307-1314)," 912.

<sup>15</sup> Madeline Caviness, "Iconoclasm and Iconophobia: Four Historical Case Studies (Templars, Reformation, French Revolution, Les-rois-retrouves)," *Diogenes*, no. 199 (2003): 100-101, [https://search.library.pdx.edu/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN\\_wos000185384100008&context=PC&vid=PSU&search\\_scope=all&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://search.library.pdx.edu/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_wos000185384100008&context=PC&vid=PSU&search_scope=all&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

Crusader Kingdoms, accusations of heresy could only degrade their once-glorified reputation, and European countries would not have welcomed the influences of the East that the Templars brought to their homelands. Rumors of dissension resulted in the perception of the order as a threat to established Christian communities. While the order's declining image and shift away from its original militaristic activities may have contributed to public skepticism of its integrity, heresy was most likely employed as a cover by Philip and other royals rather than the primary reason for their arrests. Even when threatened with torture and execution in his trial, Jacques de Molay insisted that the order adhered to its values, recorded as "Asked if, when he vowed chastity, anything was said to him about homosexual practices with the brothers, he said on oath that this was not the case and that he had never done this."<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Pope Clement evidently perceived that Philip's intentions went beyond preserving the church in France, as he refused dissolution of the Templars until after receiving pressure from the results of the Templar trials. When viewed in the context of the statements of Hugh de Payens and Clement, it seems that Philip's political and economic ambitions are far more probable as the driving force of the Templar's downfall rather than religious motives.

The dispersal of the Knights Templar still serves as a highly debated topic for scholars today. Even with the recovery and translation of letters, banking archives, legal documents, and accounts of the Templar trials, there remains a lack of records regarding the relationship of Templar leadership with powerful figures. Research on the relationships of Templar grandmasters with the popes, kings, and nobles with whom they were associated during the later

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<sup>16</sup> Molay, James, "Le Procès des Templiers," in *The Templars: Selected Sources*, translated by Malcolm Barber and Keith Bate (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 253.

years of the order may reveal more about the perception of the order in the political sphere, and the general reaction of rulers to the Templar's growing influence across Europe. Despite accusations of heresy throughout the order's lifetime, analysis of the political, economic, and religious climate in France during 1307 supports the proposition that King Philip IV utilized these accusations as an excuse to seize the financial assets of the Templars. The precise, controlled display of religious advocacy demonstrates how historical rulers employed devout values and manipulated information to effectively serve their political needs. Though they began as idealistic knights who willingly served in poverty, the Templar's financial evolution resulted in their demise, as they became too wealthy to ignore.

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