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Jerusalem: Homeland of the Templar Order

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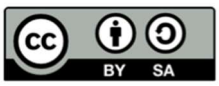

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Jerusalem: Homeland of the Templar Order

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Background and the First Crusade

In the years 1095-1097, as warriors and pilgrims from across Christendom began making preparations to join the First Crusade, many either sold goods or made donations to local monastic houses. They then recorded these transactions in legal documents generally known today as 'charters'. Tens of charters of this kind survive to the present day and, while the business affairs they describe are as various as the individuals involved, on one point they are almost entirely consistent – they present reaching Jerusalem as one of the campaign's main goals, in the majority of cases as the *only* goal.[1]

Whatever the participants' personal motives for joining the crusade therefore – whether for fame, piety, greed, or simply to get away from home – they recognised that Jerusalem lay at the heart of the expedition's purpose.

Jerusalem occupied a strange place in the Western Christian imagination. During the early-mid Eleventh century, pilgrims flocked to the city in large numbers and, although their journeys became increasingly disrupted by the ongoing wars between the Seljuk and Fatimid empires which placed Jerusalem on the front-line, large parties continued to set out for the east. Of course, European Christians heard about Jerusalem throughout their lives via the stories of the Old and New Testaments. Likewise the more intellectually inclined presumably knew that scholars considered the holy city to be the world's epicentre. Yet despite feeling a powerful association with the land of Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection, they knew very little about it. The vast majority had never been there and even pilgrims only visited briefly; few sources or travellers' tales reported much about the area (at least not before the First Crusade). In this way, on one hand Jerusalem was a remote and distant region – for some imaginative authors even a fantastical land of dragons – yet on the other it was simultaneously *fundamental* to their identity and faith, the landscape in which Jesus died for the salvation of all – put simply, their spiritual homeland.[2]

[1] MORTON, Nicholas, Encountering Islam on the First Crusade, Cambridge 2016, p. 95.
[2] CHIBNALL, Marjorie, The world of Orderic Vitalis: Norman monks and Norman knights, Woodbridge 1984, p. 151.

In the decades following the First Crusade's brutal conquest of Jerusalem in 1099 and the foundation of the Crusader States, ships bearing huge numbers of pilgrims and settlers regularly made landfall on Eastern Mediterranean's shores, these pious visitors seeking to explore their own association with this unfamiliar spiritual homeland. The Eastern Franks themselves encouraged these pious visitors, constructing magnificent churches and shrines so as to offer suitably awe-inspiring contexts in which pilgrims could grasp the significance of the biblical events they commemorated. The reports written by these travellers reveal a strange emotional mix, combining elements of both the familiar and the unfamiliar. Pilgrims and settlers had heard stories about these locations all their lives, but at the same time they generally knew nothing of the region's: climate, its landscapes or its flora and fauna. Many encountered foods such as bananas or sugar cane for the first time, while others describe visiting unfamiliar places such as the Dead Sea.[3]

The Knights Templars

The Knights Templars were the product both of these pilgrims' powerful desire to reach the holy city and also of the practical challenges presented by the journey; after all, they wanted to visit Jerusalem, but they did not know the area and they did not know the way. Consequently the earliest Templars emerged as guides and escorts, supporting pilgrims travelling across the Jerusalem area.[4]

As is well known, in later years the Templar Order grew swiftly, expanding its vocation and role to the point where it garrisoned tens of castles across the Crusader States and contributed large formations of troops to the Eastern Franks' field armies. The order's growth in the mid-twelfth century was remarkable, and its substantial military undertakings serve to indicate the sheer scale of the landholdings and revenues it built up to bear the costs of these labours. The order's wealth came from many sources, yet the origins of its prosperity trace back to the fact that the order played a central role both in defending Frankish Jerusalem and protecting pilgrims travelling to the east. These were functions which many communities across Western Christendom recognised as priorities,

[3] BRONSTEIN, Judith, Food in the Frankish Levant: A case study of cultural borrowing, in: Medieval Encounters 29, 2023, pp. 258–284; Fulcher of Chartres, Historia Hierosolymitana (1095-1127), ed. Heinrich HAGENMEYER, Heidelberg 1913, pp. 376–384.

[4] William of Tyre, Chronicon (Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis 63), Turnhout 1986, pp. 553–555.

even if they had never travelled to the east themselves. Whether they had been there or not, they perceived Jerusalem as a spiritual homeland so they wished to contribute to its defence. They also wished to show their spiritual reverence for Jerusalem as an act of piety and, in some cases, they wished to commemorate relatives who travelled to the Holy Land previously, perhaps as part of a crusading campaign. These were all powerful emotional impulses for which families were prepared to make substantial personal or financial sacrifices. Supporting the Templars – whether through donations or by joining the order – became an established way to give tangible expression to these imperatives. The Templars then used these donations to establish a network of estates across Western Christendom (known as commanderies) which served to channel further income and resources to the Holy Land on an annual basis.

The Templars grew rapidly as consequence of such acts of devotion and, given that many joined the order for precisely these reasons, a persistent and evergreen reverence for the holy city characterised the order's actions generation after generation. Given the symbiotic relationship between the Templars and Jerusalem, it was natural for the order to ornament their many chapels across Western Christendom with relics, frescos, and liturgical items which recalled saints and sacred locations in the distant Holy Land.[5] Some Templar churches and chapels even evoked Jerusalem in their architectural construction, with round naves included seemingly to recall the Anastasis of the Holy Sepulchre (the Temple church in London provides an excellent example of this practice).[6] These manifestations of Templar devotion to Jerusalem sprang from their identity and spirituality, but of course they also reminded those visiting these chapels of the order's work in the east. In this way, these chapels provided a solid nudge for Christians in Western Christendom to begin or to continue contributing to the order's cause, whether financially, through prayer, or through service – thereby splicing the order's economic model with its devout association with Jerusalem.

[5] SALVADÓ, Sebastian, Icons, crosses and liturgical objects of Templar chapels in the crown of Aragon, in: The Debate on the Trial of the Templars (1307–1314), ed. Jochen BURGTORF – Paul CRAWFORD – Helen NICHOLSON, Aldershot 2010, pp. 183–198.

[6] NICHOLSON, Helen J., At the heart of Medieval London: The New Temple in the Middle Ages, in: The Temple Church in London: History, Architecture, Art, ed. Robin GRIFFITH-JONES – David PARIS, Woodbridge 2017, pp. 1–2.

Jerusalem within the Templars' diplomacy and public image

Like other secular and ecclesiastical leaders in the Crusader States, the Templars knew very well that underlining the importance of Jerusalem, or highlighting any threat to the holy city, was an important lever with which to elicit support from Western benefactors. In 1184 the Templar master, accompanied by the Hospitaller master and the patriarch of Jerusalem, travelled to Western Europe seeking to gather assistance for the kingdom of Jerusalem against the growing power of Sultan Saladin of Egypt. Notably they brought with them a pair of keys that they presented to the kings of France and England, informing them that they were the 'keys to Jerusalem'. Evidently, they knew very well that such a gift would apply considerable emotional pressure on these rulers, prompting them to act on their notional 'ownership' of the holy city by providing practical assistance. In fact, the embassy did not fare well. The Templar master did not deliver these keys in person; he died in Verona before the party of envoys could cross the Alps. Also, neither king responded to these appeals by leading an army to the east; they had many other concerns pressing on their time. Even so, the impact of this kind of symbolic gesture should not be underestimated and did not escape the notice of contemporary chroniclers.[7]

Just as the Templars received praise for their work defending Jerusalem, so too they could also provoke criticism when their efforts fell short of these goals. Rather like modern-day charitable donors wishing to see their money meaningfully employed for a specific cause, the Templars' benefactors wanted to feel that the order was using their resources to defend Jerusalem successfully. Nevertheless, the Templars' persistent demands for support coupled with repeated battlefield losses, especially during the Thirteenth century, provided grounds for observers to complain that the Templars squandered their wealth and resources. An example can be seen with the English chronicler Matthew Paris, who responded to a Templar appeal for help in 1244 with a jaundiced commentary listing their failings. As far as he was concerned, the Templars possessed more than sufficient assets to protect the Holy Land in the long term, but their interminable squabbling, treachery and warmongering enfeebled their efforts. Clearly he was unimpressed and the Templars' appeal for help certainly did not prompt him to act on their behalf. Whether there is any

[7] Gerald of Wales, Instruction for a ruler: De Principis Instructione, ed. and trans. Robert BARTLETT (Oxford Medieval Texts), Oxford 2018, pp. 524–525.; Rigord, The deeds of Philip Augustus: An English translation of Rigord's Gesta Philippi Augusti, trans. Larry F. Field, ed. M. Cecilia GAPOSCHKIN – Sean L. FIELD, Ithaca – London 2022, p. 74.

accuracy to his accusations is immaterial, the simple point is that the Templars offered themselves as the defenders of the Holy Land so it was necessary for them to persuade their patrons that they did so both efficiently and effectively. Matthew Paris evidently remained unconvinced.[8]

In this way, the Templars' association with Jerusalem ran deep within their identity and purpose; put simply, it was intrinsic both to their ideological thought-world and to their economic framework. The Templars rose, at least in part, on the basis of this association, but they also attracted criticism when they fell short in this vocation (or perhaps more importantly, when they were perceived to fall short).

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