

Friday the 13th, 1307
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Golgotha Commandery No. 7

The day started out like any other for the rural preceptory. Dawn broke over the fields, stirring nothing more than some sparrows nesting in the rafters of the barn. The brothers of the estate, some knights, some sergeants, others lay workers, all rose to the familiar duties which had shaped their lives for decades. There were cows to be milked, eggs to be collected, and stables to be cleaned before the horses could be exercised. Morning prayers, spoken without great ceremony, accompanied their chores as the small manor lacked a chapel; it was too modest and remote for such a building. Instead, devotions mixed with labor, a rhythm the community had long practiced as the natural order of things.

Yet this day would prove to be unlike any that had come before it. As daylight spread, the sound of hooves and shouts echoed across the fields. A contingent of royal officers, bearing unmistakable authority, rode through the gate with grim purpose. These riders bore orders sealed by the king himself. The moment which had been whispered about, dismissed by some as rumor and feared by others as inevitable, had come at last. It was Friday, October 13th, 1307, and the crown had come for the Knights Templar.

Fortune, however, had not entirely abandoned the Order. Nearly a month earlier, on September 22nd, King Philip IV issued his confidential instructions to inquisitors and royal officials across France. Enclosed with those orders was a list of 127 charges of heresy, blasphemy, and moral corruption. Accusations ranged from the absurd to the obscene. This document also informed its recipients that a mass arrest of Templars would soon follow. But networks of loyalty ran deep. Many officials who received the orders regarded the Templars not as enemies of the faith but as God-fearing monks and protectors of pilgrims. Word of the impending crackdown had quietly spread across the countryside. Thus, when the king's men arrived, they found abandoned halls and empty barns where the knights had vanished without a trace.

Despite this, the crown still managed to capture more than 600 Templars in France; and, although the brotherhood would not be officially dissolved by Pope Clement V until five years later, the arrests marked the end of Templar power. Among those taken into custody was Jacques de Molay, the Grand Master of the Order. His presence at the funeral of the French king's sister-in-law only one day before his arrest deepened the sense of betrayal felt across Europe. For many, it surely seemed inconceivable that a man so recently honored by the French royal family could be accused overnight by the same of heresy so foul.

The reaction across Europe was swift and often defiant to the French king. The Templars had long been held in high regard by both the general populace and numerous rulers. Their reputation as disciplined Christian monks and ardent defenders of the Holy Land had been proven time and again for over two centuries. As a result, many kingdoms refused to believe the allegations. Scotland, Portugal, England, and other regions became refuges, at least temporarily, for exiled knights.

In Scotland, popular legend has it that a band of refugee knights fought alongside Robert the Bruce at the Battle of Bannockburn in June of 1314, helping secure a decisive victory ensuring Scotland's

independence. This legend's persistence reveals the esteem with which the Templars were held and speaks to the reputation surrounding the Order even years after its collapse.

Portugal offered the most striking example of royal support. Its king, Denis, recognizing both the innocence of the Templars and the value of their military experience, refused to arrest them at all. But political and religious pressure from the papacy eventually forced his hand. Years later, in 1318, he dissolved the Portuguese branch of the order in name only, immediately creating a new institution: the Order of the Knights of Christ. Into this new order he transferred all Templar holdings and personnel. Not a single knight in Portugal was imprisoned. This new order would play a pivotal role in the Age of Exploration. Nearly two centuries later, members of the Order of Christ were rumored to serve as some of the crew on Christopher Columbus's famous voyage with their distinctive red cross, the old Templar emblem, reportedly emblazoned across the white sails of the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María. But, theories of the Templar presence in pre-Columbian North America is a story for another time.

England's response stood between France's cruelty and Portugal's defiance. King Edward II initially resisted French pressure to arrest the Templars, questioning both the charges and motivations behind them. However, as with King Denis, the combined insistence of King Philip, Edward's future father-in-law, and the Pope forced Edward to act. Even then, he refused to allow torture. The English trials lacked the brutality seen in France and the majority of English Templars, after modest interrogations, were permitted to retire into monastic life rather than face imprisonment or execution.

The same would not be true for Grand Master Jacques de Molay and Geoffroi de Charney, the preceptor of Normandy. After years of torture in France, coerced confessions were obtained from both brothers. But, soon after, both men were condemned as "relapsed heretics" when they recanted their statements which had been obtained under duress. On March 18, 1314, they were publicly burned at the stake in Paris. Chroniclers noted that de Molay maintained the Order's innocence until his last breath, calling upon God to judge those responsible for its destruction: King Philip the Fair and Pope Clement V. Both of whom, it turned out, would be dead before the year's end. Divine justice was served after all it would seem.

It would later turn out that Pope Clement may also have been manipulated by the French King. For, in 2001 an Italian historian, Barbara Frale, discovered a pardon in the Vatican archives written in 1308 by the pope absolving de Molay and de Charney of all charges of heresy. This pardon, known as the Chinon Parchment, indicated that the Vatican was more interested in simply reforming the order rather than destroying it. However, the suppression of this pardon demonstrates the power King Philip had over the papacy and his desire to see the knightly order utterly erased.

The dramatic arrests of 1307 have left a deep imprint on European cultural memory. Over the intervening centuries, while historians debate the connection, legend holds that those events on what began as an ordinary Friday morning long ago became the spark for one of our most enduring superstitions based on a story woven from sudden betrayal, and the tragic fall of a once-mighty brotherhood.

Further reading:

<https://manorialcounselltd.co.uk/from-confession-to-curse-the-death-of-jacques-de-molay>

“The Templars and the Grail” Ralls, Karen. 2003

“Born in Blood” Robinson, John J. 1989

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trials_of_the_Knighths_Templar