

The Everyday Life of a Knight Templar

The Knights Templar, a monastic order of knights established by Bernard of Clairvaux and Hugh de Payens during the Crusades, are mainly known for their military achievements, incredible wealth, and ultimate downfall. However, amongst all of the crusading, banking, and ritual, the Templars led day-to-day lives remarkably typical of medieval monks.

Everyday life can reveal a great deal about the values of a group and the truth behind their identities. In exploring the everyday lives of the Templars, consider some of the rumours and myths you have heard about them: do the rumours match the way the Templars really lived, or are they perhaps more romantic versions of the truth behind a surprisingly typical medieval monastic order?

Rule

All medieval monastic orders were governed by a Rule, a set of regulations and instructions for daily life, behaviour, and values. The Rule of Life, as the Templars' set of instructions were called, was written by Bernard of Clairvaux, the order's founder. Written in 72 clauses, the Rule of Life calls on brothers to reject secular knighthood, instead upholding justice, defending the weak, and avoiding unnecessary violence. Two of the most important aspects of the Rule were chastity and celibacy; knights of the brotherhood were to avoid women at all costs and could not be married. Dormitories were lit and knights ordered to sleep fully clothed to prevent any sexual sins from occurring. Bernard of Clairvaux seemed quite preoccupied with ensuring the knights lived properly as monks and did not slip back into the secular ways of most knights.

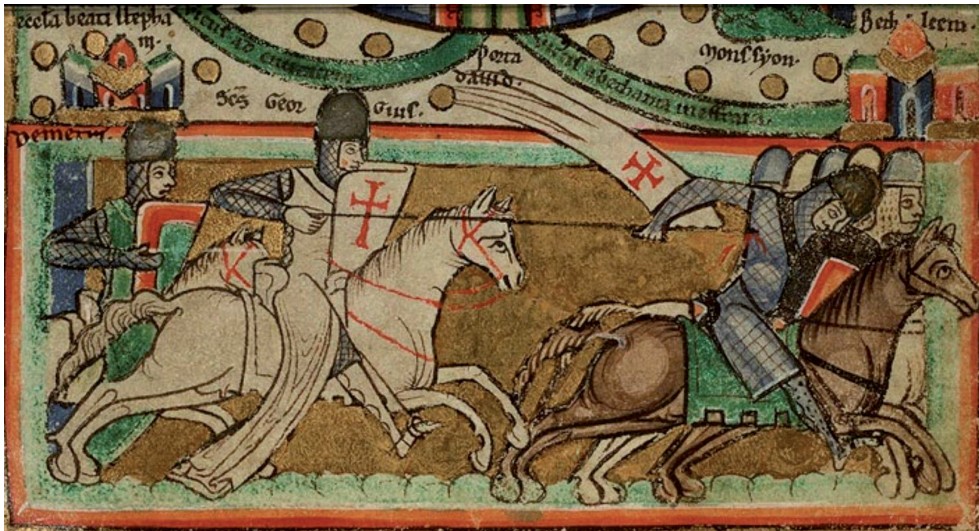


This illustration depicts a knight on horseback from an illuminated manuscript.

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Detail from a twelfth century map of Jerusalem depicting Crusading knights.

The Rule also determined the diet and fasting schedule of the knights. Meat was only allowed three times a week, as it was believed to corrupt the body when eaten too frequently. Meals were eaten only once or twice a day on Sundays, and twice or three times on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, but these meals consisted only of vegetables and bread. Brothers fasted on Fridays, and were to eat as little as possible between 1 November (All Saints' Day) and Easter.

Fancy dress, such as ornamented clothes and pointed shoes (the height of Medieval fashion) were forbidden, and idle chatter was considered sinful. Pride was looked down upon, and boasting strictly prohibited. Brothers were instructed to avoid feeling envy if possible, and could only go out into the secular world with express permission of the Master unless going to a church for prayer.

Bound by a traditional monastic vow of poverty, the Knights Templar had relatively few personal possessions compared with the wealth of the order as a whole. The earlier knights were quite poor, but as time went on and the order became quite wealthy, knights were able to own a small amount of property themselves. The average knight required around three thousand acres of land (approximately 4.6 square miles) to finance the upkeep of his armour and household, and Knights Templar were allowed to own land, a horse, and a few servants. All personal possessions were moderated and nothing was in excess, but these were knights as well as monks, and required slightly different living standards because of it. However, knights would not have been allowed to own more land than was absolutely necessary, to prevent excessive personal wealth.

Dress

Templars wore their hair cut short but did not shave their beards, and their clothing was quite simple. Clause 17 of the Templar Rule states that brothers should wear a robe with no decoration and a white cloak over the robe, representing the Templars' transition from sin into purity. Brothers were also given a lighter linen shirt to wear when it was hot outside. Brothers raised to the rank of Sergeant wore black surcoats (loose robes worn over armour) and brown or black cloaks over the surcoat. The Templars did not start sewing the famous red crosses onto their robes in the beginning years of the order, only adding the crosses from around 1145.

As knights, arms and armour were important to the dress of the Templars. As is expected, the arms worn and used by the Templars changed with the times, becoming more advanced as technology progressed.

In their Crusading days in the twelfth century, knights would wear a sleeveless coat of chainmail with a white surcoat over it. Underneath the chainmail, brothers wore a padded leather jerkin, or jacket, and their legs were also covered in chainmail. They wore iron shoes and a metal helmet. Crusading Templars carried a sword, shield, lance, Turkish mace, and three knives: a dagger, a bread knife, and a pocket knife.

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Daily Routine

While the Templars were warriors, they were also monks, and like most orders of monks, maintained a very strict routine in their everyday lives. A day in the life of a religious order was divided up between services which occurred every few hours, called the canonical hours. Brothers were expected to get up at 4am for the Matins service, look after their horses, and return to bed until 6am, when they were roused again for the Prime service. The next two services were Tierce at 9am and Sext at noon, between which brothers were expected to groom and train their horses. After Sext, a meal of cooked meats was served and eaten in complete silence while a chaplain read the Bible. Silence during meals was characteristic of monastic orders, as obedience and contemplation were highly valued in these societies. In the afternoon came Nones at 3pm, Vespers and dinner around 6pm, and Compline at 9pm. After Compline, brothers had wine and water to drink and then spent more time with their horses until bedtime at midnight, when silence was enforced until once again rising for Matins at 4am.



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The daily life of Medieval monks was dominated by regular worship.

Structure and Hierarchy

Like most orders of knights and of monks, the Knights Templar had a strict hierarchy. The Grand Master was the highest rank within the order, chosen from within the Temple by a group of twelve senior Templars. The Grand Master held great power within the order, but not absolute power; all of his decisions had to go through the Grand Chapter, a group of senior brothers.

The advisor and deputy to the Grand Master was the Seneschal. There was a Keeper of the Robes, called the Draper, who distributed clothing and linens and had the power to take them away from brothers seen to have too many clothes. The Marshal was the official in charge of military matters and decisions, such as the purchase of equipment, and the Marshal oversaw the next level of command, the Regional Commanders.

There were five Regional Commanders in the Knights Templar, each one holding the powers of the Grand Master within their respective areas: Jerusalem, Acre, Tripoli, Antioch, and the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The Regional Commander of the Kingdom of Jerusalem also played the role of treasurer within the order. There were also Provincial Masters, who were officials in France, England, Hungary, Portugal, Poitou, Aragon, and Apulia who were answerable to the Grand Master. The rest of the Knights, Sergeants, and Men at Arms fell within the command of these officials.

Written by Rose McCandless, student at Ohio State University, and intern at Rosslyn Chapel July 2018

Further Reading

Haag, Michael. *The Templars: History and Myth*. London, UK: Profile Books, 2008.

Lord, Evelyn. *The Knights Templar in Britain*. Great Britain: Pearson Education, 2004.

Read, Piers Paul. *The Templars*. London, UK: Orion, 2001.

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