

THE FALL OF THE TEMPLARS AND TEUTONIC KNIGHTS
AND THE AFTERMATH OF THE BLACK DEATH:
POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC RAMIFICATIONS OF TWO LATE-MEDIEVAL EVENTS

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After the dramatic fragmentation of the Roman Empire and the tumultuous events of the Early Middle Ages (c. 400-1000), Europe stabilized in many ways during the High Middle Ages (c. 1000-1300). Population rose, agriculture and warfare improved due to new technology and methods, and the Crusades and long-distance trade connected Europe with the East in a way not seen since the fall of Rome. Many events of the Late Middle Ages (c. 1300-1500), however, brought additional change and, in some cases, great turmoil. One such event, the destruction of the Knights Templar and the Teutonic Knights, highlights some of the economic and political ramifications of the Crusades and the increasing power of Europe's monarchs. Destroying the military orders was a deliberate act that combined economic, religious, and political motives. The Black Death, perhaps the most significant event of the Late Middle Ages, also had profound economic, religious, and political implications. Its devastation affected most aspects of society and altered Europe's development for decades, if not centuries. It caused some people to question the Church and helped break down serfdom in some parts of Europe, assisting monarchs in amassing greater power at the expense of lesser nobles and the papacy. Thus, while the destruction of the military orders and the Black Death were unrelated events in most respects, they are related in that they exemplify some of the great economic and political upheavals of the Late Middle Ages, particularly the continued growth of monarchical power at the expense of Church authority.

The Knights Templar and the Teutonic Knights, along with the Hospitallers and other religious orders, were appendages of the Church that looked after the concerns of pilgrims and others in need. They served the dual functions of nursing and arms-bearing during the Crusades

and in their aftermath.¹ They were fighting brotherhoods of warrior monks, who took monastic vows and were subject to monastic discipline. Their active defense of the Holy Land made them “soldiers of Christ,” who filled the need of a standing army in Outremer.² In addition, they served the pope as agents to promote the Crusades and to collect “Crusade taxes.”³ The collection of vast sums money either as a payment or a donation for their services allowed the military orders to amass great sums of wealth, which they used to purchase armaments, provide humanitarian relief, and pursue various building projects. To add to their wealth, the Templars ran lucrative sugarcane plantations, sugar factories, and livestock and grain operations on their vast estates in the Levant, despite their commitment to monastic poverty. These activities, in the opinion of Jonathan Riley-Smith, showed that the military orders were “keen for cash,” which made them a target in the years that followed.⁴

Their military prowess and vast stores of wealth were double-edged swords for the military orders themselves, as well as for the monarchs and popes they served. Both orders of knights thus became the focus of clashes between kings and the papacy, between *regnum* and *sacerdotium*.⁵ Pope Gregory IX temporarily stripped the Teutonic Order of its independence in 1229 out of fear that the knights had allied themselves with Frederick II against the papacy.⁶ The Templars became economic advisors, bankers, and agents for a number of European monarchs,

¹ Jonathan Riley-Smith, *Templars and Hospitallers as Professed Religious in the Holy Land* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 23, *ProQuest* ebrary, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=10423290> (accessed November 24, 2015).

² Rosemary Morris, “Northern Europe Invades the Mediterranean, 900-1200,” in *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe*, ed. George Holmes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 209.

³ Riley-Smith, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵ Nicholas Morton, “Institutional Dependency upon Secular and Ecclesiastical Patrons and the Foundations of the Trial of the Templars,” in *Debate on the Trial of the Templars (1307-1314)*, ed., Jochen Burgdorf, Paul Crawford, and Helen Nicholson (Farnham, Surrey, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2010), 41-42, *ProQuest* ebrary, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=10404114> (accessed November 25, 2015).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

roles which brought both benefits and contention for the Templars. The great favor they were often shown was occasionally betrayed as English and French kings attempted to usurp Templar wealth.⁷ Both orders faced grave dangers because of their economic and political positions.

The Templars, who possessed treasuries in various European countries, drew the greatest fire from Philip IV “the Fair” of France. Economic tensions between Philip and the Templars built up during the 1280s and 1290s due to currency fluctuations and Philip’s increasing indebtedness to the Templars. By 1286, Philip owed the Templars an amount roughly one-sixth of France’s yearly revenue.⁸ While Philip was able to pay off this debt the next year, scarcity of silver and Philip’s continuous military campaigns of the 1290s caused France to once again become indebted to the Templars. To dig his country out of debt, Philip debased his currency, creating inflation and currency depreciation.⁹ He also targeted the Jews, arresting many of them and confiscating their silver. However, his most unpopular action was to dramatically increase taxes in 1302, a move which led to sporadic revolts across the kingdom. Targeting the Jews and raising taxes failed to solve France’s economic problems, so Philip sought to strengthen the currency by increasing the amount of silver in France.¹⁰ To accomplish this, Philip once again turned to the Templars, but this time he turned against them.

The flashpoint of the conflict between Philip and the Templars may have come in 1302 when the Templars and Hospitallers provided military service to Flemish rebels, which Philip viewed as defiance against his authority.¹¹ Philip turned to Pope Clement V for assistance in

⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁸ Ignacio de la Torre, “The Monetary Fluctuations in Philip IV’s Kingdom of France and Their Relevance to the Arrest of the Templars,” in *Debate on the Trial of the Templars (1307-1314)*, ed., Jochen Burgdorf, Paul Crawford, and Helen Nicholson (Farnham, Surrey, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2010), 59, *ProQuest* ebrary, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=10404114> (accessed November 25, 2015).

⁹ Ibid., 62.

¹⁰ Ibid., 66.

¹¹ Morton, 56.

turning against the Templars. Philip was no friend of the papacy, as his treatment of Boniface VIII showed, but Clement cooperated with Philip against the Templars as part of a monarchical-papal give and take. Clement's motives against the Templars are anything but clear, but he almost certainly caved in under Philip's pressure. Jacques de Molay, the grandmaster of the Templars, had been close to Pope Boniface VIII, with whom Philip had often clashed. In addition, de Molay's "anti-French coup" to gain election to grandmaster of the Templars angered Philip.¹² Perhaps the combination of Philip's negative relation with Boniface, Clement's cooperation with Philip at the start of the Avignon Papacy, de Molay's support of Boniface, and Philip's unhappiness with de Molay's election as grandmaster caused the perfect conditions for a crusade against the Templars in the early 1300s.

The Templars faced a dizzying array of rumors and official charges, ranging from corruption to blasphemy. The most egregious charges involved a blasphemous rite in which members denied Christ and desecrated the crucifix.¹³ The knights were also accused of indecent kissing and sodomy, but such charges may well have been exaggerations or outright fabrications.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Philip prosecuted the Templars on these charges and enjoyed papal support in the endeavor. As the Templar treasury was perhaps the only remaining source of silver that could provision the royal mints to strengthen France's currency, the Templar's fate was sealed.¹⁵ Much of the Templars' wealth no doubt found its way into French mints and then into

¹² Anthony Luttrell, "The Election of the Templar Jacques de Molay," in *Debate on the Trial of the Templars (1307-1314)*, ed., Jochen Burgdorf, Paul Crawford, and Helen Nicholson (Farnham, Surrey, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2010), 31, *ProQuest* ebrary, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=10404114> (accessed November 24, 2015).

¹³ Riley-Smith, 68.

¹⁴ Alan Forey, "Could Alleged Templar Malpractices Have Remained Undetected for Decades?," in *Debate on the Trial of the Templars (1307-1314)*, ed., Jochen Burgdorf, Paul Crawford, and Helen Nicholson (Farnham, Surrey, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2010), 11-12, *ProQuest* ebrary, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=10404114> (accessed November 24, 2015).

¹⁵ De la Torre, 66.

the French economy. However, in the context of the Avignon Papacy and the tug-of-war between the monarchy and the papacy, Clement V negotiated an agreement that passed a sizeable portion of the wealth to the Hospitallers instead of into Philip's hands.¹⁶ Other European kingdoms turned on the Templars as well, including Edward II of England. His raid on the New Temple secured 50,000 pounds sterling, attesting to the staggering wealth the Templars once possessed.¹⁷

The Teutonic Knights witnessed the destruction of the Templars and feared a similar fate for themselves. Thus, in 1309, they moved their headquarters to Marienburg in Prussia.¹⁸ Having one of the most sophisticated armies in Europe at the time, the Teutonic Knights helped defend Christendom against pagans in Lithuania and other areas of the Baltic Sea region. After Lithuania's Christianization, however, the Teutonic Knights felt pressure from the papacy and from Poland that somewhat resembled the Templar's struggle against Pope Clement V and Philip IV of France. Just as the Templars had been, the Teutonic Knights were a double-edged sword for the papacy and the kings of the region. The Teutonic Knights controlled a vast territory along the Baltic, and leaders such as Władysław II Jagiełło of Poland and Vytautas the Great of newly Christianized Lithuania were determined to reign in Teutonic power and reduce Teutonic meddling in their kingdoms' affairs. At the battle of Grunwald in 1410, the combined forces of Poland and Lithuania used superior tactics, gained in part through military experiences against the Mongols, to defeat the Teutonic Knights.¹⁹ The grandmaster was killed in the battle and the Teutonic Knights lost much of their power forever.

¹⁶ Malcolm Vale, "The Civilization of Courts and Cities in the North, 1200-1500," in *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe*, ed. George Holmes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 309.

¹⁷ De la Torre, 66.

¹⁸ Riley-Smith, 69.

¹⁹ John Radzilowski, "Medieval Warfare," lecture posted to students at American Military University, November 21, 2015, <http://breeze5.uas.alaska.edu/p32763273/> (accessed November 27, 2015).

The efforts to destroy the Knights Templar and the Teutonic Knights were overt, opportunistic attempts by European kings, with the blessing of the papacy, to grab power and wealth. The Black Death, which assaulted Europe most severely during the intervening years between crackdown on the Knights Templar and Teutonic Knights, was quite different. Although European kings used the calamity to grab power, the event was an unwieldy behemoth that no one could control. Europe's kings were lucky to live through it, and may simply have made the best of the circumstances that developed in the decades following the initial devastating outbreak of the disease.

The Black Death entered Europe at a time when trade routes stretched from Europe to China and sub-Saharan Africa, allowing increasingly rapid transmission of products, ideas, and diseases across vast distances. In addition, the population was on the increase as a result of improved agricultural practices, yet Europe endured terrible famines, the worst of which occurred in 1315-1317.²⁰ Perhaps as a result of climactic events, the increase in long-distance trade, the Mongol conquests, the migration of black rats, or a combination of these, the Black Death entered Europe from the East in 1347. Commonly called the "Black Death," the wave of disease that swept throughout Europe in the Late Middle Ages may well have been a collection of several diseases that created a perfect storm that killed between thirty to fifty percent of the European population between 1347-1351. *Yersinia pestis* (bubonic plague), a bacterium that lives in the bloodstream of black rats and is transmitted through flea bites, is the most likely

²⁰ Vale, 302.

culprit for the worst of the Black Death.²¹ It caused a massive and rapid depopulation event that had tremendous political and economic repercussions throughout Europe.²²

The effects of the Black Death were profound for each of the “three estates” of medieval Europe, commoners, clergy, and nobility. Commoners endured tremendous psychological stress from the plague’s ravages; however, those who survived may have benefitted in some ways. The elderly and the chronically sick fared more poorly against the plague than did healthier individuals, creating a stronger and more immune competent population than before.²³ In addition, resources such as firewood, livestock, and agricultural land were either abandoned or available for purchase at a fraction of pre-Black Death prices. The increase in real wages for laborers, whose services were in great demand due to depopulation, led to housing improvements, a better diet, and the end of serfdom in Western Europe.²⁴ Increased wages, a decreased cost of living, and a glut of available land allowed peasants to purchase land for themselves. These benefits, while small consolation for the loss of family and friends in the Black Death, increased the social mobility of the commoners at the expense of the nobility, whose wealth and power were tied to land holdings.²⁵ Many commoners, at least economically and politically, fared much better in the aftermath of the Black Death than the nobles who had previously been their lords.

²¹ Peter Denley, “The Mediterranean in the Age of the Renaissance, 1200-1500,” in *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe*, ed. George Holmes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 248.

²² Sharon N. DeWitte, “Mortality Risk and Survival in the Aftermath of the Medieval Black Death,” *PLoS One* 9, no. 5 (2014): 1, *ProQuest*, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/docview/1522140671/fulltext?accountid=8289> (accessed November 28, 2015).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁵ Vale, 303.

Like just about every other aspect of the Black Death, however, there were many inconsistencies with regard to the fate of commoners following the calamity. Not all commoners reaped benefits from depopulation. Jews endured persecution during and after the plague, as they were often blamed for the plague's spread.²⁶ Luxury goods makers, such as goldsmiths, generally benefitted because there was more wealth in fewer hands. However, producers of common goods generally suffered because there were fewer people alive to buy their goods. Banks failed, trade temporarily decreased, and some monarchs were forced to debase their currency due to the lack of tax revenue.²⁷ Not all of these problems were the direct result of the Black Death, as numerous crises during the Late Middle Ages had already set forces into motion that caused bank failures, trade fluctuations, and currency debasement before the Black Death (ex. Philip IV's debasement of French currency in the 1290s), but the plague most certainly exacerbated these problems.

The clergy were not immune to the plague's repercussions. The abbey of Saint-Martin de Tournai recorded a loss of eighty percent of its monks from 1348-1362.²⁸ While a tragically high percentage, it is little surprise that members of the clergy were hit especially hard by the Black Death given the nature of their vocation. Members of the clergy anointed the sick, buried the dead, and counselled the bereaved. Those in cloistered monasteries, if infection infiltrated, spread disease to each other due to their communal lifestyle. New clerics had to be ordained quickly and in great numbers to fill the numerous vacancies.²⁹ The rapidity of which may have allowed men of limited education or of questionable moral character to enter offices within the Church, creating problems in the years that followed. As the Black Death raged, there were those

²⁶ Denley, 255.

²⁷ Ibid., 254-255.

²⁸ Vale, 303.

²⁹ Colin Platt, *King Death: The Black Death and its Aftermath in Late-Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 82.

who believed that the Church establishment had failed to uphold sufficiently high moral standards, and was thereby unable to prevent the Black Death's spread.³⁰ The Flagellants, among other groups, protested Church leadership and questioned some of the Church's practices. While most people found solace in the Church and probably strengthened their faith in the wake of the Black Death, the Flagellants show some of the rumblings of political tensions that would reverberate until and after the Reformation.

Like the commoners, the nobility suffered greatly from the plague in some ways, while it benefited in others. The most direct way nobles suffered from the Black Death, aside from the physical and psychological effects of the disease itself, was the lack of laborers to work the land. Lower-level nobles were especially hit hard, as the entire feudal structure crumbled. They were forced to pay higher wages to laborers who survived, making it more expensive to sow and harvest crops, maintain the large estates, and build homes and castles.³¹ Social and political tension increased as, in many cases, the poor grew richer and the rich grew poorer. In other cases, the Medici family for example, the rich grew richer, benefitting from the great wealth that was now reshuffled in the wake of the Black Death.³² Monarchs also reaped some benefits from the plague because free peasants fell under the jurisdiction of the king rather than a feudal lord. Taxes and legal fees passed directly from peasants to the monarchy, adding to the king's treasury.³³ In addition, the weakness of lesser nobles helped elevate the king to a higher status than before. European kings, who had previously been the most powerful noble out of all the nobles in the kingdom became much more distinct and much more powerful.³⁴

³⁰ Vale, 303.

³¹ Platt, 51.

³² Vale, 304.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ John Radzilowski, "Medieval Warfare," lecture posted to students at American Military University, November 21, 2015, <http://breeze5.uas.alaska.edu/p32763273/> (accessed November 27, 2015).

While the “winners” and “losers” in the destruction of the military orders are quite clear, it is much more difficult to assign such labels to survivors of the Black Death. However, the overall trend of both events is a strengthened monarchy and a weakened Church establishment. Add to that the absorption of vast stores of silver from the destruction of the military orders and the powerful militaries amassed during the Hundred Years’ War and Europe’s monarchs look even more like winners. The primary loser in both events was the Church. The military orders were destroyed, the papacy moved to Avignon, the Flagellants questioned Church authority, and numerous members of the clergy died in the Black Death. Thus, the Late Middle Ages was a time of great turmoil that helped Philip, Władysław II Jagiełło, Vytautas, the Medici family, and other rulers increase their power at the expense of the Church.

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