

FORTEAN TIMES 164 (November 2002)

### THE TEMPLARS

Translated by Malcolm Barber & Keith Bate

Manchester University Press, 2002

PB, 336pp, Ind, Bib, £15.99

ISBN 0 7190 5110 X

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This fascinating and incomparable book tells the story, at first-hand, of the rise, growth, development and dissolution of a monastic order. But not just any order – we are dealing with the Templars, which automatically complicates the story. It does this to so great an extent that it is easy to forget sometimes that – though unusual in some respects – in many others the Templars faced the usual problems of any similarly large administrative body.

We have become conditioned by a proliferation of myth, scandal and intrigue to see the Templars in the light of supernatural rather than Church history. In doing this, we continue the work of Philip the Fair and his politicians in blackening their name. That we mythologise the Templars out of love of mystery – satirised by Umberto Eco in ‘Foucault's Pendulum’ as: “the legend with which some frustrated and yearning minds are still obsessed, the myth of a boundless power lying unused, unharnessed” – alters nothing. William of Nogaret, William of Plaisians and William Imbert (‘William of Paris’, Inquisitor and royal confessor) accused the Templars of being magicians, sodomites and blasphemers. Standard stuff in heresy trials, but the Templars have never shaken off these labels.

However, as the authors point out in their introduction, “no contemporary religious Order could claim an unblemished record”. It is only implicit, but we can see here a criticism of the vast body of esoteric studies on the Templars. Though they were a martial order, the Templars were to find themselves annihilated in the combat between the French government and the Holy See. They were a valuable scapegoat, being economically powerful and under some criticism, but in that they were not unique – it could easily have been another Order that was persecuted, but the randomness of history offends us. It was the “direct actions of the French government” that led to the arrests, the trial and the downfall of the Templars, not any perceived failures of the Order. No contemporary

criticism, unconnected to Philip, accused the Templars of heresy. Had the Cistercians or the Franciscans been put under a similar spotlight, the authors remind us, it is likely that the weakness and problems of those Orders might have led to very different interpretations of them by historians.

The Templars were not, of course, always condemned and blamed. They found an enthusiastic and early champion in Bernard of Clairvaux, who composed the sermon 'In praise of the new knighthood' for them in the 1130s. In it he commented that:

"They live together in cheerful, sober fashion without their wives and children... You might say that this numerous band has a single heart, a single soul... When war is announced they arm themselves within with faith and without iron... so that they strike fear into the enemy by their arms... Their thoughts are on the battle and victory, not display and glory."

What singled the Templars out as unusual was only the wealth they controlled, wealth which ultimately belonged to the Pope but was coveted by the 'Most Christian King', Philip The Fair. Some idea can be formed of their resources from the lists of possessions in chapter four. The Templar trial was to prove the ideal battleground for the political, financial and religious struggles between the Papacy and the French government. Philip and his ministers had already won a significant victory over Clement in their persecution of his predecessor, Boniface VIII, accused of heresy, simony, unbelieving, the practice of magic and the patronage of sorcerers. Philip's supremacy in that matter was sealed by Clement's humiliating capitulation and deference to Philip's judgement in the bull 'Rex glorie'; and we see a similar defeat and retreat in the bulls relating to the Templars, 'Vox in excelso' and 'Ad providam' (both 1312) translated here. The Council of Vienne in 1312 was advised by William le Maire that they should disband the Order and confiscate its goods immediately: "rejecting these ridiculous, calumnious allegations about the necessity for defence proceedings." Although its wealth was ultimately given to the Hospitallers, various 'repayments' and compensations from the combined assets were paid to the French Crown.

This is the first single volume that enables people to read the Templars' history at first hand. Although, of course, Malcolm Barber has already written two scholarly and engaging books on the topic ('The Trial of the Templars', 1978; 'The New Knighthood: A History of the Order of the Temple', 1994) there are always those who speak of the hidden agenda.

Here the original documents tell the story of the rise and decline of the Templars. Anyone determinedly seeking a hidden agenda will have to resort to arguing for selective quotation, faulty translation or hidden documents. This book offers students of the past who do not read Old French or Latin an opportunity to hear both the Templars and their accusers in their own words, while offering a useful bibliography for those who want to read further.

The chapters of 'The Templars' cover the foundation of the Order (including translations of the Latin and French Rules), political and martial issues, the religious and charitable functions, lists of human and material resources (grants of land, money, serfs), the changing attitudes towards the Templars and documents relating to the trial (including papal Bulls, orders for arrest, and key depositions). Though providing a valuable focus on political and economic issues, the translators do not neglect odd gems: descriptions of relics, a vision, and, intriguingly, the translation of an Occidental poem by Ricaut Bonomel, enraged at the taking of Arsuf in 1265. The warrior monk demonstrates his sensitive side:

“Anger and grief are entrenched in my heart/So that I am almost ready to kill myself/Or abandon the cross that I had taken/In honour of the One who was put on the Cross;/For neither cross nor faith bring me succour or protection/Against those felon Turks, God curse them!/On the contrary, from what one can see,/God wants to support them to our detriment.”

I cannot recommend this book too highly. Those already interested in the Templars will find the translated documents absolutely gripping, while those who have not previously studied them would do well to begin here.