

Collective Identity and Self-images of the Knights of the Military Orders

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1. Introduction

In 1312 the Order of the Temple was abolished in the Council of Vienne. To the dissolution of the Templars has been paid scholarly attention. In recent years Riley-Smith argues that the state of the order seems to have been so dire that one wonders how long it could have been allowed to remain in existence. On the other hand, although the Temple experienced financial difficulties in its later years and was not altogether free from other shortcomings, the problems it faced were not very different from those encountered by the Hospital.

It is evident that the hostility against the military orders, especially the Temple, was widespread and had reached its height after the loss of the Holy Land in 1291. Union of the military orders was seen as a unavoidable task, for which various plans had been suggested

since the middle of the thirteenth century. The criticism was concentrated on the image of greed, which indicated very the betrayal of the vow of poverty.

My study seeks to get the true profile of the military orders reflected in the eyes of the others. In the change of the images and in the chasm between the ideal and the reality I will pursue the identity, which the orders shared together, and the self-images, which each order managed separately. This paper aims to get answer to following questions. Who were the Templars and the Hospitallers? Why were they called new knighthood? Were they really milites Christi? In what circumstances lived they? How could they find themselves?

2. Origin and Ideal

The military orders were called into existence by the needs of the Crusader States. It is not yet agreed where the concept came from. Some argue that it was inspired by the same movement to reform the religious life in the twelfth century. In this respect, the institution of the military orders was the most important innovation of the twelfth-century reform movement. The military orders belonged to the tradition of reformed monasticism that sought to broaden the monastic life of contemplation to include works of charity and the military activity. The others argue that it was the knights' own idea, inspired by the piety of the knightly class. What made possible the creation of hybrid institutions like the Military Orders was the lifting of this sinful stigma from prowess in arms. Such a change in attitude was in fact brought about in the course of the eleventh century by the emergence of a new ideal of Christian knighthood.

A lay association, which had been formed to keep the pilgrim routes safe for pilgrims or to defend Christian land, developed into a religious institution. At the Council of Troyes in January 1129 the knights, later called Templars, received official papal acknowledgement as

a religious order of the Catholic Church, and were given an official religious rule and habit. The members took monastic vows, said the Office and then rode out to kill their enemies, was unprecedented in Christian history, but the ideal it expressed was attractive to contemporaries.

The Templar Rule offers essential information about the 'new knighthood'.

“... therefore we admonish you, you who until now have led the lives of secular knights, in which Jesus Christ was not the cause, but which you embraced for human favour only, to follow those whom God has chosen from the mass of perdition and whom he has ordered through his gracious mercy to defend the Holy Church, and that you hasten to join them forever.”

The Templars are expected to devote themselves to the Holy Church. They have been chosen by Jesus to perform the most holy of duties, namely to fight the infidels in the Holy Land and to recover the Holy Sepulchre. The belief in God's choice and the knights' devotion to the Holy Church shed light on the gap between Templars and secular knights, whose causes for fighting are either feelings of irrational anger or the pursuit of vain glory or the desire for some piece of land. In his bull the pope Innocent II addressed the Templars as

“dear sons in the Lord like true Israelites and the most disciplined fighters of the divine battle defenders of the Catholic Church and attackers of the enemies of Christ”.

This contrast had been similarly expressed in the crusading speech of the Pope Urban II at Clermont:

"soldiers of Christ versus brigands or mercenaries".

3. Identity and Criticism

1) Fighter for the Faith

Both in medieval comments and in modern scholars the Templar's discipline and dedication to the group cause, in stark contrast to the secular warrior of the period, remains beyond dispute, although their political involvement in the East remains controversial. The Hospital took the first steps towards militarization within some years of the foundation of the Templars, in 1136, was granted its first castle and nearly bankrupted itself with over-ambitious military initiatives in the 1160s.

The images of the military orders in eyes of the Muslims were seen in fact as terrible and impregnable. The Muslims recognized the Templars and Hospitallers as the backbone of the Frankish armies. After the victory in Hattin, Saladin had the Templars and Hospitallers in prison decapitated, whose number amounted to 200, because they were the fiercest of all the Frankish warriors.

The self-image of fighter for the faith was strengthened through the close connection with the old Christian tradition. As St Bernard of Clairvaux had compared the Templars with true Israelites, they became soon on this background the new Maccabees. The connection to the Old Testament subsequently evolved into a hallmark of all Knights. For the Hospitallers this concept went on so far that they claimed in the different versions of their Rules-Prologues about the hospital in Jerusalem even a continuity since the time of the Maccabees for themselves.

Also otherwise, the identification with the Maccabees occurred above all in the historical writing of the military orders. As example the chronicle of the Teutonic Knights by Peter of Dusburg might be mentioned inter alia. The foundation for the common orientation in this model was, that the military orders should have been committed in the first place to the fighting against the infidel, regardless of their establishments and without difference.

Most lay brothers were, however, probably incapable of reading rules, statutes and customs. Through the readings during meals the brothers got the idea of the importance of his own order, of its special position in the Christendom and of his task in the world. The Teutonic Order did find it necessary to decree that a penance should be imposed on brothers who failed to learn the Paternoster, Creed and Hail Mary within six months of entry and that a more severe punishment should be meted out to those who had not mastered them after a year.

Eventually it was not only the special habit, the common housing, the celibacy, which made the soldier-monks different from the secular warriors, but also the awareness of their own special status and function, namely of the fighting against the infidel as Soldier of the Lord order New Machabaeus, furthermore also of the hospital service, which however sometimes was relegated to the background not only in the Holy Land, but also in Europe.

The reference to the Holy Land corresponded to the self-image of the individual brothers in the military orders. Convent churches of the Military Orders shared a common purpose in their direction to Jerusalem. A round-nave in their churches was used to make reference to the nave of the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. In Great Britain round churches of the Hospitallers included St John's Clerkenwell in London, Little Maplestead in Essex, St Giles in Hereford. Templar example included both the London Temples, Bristol, Dover, Garway in Hereford, Aslackby and Temple Bruer in Lincs.

3.2 Criticisms of Greed and Abuse

After initial enthusiasm the Order of the Temple was supported amongst the medieval nobility in considerable extent. The papal documents suggest that, from the earliest stages, support for the Templars was neither universal nor definitive. At the Third Lateran Council in 1179,

in which the growing hostility against the Orders finally erupted, the papacy was compelled to place some restraints on their expansion.

The principal criticisms levelled at the military orders were that they were proud envious, greedy, treacherous or cowardly, and did not use their extensive assets effectively in support of the Holy Land. To a great part criticisms were connected with that the orders were always willing to acquire more land or other possessions. Disapproval of the military orders referred to their betrayal of the vow of poverty.

William Archbishop of Tyre had great influence in making negative image of the Templars.

"They are said to have vast possessions, both on this side of the sea and beyond. their property is reported to be equal to the riches of kings. For a long time they kept intact their noble purpose and carried out their profession wisely enough. At length, however, they began to neglect humility, the guardian of all virtues. They withdrew from the patriarch of Jerusalem, from whom they had received the establishment of their Order and their first privileges, and refused him the obedience which their predecessors had shown him. To the churches of God also they became very troublesome,"

He accused the Templars of aspiring the rival the wealth of the monarches. Vast possessions caused to neglect humility and to refused the obedience. Reporting the capture of Ascalon (1153), William strongly disapproved of the Templars' offensive as motivated by lust for spoils and plunder.

Criticism of the Templars' greed and of their abuse of papal privileges was shared by John of Würzburg, a German priest and pilgrim to the Holy Land sometime in the second half of the twelfth century:

"much property and countless revenues [of the Temple] both in that country and elsewhere. The house also has very many knights for the defence of the land of the Christians; but they have the misfortune, I know

not whether truly or falsely, to have their fair fame aspersed with the reproach of treachery, "

Matthew Paris, a consistent critic of the Order, blamed the knights for actually prolonging the wars with the Saracens, as a pretext for raising more money. He repeated Emperor Frederick's claim that the Templars entertained the Sultans and allowed them to worship in the houses of the Temple. The increasing involvement of the Templars in financial transactions inflamed the criticism of their greed and avarice, traits which had done substantial harm to their image from early on. The accusations of greed have reflected hostility to the orders as money-lenders.

Pope Innocent III, otherwise a friend of the Templars, claimed that they make a cloak of religion for worldly gain, and pointed out the Order's misuse of its copious privileges.

"Following the doctrine of devils, they mark the sign of the Crucified on every kind of vagabond . . . they think nothing of adding sin to sin like a long rope, claiming that whosoever have appealed to their brotherhood by a yearly contribution of two or three shillings cannot be lawfully deprived of the burial office of the Church even though they may be under interdict."

Pope Honorius III claimed that the English Templars abused their privileges. He accused the knights of usurping domains, preventing customary dues from being paid to the crown, disregarding the customs of the king's manors, and engaging royal officers in vexatious lawsuits.

Consequently, the fall of the city Acre in 1291 led to the reform of the military orders, which should be either abolished or at least united. It seemed to be difficult to maintain the independency of the military orders. Towards the end of the thirteenth century the military orders were reproached for wasting their resources almost as frequently as they were condemned for pursuing rivalries.

In the centre of criticism stand their wealth, which would have been misused or abused, and henceforce should have been denounced. Both the popes and the rulers in Europe complained

that the military orders were not providing the amount of assistance which they were capable of giving against the infidels. In the first half of the thirteenth century the Templars had later shown an increasing reluctance to serve, and had been subject to criticism and threats by the Aragonese kings.

As the situation in the East became more desperate, attention was increasingly paid to the use which the orders made of their wealth. The prelates at the council of Reims in 1292 appear to have envisaged the confiscation of the military orders' property if they were unwilling to provide an adequate force of troops for the Holy Land. Any attempts to enforce union would be vigorously resisted, for both good and bad reasons, by members of the existing orders.

The images of greed and avarice might be related in any way to the substance of the military orders. Without any conflicts they could not come into existence and will or should perish. In the basis of the organizational network they had delivered news and informations from the East to the West. It was intended to stress their need for aid.

In the same context, the important role was assumed by the military orders in the dissemination of papal appeals and letters. The Templars and Hospitallers, driven by financial, material, and personal motives, had built a network of communications between their central houses in Jerusalem and their commanderies in the West.

The orders' commitments, namely military activities and charitable activities, demanded money, men and materiel, and these could only be generated through the management of endowed land and investments. Warfare was hugely expensive and it got more so as time went by. The orders chose, or were persuaded, to concentrate on fortification and shipping. Aggression is expensive. The resources the orders needed for their activities could only come from their Western estates, and there is ample evidence for the relative efficiency with which they managed their vast property portfolios. It is not surprising that attention has been drawn to their economic role in recent studies about the provinces and commanderies. The

orders' hunger for cash are also largely responsible for the leadership they took very early in their history in paving the way for the creation of true orders of the Church.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries all religious orders were anxious to maintain a good public profile, in order to encourage almsgiving. Competition for alms forced orders to take particular care to protect their image. But they could have drawn attention and aids of the outsiders both through military activities and through charitable service.

4. Concluding Remarks

The Templars and the Hospitallers had emerged as 'new knights'. They sought to manage a new style of life, namely the symbiosis of monk and warrior, in order to fulfill the fighting the infidels and the charitable works. Monk-knights were brave on the battlefield, self-perceived as soldiers of the Lord, as descents of the Maccabees, as defenders of the Christendom. They ought to read daily Paternoster in the convent

However, the monk-knights have been steadily criticised of a variety of causes, above all of greed and avarice. It should be considered that their commitments to demanded vast costs. It has to be pointed out that the popularity of the military orders depended to a great extent on the crusading movements. The defeat of the Christendom itself indicated a crisis to them. The loss of the Holy Land in 1291 gave an great impetus to the union of the military orders.

It is uncertain to what extent the negative image had influenced on the dissolution of the Temple. The question needs certainly more studies in their situation in Europe. It might be argued that the symbiosis of monk and warrior was ultimately not successful. Such a symbiosis would have been not at all sought. A leading scholar of monastic spirituality in Germany, Kaspar Elm, saw in the military orders an independent form of organization in a

comprehensive range of the semireligiosity. The monk-knights would have become neither true monks, nor could have reached the ideal of new knighthood, which St Bernard of Clairvaux might have had in his mind.