



The Knights Templar: Historical Perspectives of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*

Dr. U. Fathima Farzana¹

¹Assistant Professor of English, Sri S. Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College, Sattur

farzusman1992@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The mysterious Knights Templar have fascinated readers for centuries and have recently made a comeback through games and media. But there is more to these God's holy warriors and chosen ones. History proves that these warriors went far beyond protecting pilgrims - they introduced a banking system that connected treasuries all over Europe. What took these knights centuries to evolve into the formidable power they were suddenly died down and brought them to a miserable end. Historical fiction reveals who these warriors were and what they did to bring their own destruction. The Knights Templar were charged with everything from sodomy to witchcraft, condemned and burnt at the stake. This paper analyses the Templar warrior as represented by Sir Walter Scott in *Ivanhoe*. Scott perceives these mysterious warriors as nothing but deceivers and frauds who plundered land from Anglo-Saxon thanes and gold from Jews. In the end, the darkness they pursued came upon them. Monarchs from dwindling kingdoms took them down for their wealth and spoils of war.

Keywords: Templar, *Ivanhoe*, Sir Brian de Bois-Guilbert, medieval history, crusades

Introduction

History abounds with secret societies, their initiation rites, and worship. The Freemasons, Assassins' Creed, and the Illuminati have become household names today. The mysterious garb of these societies and the secrecy with which they operate have often led to distressing debates on the New World Order. Fuelled by the media, people have gone so far as to suggest that these societies are responsible for the French Revolution, the World Wars, economic crises, and even the COVID-19 pandemic. That being said, the mysterious Knights Templar are no exception. Media and the gaming industry have always depicted the Knights Templar as villains, especially in the world of Assassins' Creed.

In Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, the Templars are guardians of the Holy Grail. Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* (2003) represents the Templars as protectors of the heirs of Jesus Christ. Walter Scott has immortalized the Templar warrior in *Ivanhoe* (1819). They have also been associated with the protection of the True Cross and the Arc of the Covenant. Surprisingly enough, Friday 13th superstition is also linked with them. Who are these Templars? What happened to them? Are they out there somewhere holding their secret meetings as this chapter is being written? Read on to delve into the dashing adventures of one of the world's fiercest warriors, their representation in Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, and find out what happened to them in history.

God's Holy Warriors

The origin of the Knights Templar goes back to 1099 when Christian conquerors seized Jerusalem, which was under Muslim rule in the First Crusade. The conquerors did this to secure "a fragment of wood from the True Cross on which Christ had died, embedded in a beautiful gold crucifix-shaped reliquary" [1]. Once the cross was secure, Jerusalem was open to pilgrims who thronged from all over Europe. However, the path to Jerusalem was not safe. Muslim bandits, who were then called Saracens, prowled about in the deserts, waiting to strike the pilgrims for whatever meager possessions they had. Wild animals and terrible weather made Jerusalem a tough pilgrimage.

Hugh of Payns, a French knight who had come to see the Holy Sepulchre, or the place where the True Cross was housed, observed that a small group of Benedictine monks had dedicated themselves to caring of sick and wounded pilgrims. They were called the Knights of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem. Hugh of Payns gathered a handful of his relatives and supported by Baldwin II, the King of Jerusalem, founded the brotherhood of the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon. Ironically, he had chosen Temple Mount as the residence of these warriors, the very place where King Solomon constructed his temple famed for its concealment of the Arc of the Covenant. Their duty was one and simple - to protect the Christian pilgrims at all costs. But history would see them as otherwise.

The Code of the Templar

The Council of Troyes officially brought out the *Regula commilitonum Christi* 'Rules of the Knights Templar' on 13 January 1129. This established that the Templars were warrior monks living a life of poverty and brotherhood. As Mark Cartwright remarks, "It was a Catholic medieval military order whose members combined martial prowess with a monastic life to defend Christian holy sites and pilgrims in the Middle East and elsewhere" [2]. Initiated knights wore a white tunic with the official cross in red. They had to carry the black and white piebald banner during battle. They had to share food, wear sparse clothing, remain celibate, and not ask for anything other than the necessities. They spent most of their time training for war and the rest in prayer. But they had some privileges too. When Pope Innocent II recognized their order in 1139, he exempted them from paying taxes. The Templars also had the right to own feudal estates and collect tithes. They could also own slaves. Anyone could be initiated into the order but observe the strict practices if he must remain.

The Templars enjoyed the high favour of powerful monarchs, popes, the nobility, and the gentry. They fought valiantly in many battles and led by Richard I Coeur de Leon of England, they fended off the massive campaigns of Sultan Saladin. They earned the respect and appreciation of Christians all over Europe. They constructed colossal castles and plantations. But their victory went to their head. The massive amount of booty collected from sieges, tithes from feudal estates, and the annual payment received from each feudal estate in Europe turned some of them into immoral and pleasure-loving men. Dan Jones reports that Peter of Montaignu, a master of the Templars had rights to "four warhorses, up to four pack animals, a personal retinue including a chaplain, clerk, valet, sergeant, farrier, Saracen translator, turcopole and cook, a three-man bodyguard, a strong-box for keeping all his valuables, and a private room for his use within whichever Temple palace he was visiting" [1]. They were not poor knights anymore.

Ut Leo semper feriat

"Let the Lion always be beaten" [3] says Lucas Beaulieu, the Grand Master of the Templars in Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. This is one of the rules *Regula commilitonum Christi* which the Grand Master uses to chastise the almost heroic Sir Brian de Bois-Guilbert, a forty-year-old veteran hardened by battle and christened by servitude. The Lion is a reference to Satan and the various realms of sin. Scott introduces Brian in chapter 2; riding proudly, brandishing his weapons, and demanding hospitality from Cedric of Rotherwood. He "will not stoop to beg the hospitality which we have a right to command" [3] from poor Saxon thanes. But he goes there to see the fair Rowena though he knows full well that Templars were forbidden to glance at women, even their mothers.

"Templars and Abbots love good wines and good measure" [3] and "to drink like a Templar" [3] have become proverbial in England. Brian loves his tunic of purple silk "garnished with furs, over which flowed his long robe of spotless white, in ample folds" [3] despite the rule that Templars were forbidden to wear purple or silk. But his sin flows out of bounds when he abducts and forces Rebecca, a Jewish healer, to be his paramour or mistress. "It is against my vow to love any maiden, otherwise than 'par amours' as I will love thee. I am a Templar. Behold the cross of my Holy Order" [3] asserts Brian at the point of raping poor Rebecca who resorts to suicide as she has no other choice. Brian takes his sins a step further when he takes Rebecca to Templestowe, the Templar Preceptory of England, and hides her there without the knowledge of the Grand Master. Albert Malvoisin, the Chief

Preceptor is hand in glove with Brian and when questioned by the Grand Master, blames it all on witchcraft. The Templars brand Rebecca as a witch and hire false witnesses to prove their accusations. Brian who has slain three hundred Saracens is a valuable asset whereas Rebecca “will be a sin-offering to atone for all the amorous indulgences of the Knights Templar”[3].

The Power of the Templar

Brian proudly boasts of the Templar power to Rebecca as before which thrones already tremble. . . The poor soldiers of the Temple will not alone place their foot upon the necks of kings-a hemp-sandall'd monk can do that. Our mailed step shall ascend their throne-our gauntlet shall wrench the sceptre from their gripe. [3]

This was true as Templars wrote history - they financed wars, loaned huge sums of money to kings, constructed the world's first treasuries all over Europe, and held fiefs for their service. Richard I of England obtained a sum of “40,000 dinars and sent twenty knight-brothers and 100 other fighting men. . . to rule Cypress” [4]. They were the world's very first bankers and this was why they got into the bad books of many monarchs. They had safety deposits because the nobility depended upon their security to protect their coffers.

The fact of any connection between the order of soldier monks, devoted to the rescue and defence of the Holy Sepulchre, and the financial affairs of Christendom is to be accounted for, possibly, by the common medieval practice of depositing objects of value in consecrated places for security during times of trouble and tumult. [4]

The Templars' wealth, obtained from war spoils, fiefs, taxes, tithes, and the interest they got from funding wars filled up the coffers. Kings like Philip IV of France, who badly needed money, soon found pretexts to dissolve the Templar order just to seize their wealth. Scott shows Richard I dissolving the English Preceptory of Templars in chapter 44. He commands the Grand Master to “Dissolve thy Chapter, and depart with thy followers to thy next Preceptory . . .” and “ . . . be wise, Beaumanoir, and make no bootless opposition - Thy hand is in the lion's mouth” [3]. Truly, they had failed to beat the Lion indeed!

Friday 13th

The superstition of Friday 13th goes back to the Inquisition of the French Templars. King Philip IV had created a monetary crisis through his demonetization schemes. Heresy was the most horrifying sin in medieval times. To repudiate this, he ousted the Jews and grabbed their wealth in 1306 implicating them in heresy. Philip IV had the Templars arrested on Friday 13 October 1307 for the same crime. Why did he arrest the Templars instead of taxing his subjects? Sophia Menache gives the reason thus

Italians, Jews, and, to a lesser extent, the Templars, were tempting targets in times of financial crises. For the king, it was safer to attack foreigners or members of an international Order than to tax Frenchmen. It also seemed morally preferable. Philip wanted to be a constitutional king, and taxation, except during real emergencies, was still considered improper behaviour for a ruler. [5]

Refusing to venerate the Holy Cross, spitting on the image of Christ, sodomy, and idol worship were listed as heretical sins. Many of the Templars were tortured to extract the confessions the Inquisitors wanted to hear. Scott shows Isaac of York's feet being coated with oil and roasted over a fire in chapter 22 by Reginald Front-de-Boeuf to extricate a thousand pounds of silver. This was the very means of torture used on Templars in 1307 by the Inquisitors. Lucas Beaumanoir is modeled on Jacques de Molay, the last Grand Master of the Templars who was also captured in 1307 and burnt at the stake for alleged heresy. Those who confessed were forced to leave the order. Those who did not were burnt at the stake.

It must also be noted that Brian refuses to venerate the Holy Cross in two events: i) when Wilfred of Ivanhoe, disguised as a pedlar, brings out a portion of the true cross, everyone at Cedric's mansion joins Prior Aymer in prayer except Brian “without vailing his bonnet, or testifying any reverence” [3] and ii) when Brian is brought before the tribunal of the Grand Master for holding a Jewish woman in the Preceptory, he is asked to take an oath on the Cross. Scott is hinting at the truth through fiction.

sed Nomini tuo da gloriam

‘Not for us, My Lord, not for us, but to your Name give the glory’ [1] was the charging cry of the Templars when they went into battle. The Order was initiated on 13 January 1129 and its dissolution brought about on 13 October 1307 - both on 13. All the European monarchs followed Philip IV and dissolved the Templar preceptories in their kingdoms, greedily seizing the Templar treasuries for their use. Brian de Bois-Guilbert stood against three hundred Saracens but fell dead before the wounded Ivanhoe who came to fight for Rebecca. Walter Scott’s historical perspective eyes the Templar warriors with scorn - not on their sin and corruption but on their inaction. Why did such a powerful order meekly accept their grim fate? The Templars were entrusted with the sacred duty of protecting and transporting relics. Since they were associated with many relics, a lot of Arthurian romances like *Parzival* have connected them with the Holy Grail. The Grail, whether it was a person or an immortality-bestowing-cup, is symbolic of the True Cross that the Templars lost in Jerusalem.

Tomas Borowski and Christopher Gerrard think that the Templars were the Christian identity of the entire Europe created in Islamic lands. This military identity did not preserve the True Cross in Jerusalem but divided it up and transported it all over Europe. They had gotten hold of a variety of relics including the sacred oil from the statue of the Virgin Mary in Acre, the blood of Christ, and the heads of various virgins who were martyred.

Relics were one of the means through which the orders constructed and maintained their historical authority to rule independently over lordships that were as large and populous as kingdoms, and which were not, and could have been, theirs by inheritance. [6]

Brian was the military and Christian identity of England. He knew which relics were true and refused to venerate the fake ones. In Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, the titular hero remains wounded and inactive for most of the narrative. It is Brian who emerges as heroic, mysterious, and fierce. Though he has sinned, Brian has a conscience - he does hope to save Rebecca.

Conclusion

The Templars went down without a fight; they did not fight them though they had been fighting the Saracens for many centuries. Templars like the fictional Brian and the real Jacques de Molay remain images of bravery, chivalry, and severity even today. These military men had created the banking system, financed wars, and written history with their political decisions. They protected relics, transported them, guarded nobility, owned islands, and constructed castles. But it was not in their legacy to rule these kingdoms as they had planned. It was their true legacy to be remembered for their military discipline if not for their self-control. Despite their sins, men like Brian are remembered for their admirable qualities, more so than Ivanhoe. Walter Scott has presented Brian through the garb of the Templar to remind us of the dark times of medieval history which repeats itself.

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