



Knights Templar

by Chantal Stoughton

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Two medieval depictions of Templar executions.

The Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon--the military order known as the Knights Templar--was founded in 1118. Its purpose was to protect pilgrims en route to the holy places of the new Kingdom of Jerusalem.

The Templars followed a monastic rule created for them by the founder of the Cistercian Order, Bernard of Clairvaux. Poverty was one of the order's principles and commentators have speculated that the Templar's seal--a design of two knights riding the same horse--reflected this idea. However, others believe that the symbol is a covert reference to homosexuality within the organization.

Well connected, the order became influential in international politics and finance. In 1135, the Templars started lending money to pilgrims. This practice evolved into a form of banking. That the order evaded censure for usury (money lending), particularly from the Church, shows how powerful it had become (a loophole allowed the Templars to profit from mortgaged property), and how useful the order was to the Church and to international finance.

At this time, however, the monarchs of Europe were concerned that the Church had become too powerful financially and were attempting to wrest control of money from it.

It is supposed that this was the motive for King Philip the Fair's arrest of the French Templars in 1307. Friday, October 13, of that year marked the beginning of the downfall of the organization (and provides one explanation for the tradition of Friday the 13th being unlucky). Philip had the Templars in France arrested and seized their treasury.

The charge was religious heresy with emphasis on sodomy, "head worship," and a mystery known as "Baphomet."

Under torture, some knights admitted practicing sodomy, but the leaders of the order later claimed this testimony was false. According to some commentators, the acts performed by the knights were ritual in nature and were misunderstood outside the order. In preparation for the torture and humiliation they could expect if captured by the enemy, the knights were conditioned to commit apostasy in the mind but not in the heart. To this end, they were trained to deny Christ, spit on the cross, and to kiss other men on the backside.

The charge of "head worship" relates to the accusation that the Templars worshipped an idol in the form of a head--possibly bearded. As an idol, adoring it would be sacrilegious and might amount to devil worship. It is possible that the objects venerated were religious relics, including those of John the Baptist.

Opinions vary on the nature of "Baphomet." Some see it as a mystification, through the Atbash cipher (a Hebrew code in which each letter of the alphabet actually represents another letter), of the Greek words "sophia" (wisdom) and "logos" (word). In this interpretation, the Templars are seen as followers of the

goddess Sophia, figured as the bride of God. From this perspective, the Templars are thought to have been intent on reestablishing the feminine aspect of divinity that had been excised by the Church.

As he was burned at the stake on March 18, 1314, the last Grand Master of the Knights Templar, Jacques de Molay, cursed both Pope Clement V and King Philip, and both died within the year.

The Catholic Church has maintained that it was manipulated into attacking the Templars, and recent research indicates that they were later secretly pardoned.

The persecution of the Knights Templar did not have universal political support, and many rulers did not dissolve the order in their own domains until commanded to do so by Pope Clement V in 1312. Even then, there were survivals: in Portugal the organization changed its name to the Order of Christ while, in Scotland, Robert the Bruce--already excommunicated--had little reason to obey the pope.

In reaction to the fate of the Templars, orders such as the Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem gave up banking. Pope Clement V transferred a great deal of Templar properties to various Hospitaller organizations, which also took in many of the surviving Templars.

Modern Freemasonry has been much influenced by the Knights Templar as have other organizations that are related in spirit and ritual to the Templars, without being direct descendants of the order.

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Chantal Stoughton graduated from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge and has worked as a writer and subeditor for newspapers and magazines in Japan, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom.