

**The Knights Templar: Fact vs Fiction**

Thomas A. Gay

ENGL1121

Professor McCarthy

4/2/24

## The Knights Templar: Fact vs Fiction

When a casual student of the Crusades hears the phrase, “*Deus Vult*” what usually comes to mind is a knight in white, with a red cross on it in search of the Holy Grail. What this describes is how the Templars are thought of in our modern culture. It takes a romanticized view of the Templars: bold knights, a secret order, and treasures untold. However, this begs the question of if it’s a correct view. Were they really what we think of them as? There are many myths surrounding the Templars: their founding is a mystery, they were the original secret society, they had a vast treasure that somehow escaped the French king, they held the secret of the Holy Grail, and they were all heretics. What I have found is that many of these are either false or simply unlikely. The Knights Templar were not what they have been turned into, they were far more interesting and complex.

In *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* Michael Baigent et al (2004) writes of the mystery surrounding the origin of the Templars. The mystery regards the fact of their surprising appearance from the desert winds and rapid rise to power. What really happened and is this a sign of their secret goals? They discuss how unlikely it is that the nine knights mentioned in the account by Guillaume de Tyre were able to carry out their supposed mission and thus must have had a separate goal. This claim is not only flawed logically but the other major accounts prove more realistic. As cited in *The Templars* (2002), William of Tyre (early 1180’s) writes, “In the same year [1118] some noblemen of knightly rank [...] placed themselves in the hands of the lord [...]. The most eminent of these men were [...] Hugh of Payns and Godfrey of Saint Omar. As they had neither Church nor [...] abode, the king gave them a temporary home in his palace” as well as claiming that in the span of nine years the Templars numbered only nine knights. In

*Holy Blood, Holy Grail* Michael Baigent et al (2004) writes, “One day Hugues, unsolicited, presented himself with eight comrades at the palace of Baudouin the first, king of Jerusalem, [...]” and, “So worthy was their objective apparently that the king vacated an entire wing of the royal palace and placed it at the knights’ disposal.” The framing used seems to show that a mysterious group of knights simply appeared out of nowhere to protect the Holy Land’s pilgrims and the king mysteriously gave them great rewards for no reason. However, the account by Michael the Syrian (early 1190’s) as cited in *The Templars* (2002) writes, “the Frenchman Hugh de Payn accepted the advice of Baldwin the second to defend the highways and had thirty knights join him”, and goes on to write about how the king gave them the Temple Mount as their base with a few villages to pay for their subsistence. This proves slightly more realistic; but it still isn’t clear why they were given this. Michael the Syrian (early 1190’s) mentions that Hugh de Payn had already achieved a great reputation from remarkable actions in past wars. What appears to have happened, by analyzing the written accounts, is that the Templars were a group of knights already with a good deal of fame. Hugh de Payn was given the Temple Mount as his group’s base because of his reputation and slowly the order began to grow. William of Tyre seems to write more of a fantastical tale than a historically exact one, while still holding true to the general story. The accounts combine the impressive, as that of William and Guillaume of Tyre, with the more realistic as that of Michael the Syrian. Though one must take all historical accounts with a critical mind, none of these tales seem overly suspicious. The mystery of their founding is nothing more than one would expect to see for an event so historic.

Why are there so many secrets? Mysteries and intrigue follow the Templars, giving some people reason to claim that they were the original secret society. One of the main aspects of a secret society is that it is, in fact, secret. Logically, for there to be a secret society there would

have to be things to keep the secret from going out. In the case of the Templars, this would be impossible. They were an incredibly vast and complex organization, with thousands of knights. In “Equation shows that large-scale conspiracies would quickly reveal themselves” the University of Oxford (2016) writes, “For a plot to last five years, the maximum was 2521 people. To keep a scheme operating undetected for more than a decade, fewer than 1000 people can be involved. A century-long deception should ideally include fewer than 125 collaborators.” What this suggests is that for the Templars to have been able to keep their rituals and goals secret they would have had to keep more than 2521 people silent about them for more than a century, an impossible feat.

One of the biggest mysteries surrounding the Templars is what happened to their massive amount of wealth. Their treasure has become the talking point of many a treasure hunter and yet, it is not that simple. Some would say the Templars became rich because of their location on the Temple Mount and thus could have found the treasure of Solomon. In “The Templars Got Rich Fighting for God-Then Lost It All” Simon Worrall (2017) writes about an interview with Dan Jones, saying that the reason the Templars became so rich was because they had an impressive network of material and financial donations from the pious. He goes on to write about how this helped them gain many estates across Europe. He also writes about how the Pope used them as tax collectors from 1212-1221 CE, during the Fifth Crusade. Worrall (2017) mentions that in 1307, Philip the fourth of France destroyed the Templars, raiding them for their wealth and to bolster his reputation as a reformer king. These are the essentials of what is known about the wealth of the Templars. In “Greed and Decline: The Treasure of the Knights Templar and Their Downfall” Wu Mingren (2020) writes, “Philip freed himself from his monetary debts to the Knights Templar, and seized their treasury as well.” What likely happened to the wealth was it

was dispersed to the French royalty and all their estates and assets seized. While this is not as fantastical as writers like Dan Brown have made it seem, the truth is far more useful for historians because it shows a lot about the state of France at the time.

The greatest myth of all is also the greatest question. Did the Knights Templar have the Holy Grail? The Holy Grail itself is something of intense debate, it is said to be the cup Christ drank from during the Last Supper, supposedly with magical powers. This is something that has been discussed much more recently, especially with fictional books and shows latching onto it. However, there is no actual evidence of the Grail's existence, let alone that the Templars had it. In "The Knights Templar: Were the Crusader Knights Really Protecting the Cup of Christ?" Dan Jones (n.d) writes about how the poem *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach makes brief mention of the military order the Templeise who guard the Grail. However, he also goes on to say, "Much of *Parzival* [...] was unoriginal. Earlier writers such as Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chretien de Troyes had already established the world [...] and provided many of the plots." He further mentioned how the first origin of the Grail written, was written after Eschenbach's poem. The history of the Grail legend goes back from before the origin of the Templars, as written in "Grail Legend", Joshua J. Mark (2019) discusses how the original story took place in Ireland, dating to 1056 CE in *The Prophetic Ecstasy of the Phantom*. The story which made the Grail legend popular, *Perceval of the Story of the Grail* by Chretien de Troyes is also discussed by Mark (2019), "Chretien's story features a magical castle, a grail, [...] a strange procession, a woman who changes form, and a visiting hero who is expected to ask a question [...] all elements found in [...] *The Prophetic Ecstasy of the Phantom*." In her article "What exactly is the Holy Grail-and why has its meaning eluded us for centuries?" Leah Tether (2017) discusses the fact that even in the earlier centuries the Grail had no set definition. She explains that this is

likely because Chretien died before finishing his poem, which neglected him the opportunity to fully flush out the concept, allowing other writers to latch on and make a new version. What this means is that the only evidence that the Grail is real is a collection of myths and tales. The only one connecting the Grail to the Templars was written based on those before it. Dan Jones (n.d) writes, “All of this was high fantasy, which people in the Middle Ages would have recognized as such: The Holy Grail was no more real than Spectre in today’s James Bond films. Yet as time went on, Robert of Boron’s [...] pseudo-history became confused with the real history [...]” The mystery of the Grail comes from a collection of stories, from ages past where dragons flew, and cups could heal the world. Unfortunately, they remain in the pages of heroic fiction.

One who hasn’t researched the Templars may hear the tale of their downfall and believe they were heretics. This was the major claim that was behind their destruction and has survived into the modern day. However, this claim is based on flawed evidence in the case of their confessions. In “Why the Knights Templar Gave False Confessions of Depravity” Greg Daugherty (2019) writes, “Not only were the Templars to be arrested, and their property seized, but they were to be imprisoned, interrogated and, if necessary, tortured.” This grisly truth of what the Templars faced gives necessary information to weigh their confessions against them. In *Depositions of the Templars at Paris* (October-November 1307) as cited in *The Templars* (2002), they discuss many confessions of spitting on the cross and the “crimes” of sodomy. These were all used by their enemies to make an excuse to destroy the order for good. However, because these confessions were made under brutal torture, the confessions themselves can be taken with less credence. These “confessions” were given under the order of the King of France, Philip the fourth. There are many possible reasons as to why he wanted them dead, and as Worrall (2017)

writes, the major one being money. The fact that the confessions alone are the “evidence” for the Templars accused depravity (by the standards of the time) appears with the fatal flaw of them being forced confessions. I am not saying that they could not have been heretical, however, what is clear to me is that there is not enough evidence to condemn them based solely on their “confessions.” They could have been heretical at any point, but their confessions cannot be taken as enough evidence of their depravity.

There is no reason to look for a hidden mystery in their founding, they were not a secret society, their treasure is likely already dispersed, they did not have the Holy Grail, and they were most likely, not heretics. While writing this I learned most importantly that history is complex, there are reasons false beliefs come about and there are many reasons myths arise. While I had already been researching about the Templars for my own enjoyment for years, I learned quite a lot from writing this. Mostly I could read the accounts of their history, learned how they got their wealth and much more. Before writing this, I had no idea about how the myth of the Holy Grail occurred, the collection of authors and myths that helped create it. One of the most important things I learned is that nothing is simple and there is always more to discover, but truth is always more important. When you hear the phrase, “Deus Vult” you likely still think of the Templars. When you think about them now, do not get swept up in the myths and tales but instead marvel at the incredible truth. They came from only a small group in the Holy Land to a powerful organization that stretched across Europe. See not the Grail or the treasure but see the people.

## References

Baigent, M. et al. (1982) *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. Delacorte Press

Barber, M. and Bate, K. (2002) *The Templars*. Manchester University Press

Daugherty, G. (2019, March 5). Why the Knights Templar Gave False Confessions of Depravity.

*History* <https://www.history.com/news/knights-templar-downfall-confessions-torture>

Jones, D. (unknown) The Knights Templar: Were the Crusader Knights Really Protecting the

Cup of Christ? *History* <https://www.history.com/shows/knightfall/pages/were-crusader-knights-really-protecting-the-cup-of-ch>

Mark, J. (2019, April 16). Grail Legend. *World History Encyclopedia*.

[https://www.worldhistory.org/Grail\\_Legend/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Grail_Legend/)

Mingren, W. (2020, June 30). Greed and Decline: The Treasure of the Knights Templar and

Their Downfall. *Ancient Origins* <https://www.ancient-origins.net/myths-legends/greed-and-decline-treasure-knights-templar-and-their-downfall-004668>

Synan, M. (2013, June 26). What is the holy grail? *History*. [https://www.history.com/news/what-](https://www.history.com/news/what-is-the-holy-grail)

[is-the-holy-grail](https://www.history.com/news/what-is-the-holy-grail)

Tether, L. (2017, November 22). What exactly is the Holy Grail – and why has its meaning

eluded us for centuries? *The Conversation* <https://theconversation.com/what-exactly-is-the-holy-grail-and-why-has-its-meaning-eluded-us-for-centuries-87558>



University of Oxford. (2016, January 26) Equation shows that large-scale conspiracies would quickly reveal themselves. *Phys.org* <https://phys.org/news/2016-01-equation-large-scale-conspiracies-quickly-reveal.html>

Worrall, S. (2017, September 22). The Templars Got Rich Fighting For God-Then Lost It All. *National Geographic*. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/knights-templar-crusades-dan-jones>