

Trial by Fire:
The Unsubstantiated Accusations Against the Knights Templar
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The trials of the Knights Templar provide historians with a lens of understanding the scale to which religious atrocities could reach in the 13th and 14th centuries. The trials occurred from 1307–1314 in multiple locations throughout Europe. The trials represent prime examples of the way in which parties of religious heretics could be accused of, convicted, and executed based on claims grounded in unsubstantiated beliefs. The witnesses testimonies in the trials did not offer substantial evidence to warrant the prosecution of the Templars. With the exception of the testimonies from the Papal States and Abruzzi, which involved the use of torture, almost none of the testimonies directly claim that the Templars had done any religious wrongdoings. The Knights Templar had been protectors of religious pilgrimages in the Holy Land since the mid-12th century. They provided the necessary protection in the Holy Land for pilgrims seeking travel to the Holy Sites.¹ Despite the necessity of the Knights Templar and their presence in the Holy Land, the Templars still received a number of grievances issued towards them, which originated from King Philip IV of France. These grievances consisted of fabricated claims about sodomy and homosexuality among the Knights Templar. The Templars received conviction for their supposed acts of sodomy and homosexuality, and several of them faced execution. Through analyzation of the witness testimonies, a clear conclusion can be drawn, that the trials had insubstantial evidence to convict the Templars of their supposed crimes.

Prior to analyzing the trials of the Templars there must first be an understanding made of the fundamental principles of the Knights Templar. Two fundamental primary accounts of popular views on the Knights Templar still exist. The letter from Hugh ‘Peccator’ (Hugh the sinner) exists as one example, and Bernard of Clairvaux’s *In Praise of the New Knighthood* exists as another. The author of the letter from Hugh ‘Peccator’ remains a mystery. The historian Malcom Barber has some speculations as to who it may have been. Barber speculates that “the writer was Hugh of Payns himself, but both the content and style make this improbable. Another candidate is the theologian Hugh of St Victor, of the Augustinian house in Paris”² No matter the identity of the author, he still offers significant insight into his opinions of the Templars. These insights helped to form 12th-14th century opinions of the Knights Templar, opinions which influenced the witness testimonies in the trials.

The letter from Hugh ‘Peccator’ from 1128 presents its readers with positive opinions of the Knights Templar. Even still, the author warns the Templars of the danger of the Devil, saying that “[t]he first task of the devil is to draw us into sin; the second is to corrupt our intentions and good deeds; the third is that as if with the appearance of helping he should divert us from our

¹ Malcom Barber, *The New Knighthood: A History of the Order of the Temple* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4.

² Barber, *The New Knighthood*, 42.

intended act of virtue and make us falter.”³ The author then continues on to articulate on the ways in which the Templars can overcome these sins. It appears the author thinks that the Templars may be misguided by the Devil and sin. Further on in the letter the author discusses the way in which the Templars must stand firm against the Devil. Expressing that “[w]hat [the devil] really wants is for you to change your position. . . . That is the hateful trickery, this the craftiness and the wiliness of the devil, with which he wants to deceive you. That is why you must stand firm and resist your adversary who is the lion and the serpent”⁴ The author expresses concern for the Templars. He wants them to heed his warnings, and to be aware of the dangers which the Devil tempts them with. This can only be accomplished by standing firm against the Devil’s temptations. The author requires the Templars to turn their focus inwards, and to ignore the distractions of the outside world.⁵ This suggests that the Templars may have been distracted by external threats, such as the temptations of the Devil. The Templars had a fundamental basis in monastic as well as military life. This duality made it difficult for the Templars to properly adhere to both. Lastly, an apparent connection exists between Bernard of Clairvaux and the letter from Hugh ‘Peccator’. By outlining some of the fundamental principles which the Knights Templar must adhere to, the author displays that the Knights Templar could be a capable group of fighting knights who could serve in the Holy Land. As the author predicted, the Templars filled this role well and they received great respect for their efforts. These positive views of the Templars remained consistent throughout the Templar trials, influencing the testimonies of the witnesses. Lastly, the letter appears to have been kept in a Hospitaller church in the Holy Land, beside Bernard of Clairvaux’s famous treatise on the Knights Templar.⁶ This suggests that the letter had great value to the Knights Templar, since it resided in the same place as Bernard of Clairvaux’s famous treatise.

Bernard of Clairvaux, also known as St. Bernard, exists as another figure of importance in understanding the fundamental principles of the Knights Templar. His treatise from the 12th century outlines the way in which the Knights of the Order should behave in combat, in religion, and in daily life. Regarding the way which knights should behave, he writes: “a knight must guard his person with vigor, shrewdness, and caution; he must be unimpeded in his movements, and he must be quick to draw his sword.”⁷ He held an idealistic view of knights and knighthood which, for the Knights Templar, had certainly faded from their vision by the 14th century. St. Bernard also writes on how the Templars should turn their focus to those who do not adhere to the faith. “Those

³ Hugh ‘Peccator’, “Letter of Hugh ‘Peccator’ to the Templars in the East (c. 1128),” in *The Templars: A History of the Temple*, trans. Malcom Barber and Keith Bate (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002), 54–59 at 55.

⁴ Hugh ‘Peccator’, “Letter of Hugh ‘Peccator’ to the Templars in the East (c. 1128),” 56–57.

⁵ Barber, *The New Knighthood*, 43.

⁶ Barber, *The New Knighthood*, 42.

⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood: A treatise on the Knights Templar and the Holy Places of Jerusalem*, trans. M. Conrad Greenia Osco (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 37.

who busy themselves carrying off the incalculable riches placed in Jerusalem by Christian people Let both swords of the faithful fall upon the necks of the foe to the destruction of every lofty thing lifting itself up against the knowledge of God.”⁸ St. Bernard wants the Templars to turn their attention towards the infidels, and to bring them death and destruction. Such rhetoric paved the path for the Templars becoming a formidable military order in the Holy Land. This somewhat disagrees with the Letter from Hugh ‘Peccator’, the author of the letter wanted the Templars to be more religiously focused, while St. Bernard wanted them to be more militarily focused. However, St. Bernard makes a similar argument to the author of the Letter from Hugh ‘Peccator’ regarding religious practices. “[A knight of Christ] is God’s minister in the punishment of evil doers and the praise of well doers. Surely, if he kills an evil doer, he is not a man-killer, but, if I may so put in, an evil-killer.”⁹ St. Bernard regards the Templars as tools which could be used to strike down the infidels in the Holy Land. St. Bernard advocated for the Second Crusade as one of its major supporters, and his language here reflects that perfectly. Bernard of Clairvaux’s treatise and the Letter from Hugh ‘Peccator’ summarize the aspects of the Knights Templar which held value to the witnesses in the trials. Through testimony, these values express the common views of the Knights Templar through the 12th–14th centuries.

In leadup to the arrest of the Knights Templar in 1307, Pope Clement V issued a Papal Bull which decreed that great atrocities exist within the Order of the Knights Templar. Clement V claims that “[t]hey confessed among other things that they had denied Christ and spat upon the cross at their reception into the Order of the Temple.”¹⁰ Upon returning to Rome from the Holy Land in the early 14th century, leaders of the Order discover that the papacy had turned against them and sought to completely dissolve the Order. At the time, the thought that the Templars had behaved wrongfully and sinfully perplexed the population. The view that Bernard of Clairvaux had established for the Order remains prominent among those who saw the Templars as religiously focused knights. Bernard of Clairvaux revered the Templars as esteemed members of the cross and of the faith. He also saw them as very capable fighting knights who could defeat enemies with ease.¹¹ Now the Templars fall from the pedestal which Bernard of Clairvaux placed them upon, and the consequences would soon mount against them.

Pope Clement V writes to King Philip IV regarding the issue which the Templars presented, and he makes a call for action, saying that “[it is] not without great bitterness, sorrow and turmoil in our heart [that] we are forced to act on the foregoing, doing whatever reason demands.”¹² The

⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, 41.

⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, 39.

¹⁰ Clement V, “Papal bull, *Vox in excelso*” in *The Templars: A History of the Temple*, trans. Barber and Bate, 309–18 at 314.

¹¹ Barber, *The New Knighthood*, 280; Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, 34.

¹² Clement V, “Letter of Clement V to Philip IV (24 August 1307),” in *The Templars: A History of the Temple*, trans. Barber and Bate, 243–44 at 243.

Pope appears distressed by the situation, but he does not express concern about bringing justice for the atrocities which the Templars supposedly committed. The Pope continued with his plans to take action against the Templars, unaware that the claims he followed had no basis in truth. No matter the outcome of the trials, the Pope showed preparedness in the leadup to their start. Clement V expresses his preparedness in his letter to Philip IV, saying that “if they were to be found innocent, as they claimed, we should absolve them, but if they were to be found guilty, which they believed not to be the case, we should condemn them.”¹³ He instructs Philip IV that he should also be prepared. The Pope recently told Philip IV that he plans to open an enquiry to investigate the rumors he hears regarding the Order’s sinful actions.¹⁴ However, the arrest of the Templars gets underway without the knowledge of the Pope. This suggests that Philip IV conspired against the authority of the Pope, which would not be the first time this had occurred.

The letter from the Pope preceded the Order for the Templars’ arrests. The Order for the arrests makes various claims which lack any significant weight. Despite this, the writers of the document made several accusations against the Order. Claiming that they “received insistent reports from very reliable people that brothers of the Order of the Knights Temple, wolves in sheep’s clothing . . . are again crucifying our Lord Jesus Christ in these days.”¹⁵ The Order for the arrests makes note of “very reliable people” but fails to tell who gave them this information. The document also makes claims of homosexuality within the Order, claiming that “[the Templars] are kissed by [Visitor or his deputy] first on the lower part of the dorsal spine, secondly on the navel and finally on the mouth, in accordance with the profane rite of their Order but to the disgrace of the dignity of the human race.”¹⁶

The historian Anne Gilmour-Bryson articulates on how the Templars have permission to carry out homosexual acts. While most Templars receive permission to carry out homosexual acts, few of them admit to having partook in such actions themselves. Members of the Order do not confess to such actions before the trial. High-ranking members of the Order permit and sometimes encourage homosexual acts among younger members. The accusations of sodomy issued refer to Templars supposedly with same sex partners. A formal definition of sodomy, as understood by the medieval world in the 14th century, does not seem to exist.¹⁷ A majority of the accusations focus on the impacts which homosexuality had on the Order. The claims of homosexuality often included the intended claims of sodomy. The 13th and 14th centuries display a revised pursuit of non-

¹³ Clement V, “Letter of Clement V to Philip IV (24 August 1307),” 243.

¹⁴ Juien Théry-Astruc, “The Fight of the Master of Lombardy (13 February 1308) and Clement V’s strategy in the Templar affair: a slap in the Pope’s face,” *Rivista Di Storia Della Chiesa in Italia*, vol. 70, no. 1 (2016): 35–44 at 39.

¹⁵ Unknown, “Order for the arrests (14 September 1307),” in *The Templars: A History of the Temple*, trans. Barber and Bate, 244–48 at 245.

¹⁶ Unknown, “Order for the arrests (14 September 1307),” 245.

¹⁷ Anne Gilmour-Bryson, “Sodomy and the Knights Templar,” 161.

Christian parties. Anne Gilmour-Bryson clearly expresses that “[s]cholars agree that by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, stricter measures began to be taken against marginal peoples: Cathars, lepers, Jews, and homosexuals. Groups that had been tolerated in Christian society no longer were.”¹⁸ This targeting adversely affects minority groups such as the Knights Templar, rumored to be homosexuals.

Of the many witnesses who testified at the Templar Trials, very few of them offer enough evidence to say that the claims made by the Papacy and King Philip IV held any weight. One witness who testified at the trial in the Papal States did confirm that there existed some homosexual activity within the Order, however. He stated that upon “[a]rriving at the questions on permission to have sex with other brothers, [he] merely answered that ‘William and Dominic told him that brothers . . . could legitimately have sex with one another.’”¹⁹ William and Dominic had been brothers of the Order. This statement from the witness confirms that brothers in the Order can have sexual relations, but there seems to be little evidence to support that they do. No other witness in this story testifies to these actions. A testimony from William or Dominic may have served well to further this testimony, but those do not exist. Another witness testifies that “having been told that Christ was a false prophet . . . [and of] obscene kisses, sodomy committed by others, . . . that he too had left the Order because of improper practices.”²⁰ This member of the Order proclaims to see and hear many things within the Order which convinces him to leave. Note that he does leave the Order, meaning that he felt at liberty to speak regarding the Order. He could easily exaggerate these claims to make the members of the Order appear more guilty than they may have been. By exaggerating claims in testimony, the Templar members shift blame off themselves and onto others. Several other members of the Order proclaim that they had seen or heard of the possibility of homosexual acts occurring among Templar members, but they never proclaim to partake in it themselves. There remain no testimonies which directly support the other testimonies claiming there to be homosexual activity within the Order.

Witnesses likely would not admit to partaking in homosexuality, for it placed guilt upon themselves. It may have been easier for them to admit that others partake in such acts, for that places guilt on them, and off their chest.²¹ This system of finger pointing at fellow Templar brothers makes it challenging to decipher if the claims these witnesses make hold significant weight. No two witnesses claim the exact same events to have occurred among the exact same people. Clearly the Templar brothers on the trial in the Papal States and Abruzzi had suddenly become more concerned with their individual security than those of others. This differs greatly from the ideal form of knighthood which Bernard of Clairvaux wanted the Templars to possess.

¹⁸ Anne Gilmour-Bryson, “Sodomy and the Knights Templar,” 162–63.

¹⁹ Anne Gilmour-Bryson, “Sodomy and the Knights Templar,” 170.

²⁰ Anne Gilmour-Bryson, *The Trial of the Templars in the Papal State and the Abruzzi* (Citta Del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1982), 59.

²¹ Anne Gilmour-Bryson, “Sodomy and the Knights Templar,” 171.

Testimonies which admit to this scale of homosexuality within the Order cannot be found in the other trials, such as those in Cyprus. A key difference being that unlike in other trials, those in the Papal States and Abruzzi employed torture as a means of extracting information.²²

Templar members in Cyprus do not express the same testimonies as those in the Papal States and Abruzzi. In fact, all of them claim ignorance of any wrongdoings or errors within the Order. A good example of this sort of testimony comes from a Templar witness, answering that “he never knew of errors within the order nor heard it said that there were [any]; and therefore, since [errors] did not exist, they did not have a beginning.”²³ Without torturing witnesses, the inquisitors struggle to get any tangible evidence as proof of homosexuality in the Order. Those tortured in other trials may have been feeding the inquisitors any information necessary in an attempt to end their sufferings.

Among non-Templar witnesses in the trials in Cyprus, all of them proclaim that they knew nothing of any wrongdoings or errors within the Order. None of them have reason to believe that there exists faults within the Order. They assume the Templars to be religiously and militaristically in line. Several of the witnesses make reference to the Templars being a secret society, and that no one could understand their lives. Lord Andrew Tartaro testifies that “brothers of the Temple used to keep their rule very much hidden so that no one could know it.”²⁴ Another non-Templar witness, Lord Lawrence of Beirut, conveys that he “spent eighteen years with the brothers of the Temple, and when he lived with them, he saw them revere and honour the cross with great devotion.”²⁵ These witnesses could not provide the evidence which the inquisitors sought because they never lived long enough with the Templars to see them commit any atrocities, nor had they become enveloped within the Order. The non-Templar witnesses believe the Order to be religiously correct; they had no reason to believe otherwise. This follows the views of the Templars still held by 14th century European society. As expressed in the documents by Bernard of Clairvaux and in the Letter from Hugh ‘Peccator’, the Templars should serve as religiously and militaristically focused individuals. To those outside the Order, they appear to fill these roles sufficiently, no evidence exists to prove otherwise.

Despite the clearly stated testimonies of the witnesses, the reason for the original arrest and prosecution of the Templars remains unclear, however some theories have been suggested by historians which explain King Philip IV’s reasoning. Although difficult to ascertain, King Philip IV and his prosecutors likely did have a substantial reason for arresting the Templars. Malcom Barber responds with a likely theory, stating that “[w]hile it is true that both Philip II and Philip IV attempted to use Louis IX’s confirmation of Templar possessions in 1258, . . . this needs to be seen in the context of the attempts made by most contemporary monarchs to reduce the proportion

²² Anne Gilmour-Bryson, “Sodomoy and the Knights Templar,” 171.

²³ Anne Gilmour-Bryson, *The Trial of the Templars in Cyprus* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 99–100.

²⁴ Gilmour-Bryson, *The Trial of the Templars in Cyprus*, 407–8.

²⁵ Gilmour-Bryson, *The Trial of the Templars in Cyprus*, 410.

of lands held in a mortmain by clerical institutions, rather than an action aimed specifically at the Temple in France.”²⁶ When viewed within historical context, Barber’s argument holds some significant value. The Templars likely had no reason to have grievances against the King in France because the King did no wrong to them. As Barber summarizes, “There is no evidence of Templar opposition to the crown.”²⁷

Sufficient evidence must still be found to account for the reasoning behind the arrest of the Templars. One viable possibility could be King Philip IV’s desire to acquire wealth. Since the 12th century, the Templars had been known as wealthy moneylenders. Knowledge of the Templars’ wealth had not been lost on the monarchy in France.²⁸ Philip IV had been struggling with the financial standing of France for some time. He may have believed that the seizure of the Templars’ assets could rectify some of his problems. A somewhat different argument for the arrest of the Templars comes from the historian Norman Housley, suggesting that the actions taken by Philip IV may have been more complex than simply a lust for wealth. He states that “[a]lthough not totally erroneous, this interpretation of the fall of the Templars now seems too straight-forward. That the trial’s origins and outcome were connected with the expulsion of the Christians from the Holy Land seems certain, but it reflects a public response to 1291 that was diverse and complex, extremely hard for us to read.”²⁹ Housley speculates that the reasoning behind the initiation of the Templar trials may be more complex than what it initially appears to be. He does not elaborate on this point and does not offer an alternative possibility as to the reason for the initiation of the trials. Therefore, Housley’s argument offers insufficient evidence for why the King and the Papacy sought out the arrest of the Templars. No matter the motives behind Philip IV’s reasoning for initiating the trials, the clear lack of historical documents explaining his reasoning testifies to the secrecy behind his actions.

The most compelling evidence for any sodomy, heresy, or homosexuality within the Order can be found in the testimonies from those who received torture in the trials of the Papal States and Abruzzi. However, these witnesses still offer little in the way of concrete evidence in support of homosexuality to the degree to which they had been accused of. No two Templar testimonies align to conclude that any Templar brother certainly partook in homosexual activities. The Templar brothers accused each other of homosexual activity without evidence to support their claims. These testimonies mention that they received offers to partake in these actions from other brothers, but they themselves did not testify to have personally partook in such actions. The Templars frequently shifted the burden off of themselves. This pattern in the testimonies can be found so frequently throughout the testimonies from the Templars that it almost appears as though

²⁶ Barber, *The New Knighthood*, 297.

²⁷ Barber, *The New Knighthood*, 297.

²⁸ Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995), 199.

²⁹ Norman Housley, *Contesting the Crusades* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), 125.

they each had a similar mindset. The members who testified in the Papal States and Abruzzi showed no concern for each other, rather each of them sought to escape the inquisitors who tortured and interrogated them. At other trials, such as those in Cyprus, the Templar members claimed ignorance when asked about the presence of homosexuality or sodomy within the Order. No primary accounts exist detailing the Templars' thought process on this matter. Therefore, there lies great difficulty in understanding the apparent pattern in the Templar testimonies. Among the non-Templar witness testimonies, the blatant ignorance of the witnesses furthers the argument that they believed the Templars to be the knights which Bernard of Clairvaux and the author from the Letter from Hugh 'Peccator' expressed them to be. Through analysis of primary source documents pertaining to the Trials of the Templars, Pope Clement V's desire to arrest the Templars stemmed largely from the fabricated claims which he had heard. King Philip IV's motivations for the trials have been a more difficult aspect to understand. He may have sought to gain the wealth from the Templars, or it may have been more complex than that, as Norman Housley suggests. Either way, Philip IV died shortly after the conclusion of the trials, so there remain no conclusive documents which express that he gained significant financial benefit from the disintegration of the Templars. This remains as one of the aspects which could do with some further investigation. Through historical analysis of the Templar trials, ample evidence could not be found worthy of the Templar's conviction. The fabricated claims made about the Knights Templar served only as a tool to wipe them permanently from the face of history.

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