

The Order of the Temple was founded around 1118 in Jerusalem. The city had been liberated from the Saracens during the First Crusade in 1099 and it was once again a holy place of pilgrimage for Christians. Hugh (or Hugues) de Payens, and seven or eight fellow Knights, founded the Order to protect Pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land.

The King of Jerusalem granted them quarters near the site of the Temple of Solomon, and it is thought that the Order took their name from this. In 1128-9, the order was formally recognised by the Pope. Bernard of Clairvaux was asked to give the new Order a rule and organisation. The rule was based on that of St Benedict, but the organisation more closely resembled Bernard's Cistercian order.

For the next ten years, as well as their official duties, it has been claimed that the Templars excavated the ruins of the original Temple of Solomon. There is no evidence that this happened, or that anything significant was found there if they did. But some believe that they must have found something important, because in 1139 Pope Innocent II issued a Papal Bull which granted great powers to the Templars. They were exempted from local laws, could pass freely across country borders, were not required to pay any taxes, and were subject to no authority except the Pope himself. A more likely explanation is that the Templars needed to raise large sums of money to create a protective network across many national boundaries, and the Pope wanted to make sure that the Knights had the resources to achieve this.



A 13th century image depicting Baldwin II ceding the location of the Temple of Solomon to Hughes de Payens.

The Templars swore a vow of poverty as individuals, but this did not exclude them as an Order from controlling wealth or receiving donations. They quickly began to acquire lands and money. Pilgrims were always worried about being robbed en route to the Holy Land. The Templars built Preceptories all over Europe, so pilgrims could deposit their wealth in a local Templar house, and receive a credit note which could be redeemed once they reached the Holy Land. This was the beginning of banking, and the Templar credit notes were the first cheques.

The Knights Templar

Over time, the Templars became incredibly wealthy, owning large tracts of land, and making huge sums of money from banking and other trading. They protected trade routes across Europe, and their exemption from taxes helped their riches to grow. This led to jealousy and suspicion that they were becoming too powerful for their own good.

By 1291 the Saracens had taken back the Holy Land and the religious routes were no longer in use. There seemed to be no good reason for the Templar order to continue. Their power and wealth made Kings jealous and afraid for their own security.

In 1307 King Philip of France outlawed the Templars and commanded that all the Templar Knights be arrested. He was angry at them for refusing him loans and he determined to take away their power. But just before he could seize everything, the Templar Fleet set sail from La Rochelle in France. We are not sure where they ended up, but it is believed by some that they sailed to Scotland. Only Scotland and Portugal at this time had not followed France and outlawed the Order. Legend tells that a vast Templar treasure sailed from France with this fleet and could well have landed in Scotland. But this was winter, the storm season, and that it would have been very dangerous to set sail in winter weather. More likely that the treasure was taken overland to a safe hiding place. There is also a question over just how much actual treasure existed. By the end, the Templars had lost power and influence, and were an easy target for the French King. The network of preceptories were expensive to maintain, especially now that the Holy Land had been lost, and there was little sign of wealth in the Templar living quarters.

In 1312 what remained of the Order of Knight Templar was dissolved by the Council of Vienne and their property was ordered to be transferred to the Knights of St John (also known as the Hospitallers).

In France, many Templar Knights were tortured for confessions of heresy, and put to death. Finally, in 1314, the Templar Grand Master, Jacques de Molay, was burned at the stake. The surviving members of the Order went into hiding or merged with other orders.



The burning of Knights Templar in the presence of Philip the Fair and his courtiers, from 1413-15.

Why do people connect the Templars with Rosslyn Chapel?

Hugh de Payens served on the First Crusade with Henri St Clair, 1st Baron of Rosslyn. He also met King David I in Scotland, and the Order established a number of Templar sites. There are stories told that Hugh de Payens married a Catherine St Clair, but there is no evidence that she existed, let alone married a Templar. We do know that Hugh de Payens established a seat at Balantrodoch, now called Temple, by the River Esk in Midlothian. It was one of only two Templar preceptories established in Scotland. The other was at Maryculter, in Aberdeenshire. As Rosslyn Chapel is only 9 miles from Temple, it is understandable that the connection might be seen.

The St Clairs were loyal to Robert the Bruce. Sir Henry St Clair, 7th Baron of Rosslyn, fought with his two sons John and William at the Battle of Bannockburn. When Bruce died, John and William were given the task of carrying Bruce's heart to the Holy Land, along with Sir James Douglas and Sir Robert Logan. William, John and Douglas were killed in a fierce battle with the Moors at Teba in Spain in 1330. Such was their bravery that the Moors allowed the survivors to bring their bones and Bruce's heart back to Scotland. There are carvings in the Chapel which may commemorate this.

There is a legend that the Knights Templar reached Scotland and were welcomed by the excommunicated Robert the Bruce. That legend also says that the Templars helped Robert the Bruce win the Battle of Bannockburn, and that the King was so grateful for this, that lands and titles were awarded to the Templars. If you believe that story, then it is not a great leap to suggest that the St Clairs must have been involved with the Templars in some way, given their loyalty and close relationship to the King. Like many of the stories surrounding the Knights Templar, however, there is no evidence at all connecting the Templars to Bannockburn and Robert the Bruce.



The St Clairs fought on the side of King Robert the Bruce at the Battle of Bannockburn. This illustration dating from the 1440s is the earliest depiction of the battle.

Further Reading

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