

# The Importance and Impact of Knightly Orders

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## Introduction

Although the knightly orders and Crusades are looked down upon in current academia, they are nonetheless some of the most important groups of history, more especially of the medieval age. They protected many people from pirates and invaders; without them Europe would have surely been conquered. Without their efforts and the lives they gave, the West, Christianity, and possibly even Masonry would have been eradicated or never formed.

## Before the Orders

First, let's look at some of the groups and situations that predate the knightly orders and may have inspired their formation.

To many, the idea of a warrior monk is an oxymoron. How can you be a gentle hermit as well as a ruthless soldier? The answer comes from monks who took up arms against Vikings out of necessity. Monasteries often accrued wealth when nobles donated to them. Since they could not spend the wealth, it usually got hoarded. Religious artifacts were often housed by them as well for safekeeping. When Vikings discovered that there were mounds of wealth sitting unprotected, they turned their attention to these places. Most often, these raids were mere slaughters of the monks; but sometimes they fought back. This was far from military fighting and consisted of whatever arms they could find. The region of Kent took the brunt of many Viking attacks in the 8th and 9th centuries. Lyminge Abbey, however, managed to bring ecclesiastical and secular parties together to mount a strategic defense against the invaders.

An example of a warrior monk ahead of his time was Hugh the Abbot of Auxerre. Hugh was a prominent noble of the 9th century that became a monk and quickly became the Abbot of the Abbey of Saint-Germain d'Auxerre. Over his lifetime, he vigorously fought the Vikings and even became the Archbishop of Cologne.

Another possible influence for the knightly order could be the Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula. During the early medieval period, the Umayyad Caliphate conquered nearly all of what is today Portugal and Spain. At the height of their conquest, only the northernmost Kingdom of Asturias held out. This kingdom was victorious at the Battle of Covadonga in 711 AD. This battle was not only the first win of the Reconquista, but also the first Christian victory over the Umayyad Caliphate. Although the Reconquista was not completed till the surrender of Granada in 1492 AD, its early victories showed that Europe and Christianity did have the strength and ability to fight back against those seeking to conquer them. In the latter part of the Reconquista, Iberian military orders were created in the image of the knightly orders like the Hospitallers and Templars.

## Knights Hospitaller

The Order of Knights of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem, which is often shortened to the Knights Hospitaller, formed in a time when some in the Benedictine order wanted to strengthen their faith and devotion by caring for the poor. In the 11th century, a hospital was made in Jerusalem to take care of sick and injured pilgrims in the holy land. This hospital was dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. When Jerusalem was conquered in the First Crusade, the Hospitallers rose in prominence and became their own separate order. The order militarized as they hired knights that eventually joined the order and fought in several crusades. Their biggest impacts include showing you could take charitable monks and turn them into warriors, as well as pioneering health care for those in need.

## Order of Malta

Malta and the other areas the Hospitallers held were extremely important not only to keep Islamic forces from overtaking Europe, but also in the fight against the Barbary pirates. The Knights Hospitaller had many naval ships to fight these pirates during and long after the medieval age. These Ottoman privateers and corsairs were the front men for one of the biggest slave trades in history, mainly consisting of Europeans, mostly Christians and Jews. Some were ransomed or massacred for not being able to pay said ransoms. But most were put into brutal forms of slavery including rowing in the galleys, hard labor in quarries and timber yards, or even sex slavery. Forced conversion was not uncommon either. The terror they spread knew no bounds as they would sometimes mutilate people for minor infractions.

What could be seen as their biggest impact however is seen at the Great Siege of Malta in 1565. The estimates vary, but somewhere around 600 Knights Hospitaller joined a militia of ~6,000 to hold out against a siege of 40,000 Ottomans. The battle casualties of the Ottomans were claimed by different sources at the time to be between 25,000-35,000. This tremendous

victory kept the Islamic force from getting another stephold into Europe. It also broke the Europeans' delusion that the Ottomans were invincible.

## Knights Templar

The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon, also known as the Knights Templar, were formed when Hugues de Payens wanted to make a monastic order to protect pilgrims. Even though Christians held Jerusalem, the rest of the surrounding areas were far from safe. Bandits and Islamic marauders preyed upon and often slaughtered travelers.

One way the Templars helped pilgrims was by creating an early form of banking. This included a letter of credit you could use to deposit in one bank and retrieve from another, allowing one to travel without the valuables that highwaymen looked for. This was made possible by a network of international branches of their banks. Although these were not the first banks, they were influential in making them more extensive than they had ever been before. This in turn made travel much safer.

While the Knights Hospitaller started as monks, the Knights Templar from the start were a military order and eventually inspired the Hospitallers to take on the combat role too. Knights Templar were often used as shock troops that had heavy armor and horses. They would charge into the enemy lines to help break them apart so that the foot soldiers could fight weakened lines. One notable battle they helped win was against Saladin in the Battle of Montgisard. 500 Knights Templar helped a few thousand soldiers defeat 26,000+ Saracens. Through this and other Crusade-related battles, the Knights Templar were able to free non-Muslims from oppression as second-class citizens subject to strict laws and protection money disguised as taxation, known as the Jizya.

## Conclusion

The Hospitallers still exist today in a purely religious form—more like a fraternity rather than its old status as a military order. The Templars were disbanded by Pope Clement V under the pressure of King Philip IV of France. Even though neither order is the mighty force they once were, their impact was tremendous in helping to protect Europe and advance both banking and hospital systems which, in turn, helped Europe modernize much faster than the world of their opponents. It is important that we all dive deeper into their, and other orders', histories so that we can better appreciate and defend what they did for us. Without their sacrifice, we would not be where we are today. Instead of the constitutional republic we have now, we would likely be ruled by a caliphate and either forced to become Muslim or suffer under the taxation of the Jizya.

## Further watching/listening

*Real Crusades History* has countless videos on this and similar subjects. A few examples:

- “The Reconquista of Spain in 5 Minutes”
- “Rise of the Knights Templar - full documentary”
- “What were the Differences Between the Templars, Hospitallers, and Teutonic Knights?”

*Metatron* also has a good video:

- “Knights Hospitaller - Historical Presentation”

## Further reading

*The Two Swords of Christ* by Raymond Ibrahim

*Defenders of The West* by Raymond Ibrahim

*Sword and Scimitar* by Raymond Ibrahim

*The Great Siege: Malta 1565* by Ernle Bradford

*The New Knighthood: A History of the Order of the Temple* by Malcolm Barber

*The Knights Hospitaller* by Helen Nicholson