Centre for Medieval Studies

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Centre for Medieval Studies Newsletter
Special Edition One

By John H. Pryor, with thanks to Malcolm Barber
Edited by Gabrielle Singleton

This first Special Edition of the Newsletter of the Centre for Medieval Studies has been compiled on the occasion of the acquisition by Fisher Library of a facsimile reproduction and edition, with Historical Notes, of a series of manuscripts from the Archivio Secreto Vaticano Adservatis, collectively entitled the Processus contra Templarios / Proceedings against the Templars.

Members of the Centre who would like to produce a Special Edition of the Newsletter of their own are invited to send submissions to John Pryor.

John H. Pryor
21 July, 2008

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1 Use of Malcolm Barber, The trial of the Templars, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, C.U.P., 2006), and of Barbara Frale, “The Chinon chart: Papal absolution to the last Templar, Master Jacques de Molay”, The journal of medieval history, 30 (2004), pp. 109-34 is tacit throughout here. This is not a piece of original research but rather a report.
Fisher Library has recently acquired a facsimile reproduction and edition, with Historical Notes, by Barbara Frale, of a series of manuscripts from the Archivio Segreto Vaticano Adservatis, collectively entitled the Processus contra Templarios / Proceedings against the Templars. The facsimile edition is the result of 10 years of Frale’s research in the ASV. The Library’s copy is number 300 of an edition of 799, the 800th being offered to the Pope. The Library had to apply to be allowed to purchase a copy. As far as we know there are only two copies in Australia.

The manuscripts are ASV Armarium D. 208, D. 209, D. 210, D. 217, D. 218, and Registri Avenionenses 48 ff., fols 437r-460r. ASV Arm. D. 208-210 are a record of an inquisition of 72 Templars held at Poitiers, then the temporary residence of Pope Clement V, over four days from 29 June to the 2 July 1308, in the presence of the Pope. There are three huge charters, the largest composed of three sheets of parchment sewn together and measuring approximately 50x180 cms.
Archivio Segreto Vaticano Armarium D. 208-210: the records of the Poitiers inquisition of 72 Templars, 28 June - 2 July 1308

ASV Arm. D. 217 and 218 (a contemporary copy of 217) record a subsequent inquisition held at Chinon on 17-20 August 1308 at which the Grand Master of the Order, James of Molay, and four Preceptors (heads of provinces) of the Order, were interrogated, confessed, and were absolved. The charter is approximately 60 centimetres square. On this occasion the Pope was not present.

The manuscripts are fair copies in Latin of the inquisition records, redacted as fair copies later for the Pope when he retired to the priory of Grazean before the Council of Vienne, which eventually convened on 16 October 1311, at which the final fate of the Order would be considered.

ASV Armarium D. 217, the original of the Chinon manuscripts
Reg. Aven. 48ff, fols 437r-460r are part of a Register of Pope Benedict XII (1334-42), in which Frale found these folios which had been bound in with it at a later date but which are from the pontificate of Clement V (1305-14).

This manuscript, which contains abbreviated versions of the confessions of the Templars, was prepared for the Pope and other notables prior to the Council of Vienne. It was drawn up from the now-lost notarial records made as the Templars were actually speaking and from which ASV Armarium D. 208-210 were also drawn up. Its opening two folios also have summaries of the confessions of the Grand Master and the Preceptors made at Chinon.

Reg. Aven. 48ff, fol, 438r, containing the record of the Inquisition of James of Molay, here picked out in red

The background is that Frale was a graduate student at the Vatican and for an exercise was allowed to use documents not normally available. While doing so, in 1995 she identified fols 437r-460r of Reg. Aven. 48ff as being a version of the inquisition held at Poitiers and became particularly interested in the short marginal annotations in the manuscript. Konrad Schottmüller had published ASV Arm. D. 208-210 in Der Untergang de Templer-Ordens, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1887), pp. 13-39.

The manuscripts had been, however, badly damaged and with the help of modern technology, especially a Wood's Lamp and digital ultra-violet and infrared photography, the new edition is an infinite advance on the 19th-century one. Between 1996 and 2000 Frale completed her Tesi di dottorato at the Università di Venezia: Custodi del Santuario. Le radici orientali del processo contro l'ordine del Tempio (1129-1314), 2 vols, and then published from it a book: L'ultima battaglia dei Templari. Dal codice ombra d'obbedienza militare alla costruzione del processo per eresia (Rome, 2001). She published her own monograph on the trial as Il Papato e il processo ai Templari (Rome, 2003), and also set out her findings at Malcolm Barber's request in an article: “The Chinon chart: Papal absolution to the last Templar, Master Jacques de Molay” in The journal of medieval history, 30 (2004), pp. 109-34 [available on-line].

During the Avignon period the Papal archives were held in the Tower of the Treasury of the Papal Palace. The records of the trial of the Templars were kept in a chest there and eventually were transferred to Rome some time after Urban V returned to Rome in 1367; how and when are unknown. By 1628 they were held in Castel Sant’Angelo and a catalogue, which still exists, was made by Giambattista Confalonieri.

At dawn on 13 October 1307 all Templars in France who could be found were arrested by order of King Philip IV. Only a few escaped and of those only one, Gérard de Villiers, the Preceptor of France, was of any eminence. The instructions for the arrests had been issued secretly a month before, on 14 September. They were accused that when they entered the Order they were made to deny Christ, were shown an image of Christ on a crucifix and made to spit on it; that they removed their clothes and kissed, or were kissed by, the brother who received them, on the lower back, the navel, and the mouth; that they were bound to allow other brothers to sodomize them; and that they wore a small belt that had been touched to a strange idol with a small head. Accusations such as these were similar to others that had been levelled against heretics and religious and political opponents for centuries. The Templars were to be tried by
ecclesiastical court and all property of the Order was to be seized. The prisoners were interrogated and tortured by royal agents under the direction of Guillaume de Nogaret and almost all of them confessed to one or more of the charges. Their inquisition, under the auspices of the Papal Inquisitor of France, Guillaume de Paris, began on 19 October. Guillaume was a French Dominican closely connected to the French crown and was the royal confessor. Jacques de Molay himself was questioned on 25 and 26 October and his confession was sent to the Pope. Nogaret edited their confessions and by early 1308 the French had around 300 confessions. The arrest was in violation of the foundation bull for the Templars, *Omne Datum Optimum* of Innocent III of 29 March 1139, under the terms of which: “... the house or Temple ... will be under the protection and tutelage of the Holy See for all time to come.” and “... we prohibit and altogether forbid that any ecclesiastical or secular person should dare to demand fealties, homage, oaths, or other safeguards, ... from the master or the brothers of this same house.” and “... they [the brothers] shall be subject to no person outside your chapter ...”. For almost two centuries the Templars had been subject to no jurisdiction other than that of the Popes, with one exception. In 1230 Pope Honorius III had bestowed extraordinary powers on the Inquisitor in Tuscany to root out heresy wherever it could be found, including within the military orders. Philips’s agents therefore had to direct their accusations to questions of heresy and Guillaume de Paris could examine the Templars for heresy.

Clement V himself was Betrand de Got, a Frenchman who had been Archbishop of Bordeaux, and as such an English subject. He was a compromise candidate who, because he had not been a Cardinal and member of the Papal Curia, was not tainted by the factionalism that had riven the Curia as a result of the bitter struggle between Philip IV and Pope Boniface VIII (1295-1303). He was elected Pope on 5 June 1305 and enthroned at Lyons. Although he made preparations to return to Rome, he put it off repeatedly and resided at Poitiers and elsewhere until he moved to Avignon in 1309 to prepare for the Council of Vienne.

After being told of the French allegations against the Templars, Clement retired to Poitiers and took various measures to stave off proceedings. He knew that he had to obtain access to the Templars, especially to the leaders, but the French argued that they were criminals who had confessed, refused to hand them over, and began a publicity campaign to vilify the Order. On 22 November 1307 Clement issued the bull *Pastoralis preeminentiae,* ordering a general arrest of Templars everywhere on the grounds that there was a need to investigate the Order. He tried to have the Church take over the investigations from the French and as a result the Templar officers retracted their confessions at Christmas. According to one source, Jacques de Molay said that he had confessed to the charges because he had been tortured and he showed the wounds on his body. At Chinon, however, he would declare that he had not been tortured. Clement suspended Guillaume de Paris in February and with him the French inquisition. But the French resorted to a campaign of public anti-Papal and anti-Templar propaganda and at Poitiers Clement was virtually placed under house arrest. Because he was at Poitiers, within the territories of France, he did not have the freedom that Boniface VIII had had in 1303 when he excommunicated Philip in the bull *Super Petri solio.* And, in any case, Boniface’s actions had been countered by Philip’s arrest of the Pope before the bull could be issued. It would take almost a year of careful diplomacy to persuade the French to surrender at least some of the prisoners.

Clement’s actions led to trials in England, Spain, Germany, Italy, and Cyprus. The English hearings examined 43 Templars between 20 October and 18 November 1309 but none of them admitted to any of the 87 charges levelled against them. Even after torture was eventually brought to bear in summer 1311, contrary to English law, the results in England were nothing like those achieved in France. In Aragon, King James II initially demanded Papal instructions but in December he changed his mind and ordered the arrest of the Templars and seizure of their castles. But although the Master was seized together with some castles, such as Peñíscola, others held out, the Order reinforced them, and leadership was assumed by Raymond of Guardia, the Preceptor of Mas Deu in Roussillon. The Order’s resistance was, however, ended in July 1309 and four enquiries into the Templars were then conducted. Under Aragonese law torture was not allowed and all the Templars denied the charges against them. When eight Templars were eventually tortured in August 1311, they still refused to confess. Eventually a provincial council declared the Templars in Aragon innocent of all charges. Similarly in Castile, where two commissions were established at Compostela and Toledo, and in Portugal, where one was established at Orense, none of the Templars incriminated

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2 Trans. Malcolm Barber and Keith Bate, in *The Templars: selected sources translated and annotated* (Manchester, M.U.P., 2002), No 67 (pp. 244-7).
3 Loc. cit., No 7 (pp. 59-64).
themselves. The Order was declared innocent at the Council of Salamanca in October 1310. Charles II of Anjou, King of Sicily and Count of Provence, and Philip IV’s uncle, ordered the arrest of the Templars in Provence and South Italy on 13 January 1308. Most seem to have escaped, however, and the few later examined at Lucera and Brindisi all admitted the denial of Christ, but their testimony is almost incoherent. Whether torture was used is not known. In the Papal States the inquisitors held sessions in Rome and 12 other towns and heard depositions from 24 external witnesses, none of whom admitted to knowing anything. Again, most Templars appear to have escaped in advance and only six serving brothers were apprehended, all of whom confessed to at least some illicit practices. There were also inquisitions elsewhere in Italy and in Germany and central Europe. At Trier, the Archbishop acquitted the Order. At Mainz, the session was disrupted by the Templar Preceptor of Grumbach, who burst into it with 20 armed knights. His brother, the Preceptor of the Rhine, offered to prove the Order’s innocence by submitting to the ordeal of the red hot iron. At Mainz 37 Templars asserted their innocence and 12 external witnesses also defended the Order. On Cyprus the 83 knights and 35 sergeants of the Order all proclaimed their innocence collectively. Subsequently examined at Nicosia on 5-28 May 1310, the 76 men whose depositions survive all confessed to nothing. The Marshal, Ayme of Oselier, declared that if Jacques de Molay had confessed, he had done so “against God and the truth” because there never had been any errors. In August 1310 King Henry II, who was no friend of the Templars, returned to Cyprus and instituted a second enquiry into the Templars, having 21 external witnesses interviewed. But again, nothing conclusive was alleged against them. Away from the influence of the French court, things were very different.

Back in France, the French finally consented to allow the Pope to interrogate some Templars and 72 were sent from their prisons in Paris to Poitiers, in chains and in carts escorted by troops. They were carefully selected, mostly being simple sergeants, or those who had left or wanted to leave the Order, or who had some grudge against it, or who had been terrified by the torture. The hearings at Poitiers on 29 June - 2 July 1208 were presided over by Bérenger Frédol in the presence of the Pope and Cardinals Pierre de la Chapelle-Tailléfer, Thomas Jorz, Étienne de Suisy, Landolfo Brancacci, and Pietro Colonna. As the convoy of prisoners made its way from Paris to Poitiers, however, James of Molay and four Preceptors of the Order were removed at the last moment and taken to the royal castle of Chinon. At Poitiers, Clement questioned the prisoners personally. All confessed to at least something, sought forgiveness, and were absolved and restored to the Church.

But the proceedings at Poitiers neither freed the Templar prisoners nor wrested the Templar properties from French control. Although Templar properties were supposed to be held in trust for the defence of the Holy Land, in practice the French crown was already disposing of them in its own interests. In a letter to Philip written in December 1310 Clement lamented that he had already known at Poitiers that all was “lost and dissipated” as regards the Templars’ properties in France.

In *Faciens misericordiam* of 12 August 1308 Clement instituted two inquiries: a Papal commission to investigate the Order as a whole and a series of episcopal inquiries into individual Templars in the bishops’ dioceses. *Regnans in coelis*, issued the same day, announced that a General Council would meet at Vienne in October 1310 to decide the fate of the Order, amongst other things. Over the next three years inquisitions were conducted throughout the Christian world and the results were sent to the Pope, who examined them at the priory of Grazean, and to a select group of prelates assembled at Malauçène, before the Council of Vienne. Only the summary of the inquisitions in England has survived, apart from *Reg. Aven.* 48ff, fols 437r-460r, found by Frale.

A French royal register of Philip the Fair’s Chancellor, Pierre d’Étampes, contains a report of a letter sent by three Cardinals to Philip saying that they had absolved in the name of the Pope the Grand Master and his fellow prisoners at Chinon. This report had previously been unsubstantiated. In 2001, however, Frale returned to the Vatican from Venice and found the record of the absolution of the Order’s officers made at Chinon by Cardinals Bérenger Frédol, Étienne de Suisy, and Landolfo Brancacci in August 1308, which had been previously lost in the cataloguing system. Entitled *Inquesta in diocesi Turonensi*, the charter had been misplaced among others recording episcopal, provincial enquiries into the Order. It had been known previously in an abbreviated form only. (See Heinrich Finke, *Papsttum und Untergang des Templerordens*, 2 vols (Münster, 1906), vol. 2, pp. 324-40.) The charter reveals that at Chinon the Cardinals examined Jacques de Molay and the four Preceptors free of French intervention. There is a problem in the dating, however, for the inquest at Chinon was held on 17-20 August but, in *Faciens misericordiam* of 12 August, Clement announced that Jacques de Molay and the other leaders had been absolved and reconciled to the Church. Either the Pope anticipated that they would be absolved and took the risk of announcing an absolution that had not yet been granted, or *Faciens misericordiam* was actually
written later in the month but then dated to 12 August together with other bulls drawn up that month, as was common Papal chancery practice.

The Papal commission into the Order did not commence until 8 August 1309 at the famous monastery of Sainte-Geneviève in Paris. It would hold three sessions between November 1309 and June 1311, chaired by Gilles Aycelin, Archbishop of Narbonne, who was a long-standing servant of the French crown. Peter of Bologna, a former Procurator of the Order at the Papal court, and Reginald of Provins, Preceptor of Orleans, led the defence, arguing that the Templars had confessed only because of torture. Nothing actually happened until 22 November. Hugh of Pairaud, the Visitor of the Temple in France, appeared that day, and Jacques de Molay appeared on 26 November. Neither provided any effective defence of the Order. Pairaud seems to have wanted to throw himself directly on the mercy of the Pope and Molay appears to have been so crushed by two years of imprisonment and maltreatment that his testimony was incoherent and alienated the commissioners. Ultimately, on 28 November, he also threw himself on the Pope’s mercy. Other prisoners, however, began to offer a more spirited defence. By February 1310, many Templars were beginning to defend the Order before the commission. Between 7 and 27 February no less than 532 Templars came forward to defend it. By now the leaders, Molay, Pairaud, and Geoffroi de Gonneville, the Preceptor of Aquitaine and Poitou, all appear to have resigned themselves to an appeal to the Pope. But, nevertheless, other defenders of the Templars came forward, reaching a total of 597 by the end of March. They claimed that those members of the Order who had died in prison, except at Paris, had been denied burial in consecrated ground. By now it appears that the rank and file of the Order had been, and felt themselves to have been, failed by its leadership. On Tuesday 7 April 1310 nine selected Templars appeared before the commissioners and mounted a spirited defence of the Order. The defence was effective and led the French crown to try to stop it by acting elsewhere. In May 1310 Philip of Marigny, Archbishop of Sens, condemned the Templars in his province as relapsed heretics and they were burned at the stake. In the end the French crown had its way and the defence was swept aside. On 12 May 1310, in a field outside Paris, 54 Templars were burned to death at the stake. Others followed, both at Paris and elsewhere. The main leader of the defence, Peter of Bologna, who had been the Order’s Procurator at the Papal court, disappeared some time between 10 May and 3 November. He was said to have escaped and fled, but he may well have been murdered in prison. Resistance crumbled. In the third session of hearings that began in November 1310, of 212 Templars examined, 198 made confessions of some kind; only 14 maintained the innocence of the Order. Their depositions and vacillations demonstrate clearly that they were at the end of their tether. Nevertheless, they maintained that previous confessions had been the product of torture. Even the notarial records of the commissioners record that they were frightened. Some appeared more than once and changed their depositions from denial to confession. John of Pollencourt, a serving brother, was one such. On 9 January 1311 he denied everything but then he asked to appear again on 12 January and this time confessed everything. What had happened in his prison over the intervening three days, one can easily imagine. Although the proceedings of the commission were supposed to be confidential, the French gaolers had ready access to information from it and their physical control of the Templars in prison meant that resistance by individuals was now useless. By the end of May 1311 the commission had done its work and was wound up.

When the Council of Vienne finally convened on 16 October 1311, nine Templars appeared, claiming to represent another 1,500-2,000 in Lyons and its region. They were promptly imprisoned. Debate raged among the prelates about whether the Templars should be allowed to defend themselves at the Council. Philip came south to Lyons, just up the Rhône from Vienne, to put pressure on the Pope. The decision to suppress the Order was announced at a session on 3 April 1312, with Philip and his son Louis of Navarre sitting on either side of the Pope. Clement never condemned the Order but he did order its dissolution in the Bull Vox in excelso on 22 March 1312 “... for God’s honour and for the preservation of the Christian faith, also for the aid of the Holy Land and many other valid reasons ...”. The bull Ad providam of 2 May 1312 abolished the Order and transferred its property, or what was left of it, to the Hospitallers, except in the kingdoms of Castile, Aragon, Portugal, and Majorca, where it was reserved to the Papacy itself. In fact the Templars in Aragon were absorbed into the new Order of Montesa in 1317 and in Portugal into another new order, the Order of Christ, in 1319.

Templars who had been reconciled, or against whom nothing had been proved, received pensions and continued to live in former Templar houses or transferred to other orders, especially to the Cistercians. Those who were impenitent, or who had retracted confessions, received various terms of imprisonment. The

fate of the Order’s officers was left to the Pope. James of Molay himself was burned at the stake as a relapsed heretic on 18 March 1314. Even after the dissolution, however, former Templars were considered to be still bound by their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. It is hardly surprising to find that some embarked on other careers. Some married, some took concubines, some became criminals. Bernard of Fuentes, the former Preceptor of Corbins, turned up at the Aragonese court in 1313 as the ambassador of the Emir of Tunis. Actions were taken against those who were considered to be living in breach of their vows.

The records of the Poitiers and Chinon inquisitions have been loudly trumpeted in the Press as evidence that the Papacy believed that the Templars were innocent of the crimes of which they were accused, which fits rather neatly into the recent trend of Papal apologies for mistakes of the past. Wikipedia claims that the documents show the Pope in a better light and are a failed attempt to preserve the Order from Philip IV and to establish that it was not heretical. Malcolm comments, however: “This seems to be a misunderstanding of the penitential procedures of the medieval Church. In October 1307 the officers had confessed, but at Christmas they retracted in front of the Cardinals. The Pope then suspended proceedings but Philip IV put pressure on him to re-open them through propaganda, meetings of the Estates of France, and finally a grandstand confrontation at Poitiers in May-June 1308. In the end Clement gave in but restarted the trial in a different form, setting in train proceedings that lasted almost until the Council of Vienne. Philip had, however, been careful not to send the leaders to Poitiers, so the Pope sent the Cardinals to Chinon, where they had been imprisoned. The result was a reversion to the previous confessions, expressions of contrition, and subsequent abscission. All of this was standard procedure and did not imply any Church opinion about the guilt or innocence of the Order. The trials then went on with the Papal commission examining the Order as a whole and episcopal inquiries examining individuals.” [personal communication]

What is surprising is that, of the 138 Templars whose depositions from the original Paris interrogations survive, only four completely denied the charges against them, and they were all junior members. By 1307 many Templars were middle aged or elderly and they put up surprisingly little resistance. Geoffrey of Charney, Preceptor on Normandy, was around 56 years old and had been received into the order 37 or 38 years before. James of Molay himself had been received 42 years previously. Hugh of Pairaud, Visitor of France, had been received 44 years previously. All of these confessed to some accusations, Hugh of Pairaud to just about everything. But John of Châteauvillars, who was only 30 and who had been received only four years before at Mormant, in the diocese of Troyes, denied everything except being kissed on the mouth after receiving his mantle. It should also be remembered that many Templars were not fighting knights who had battled the Muslims in the East. Many were merely managers of unfortified and non-military agrarian estates. The Templars questioned at Paris included men who were shepherds, agricultural workers, a carpenter, a priest, and even a ploughman. The priest was 70 years old and had entered the Order only three years before. These were not the men to resist harsh questioning accompanied by torture. The popular understanding of the membership of the Order needs to be reassessed radically.

James of Molay provided no effective defence of the Order himself. He had been received into the Order in 1265 at Beaune in Burgundy and sent to the East during the Mastership of William of Beaujeu, some time around 1275. He was active in the East but it is not known whether he was at the siege of Acre in 1291. He was elected Master on Cyprus in 1292, from where he organized naval raids on the Palestinian coast and tried to re-occupy Ruad (Arwād) island off the coast at Tortosa. The garrison was wiped out in 1302. He attempted consistently to promote Crusades throughout the 1290s and visited the West twice, in 1293-6 and 1306-7, to obtain privileges and material help for the Order. In 1306 both he and the Hospitaller Master, Fulk of Villaret, were asked by the Pope to produce memoirs on a case for and against the union of the two Orders. Predictably both Masters argued against the proposal but Molay also urged the Pope to promote a new Crusade of 12-15,000 knights and 5,000 footsoldiers.

When he was arrested in Paris in October 1307, he confessed to denying Christ. He denied spitting on a crucifix, however, saying that he spat only on the ground. He later repeated his confession before a public meeting of university theologians and leading ecclesiastics but retracted his confession together with the other officers at Christmas 1307. He repeated it, however, when examined at Chinon. After the Council of Vienne, he was condemned to life imprisonment by three Cardinals in March 1314. When he retracted

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5 Loc. cit., No 69 (pp. 251-6).
6 Loc. cit., No 69 (pp. 252-3).
the confession again, he was handed over to the French as a relapsed heretic and burnt at the stake on 18 March 1314. Throughout the whole affair he was vacillating and indecisive.

The record of James of Molay’s inquisition at Chinon as recorded on Reg. Aven. 48ff, fol. 438r.

Here is the text and a translation of the record of James of Molay’s interrogation at Chinon.


Text Preliminary rough translation

50 Item die vicesima dicti mensis in nostra et notariorum ac testium eorumdem presencia personaliter constitutus frater Iacobus de Molam, miles, magister maior Ordinis Militie Templi, iuratus et diligenter interrogatus secundum formam et modum

Item, on the 20th day of the said month, in our presence and [that of] the notaries and their witnesses, brother James of Molay, knight, Grand Master of the Order of the Knighthood of the Temple, arraigned in person, sworn and diligently questioned according to the pattern and manner written above [i.e., of others questioned before him], said that 42 years or thereabouts have passed [since] that he was received at Beaune, of the diocese of Autun, as a brother of the said Order by brother Humbert of Paroaud, at that time Visitor of France and Poitou, a knight, in the chapel of the house of the Temple of the said place of Beaune. And he said concerning the mode of his reception that the said receiver showed to him a certain cross after he had handed a cloak to him, and he said to him received that he should deny the God whose image was depicted in the same cross and that he should spit on the cross: which he himself did; but nevertheless he did not spit on the cross but beside [it], as he said. Item, he said that he made the aforesaid denial by mouth, not in [his heart]. Of the vice of sodomy, the idolatrous head, and illicit kisses, having been questioned diligently, he said that he knew nothing. Questioned whether he confessed the aforesaid by request, for reward, for love, for favour, through fear or hatred or at the instigation of anyone, or from the violence or fear of torture, he said that no. Questioned whether after he was captured he was put to questioning or torture, he said that no. After these [things], [from below] we have considered that the benefit of absolution according to the form of the Church should be extended to the same brother James, Grand Master of the said order, abjuring in our hands according to
The torture consisted primarily of: the rack, an instrument on which the hands and feet of the prisoner were tied to a windlass which, when turned, dislocated the joints of the ankles and wrists; the strappado, in which the prisoner’s hands were tied behind his back and he was then hauled up to the roof, by a rope thrown over a beam, and then allowed to fall to within a few inches of the floor; and the flame, in which the prisoner’s feet were placed in front of a fire, fat rubbed into them, and then the flame applied. Sometimes weights were attached to the testicles or feet during the strappado. When added to shackling, a diet of bread and water, and the sophisticated questioning techniques that a century of inquisition into heresy had developed, these were mechanisms that only the most battle-hardened and hardy Templars would withstand, and few of those were in France. It should be said, however, that an anonymous treatise entitled the Lamentacio quedam pro Templaris, probably produced in February 1308, said that the torturing had led to the death of 36 Templars from the House in Paris alone. No confessions were recorded from Templars who had died under questioning, so it is probable that in fact some, perhaps even many, did resist and paid the ultimate price.

The episcopal inquisitions that were conducted away from the influence of royal officials produced far fewer confessions. By now the intent was to lead accused Templars along a path towards confession, penitence, absolution, and reconciliation. Those who denied charges were to be interrogated several times. If they persisted, they were to be put on a diet of bread and water. They were to be shown the confessions of the Grand Master and other officers. Other Templars, who had confessed, were then to be sent to them to convince them. In the end torture could be used. Nevertheless, at Clermont in June 1309, of 69 Templars examined, 29 or 42% denied the accusations completely.

What provoked the extraordinary attack by Philip of France on the Templars? After the fall of Acre, virtually the last Crusader outpost in the Holy Land, to the Mamluk Sultan, al-Ashraf Sālāḥ al-Dīn Khalīl, on 18 May 1291, the Templars, as well as the Hospitalers, lost much of the reason for their existence. The Order had been founded in 1118, some say 1120, by a knight from Champagne called Hugh de Payens and eight others to protect pilgrims coming up to Jerusalem from the coast and going down to the river Jordan to renew their baptisms. It is interesting that Frale believes, as do I, that originally the Templars were Augustinian canons, a point much disputed by others. Although the Order remained very small for some years, it eventually won support for its Rule at the Council of Troyes in 1129 and then attracted the influential support of St Bernard of Clairvaux, who wrote his De laude novae militiae in its defence in the 1130s. In Innocent III’s bull Omne datum optimum of 1139 the Order was made sovereign in its own right, subject only to the authority of the Papacy. By then the Order was making an important contribution to the defence of the Crusader states in Syria and Palestine through its castles and its personnel in the field armies. It the West the pious donated hundreds of properties to the Order, mostly farms and estates which produced resources to support the military effort in the Holy Land. Following Saladin’s disastrous defeat of Guy of Lusignan and the forces of the Kingdom of Jerusalem at the battle of the Horns of Hattin in 1187, in addition to those Templars killed in the battle Saladin had another 230 or so beheaded. They were too dangerous to be allowed to live. Only a handful escaped the battle. The Master, Gerard de Ridefort, was sent into captivity in Damascus together with the king and other notables.

Possibly as early as before Hattin, the evidence is inconclusive, however, but certainly by the early years of the thirteenth century, the Order had begun to expand into other spheres of activity, in particular shipping and banking. This was probably simply an extension of processes it developed for the transfer of its own resources to the East. The Hospitalers also expanded into shipping to supply their own establishments in the Holy Land but only the Templars went into banking. It would prove to be one of the elements of their undoing. By the middle of the century the Temple in Paris was the clearing house for the transfer of funds from France to the Holy Land and by the end of the century it was the treasury of the
French crown.

The fall of Acre in 1291 robbed the Templars of the rationale for their existence that St Bernard had given them. His conception of them as the perfect Christian warriors was an impossible ideal to live up to in any case and with the loss of the Holy Land their purpose of defending it was also lost. But even earlier, criticism had been growing. The English chronicler Matthew Paris was scathing of them. Criticism of the Hospitallers also began to develop and at the Council of Lyons in 1274 it was suggested that the two orders be merged. The proposal was rejected but did not go away.

Nevertheless, the arrests were sudden and unexpected. Clement V claimed to have learned of French accusations at his coronation in Lyons in November 1305 but there is no evidence for any serious French activity until 1307. In 1305 and 1306 the Temple in Paris continued to function as an arm of the French royal treasury. Some have suggested that the Templars constituted some sort of threat to the crown but there is no evidence to support it. It has also been suggested that Philip had a rather ‘puritanical’ cast of mind, imbued with a strict sense of morality, and that he also had an elevated belief in France as the sacred realm of Christianity. He may have been willing to believe the charges of heresy and sodomy and have seen the Templars as a diabolical force that threatened France. Ironically, his chief agent, Guillaume de Nogaret, was the grandson of a heretic. Nogaret’s successor, Guillaume de Plaisians, wrote that Philip had actually infiltrated the Templars to obtain evidence against them.  

But Philip was also saddled with a large debt inherited from his father’s failed Crusade against Aragon of 1284-5, a debt that wars against England and Flanders had exacerbated. He also took action against Lombard bankers and the Jews, expelling them and confiscating their assets. After the arrests of October 1307, Templar properties were inventoried, lands were seized and rented out, their assets were stripped, and the Templar treasury was administered and used by royal officials. The Templars’ wealth was an obvious target. During the trial on Cyprus, Baldwin of Cery, who had been a Templar since 1267 declared that: “Those who coveted the goods of the Templars were the first to spread the word about their errors and idols defaming the Order, and these words had their origin with those who wanted to have their goods.”. He was undoubtedly correct. Even after the dissolution, the French Crown pressed the Hospitallers for reparations. Leonard of Tivoli, Prior of the Hospital at Venice, agreed to pay £200,000 Tournois on 21 March 1313. Another £60,000 were paid soon after, and a final £50,000 in 1318.

Was there any truth in the allegations? One of the interrogated Templars claimed that on Cyprus, before he was elected Grand Master, Jacques de Molay said to him that he would eliminate any unsatisfactory practices which he thought would damage the Order.  

Clement claimed that Philip had been making accusations against the Templars as early as at his coronation at Poitiers in 1305 and in 1307 Jacques de Molay himself asked the Pope to investigate the Order to dispel accusations against it. Two sources record that at an interview with the Pope Molay was asked to deny that the Templars worshipped an idol and that Clement asked for a copy of the Templar Rule; why he would want a copy of something now around 175 years old and in the public domain seems very strange. Nevertheless Clement wrote to Philip on 24 August 1307 announcing that a formal investigation into the Order would begin in October. The Papal enquiry was, of course, pre-empted by the arrests. The fact that those Templars who confessed to at least something were absolved and restored to the Church, without having further penance imposed on them, leads Frale to the conclusion that Clement thought that they were neither completely innocent nor really guilty: “... they were surely so tainted by bad habits that they needed reform, but they could not be considered as heretics.”.

The ceremony of receipt into the Order was simply an initiation ritual designed to strengthen the recruits. The denial of Christ and spitting on the cross was what they would be made to do if captured by Muslims. The kissing seems to have been designed to reinforce the recruit’s obedience to the officers of the Order. Reciprocal kissing was, of course, common in ceremonies of homage by mouth and hands in the Middle Ages. Frale believes, nevertheless, that it was initiation rituals such as these that Jacques de Molay had said he would eliminate and that Nogaret and his agents used to their advantage.

There can be little doubt the torture did break men and produce confessions. In November 1309 the serving brother Ponsard of Gizy told the Papal commission that all the accusations were false but that if,
tortured again, he would say whatever he was told to say. Where torture was not used, it proved virtually impossible to gain confessions. The number of witnesses external to the Order, many of whom had had close relations with the Order and its members, who denied the accusations again testifies to their falsity. That the kinds of accusations made against the Templars lay within the genre of accusations against heretics common to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries also suggests their fabrication. As also does the fact that not a single Templar went to the stake as a martyr for his ‘heresy’, as so many heretics did, but that many died in the flames asserting their innocence and that of the Order.

The manner of the Order’s downfall will ensure that the issue will continue to engage historians, and fascinate into the future those who believe in murdered magicians, codes, a secret treasure, and an endless variety of similar nonsense. At the International Medieval Congress at Leeds in 2007, no fewer than 24 papers examined various aspects of the Trial of the Templars. Even at the forthcoming Conference of the Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East (Avignon, 28-31 August), there are six papers on the Templars. Thankfully, only three are on the trial. The Order’s demise attracts more attention than does their establishment and their history in the Holy Land in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which is a very great pity.

Selected Further Reading

Gilmour-Bryson, Anne, The trial of the Templars in the Papal State and the Abruzzi [Studi e testi, 303] (Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1982).
Gilmour-Bryson, Anne, The trial of the Templars in Cyprus (Leiden, Brill, 1998).