

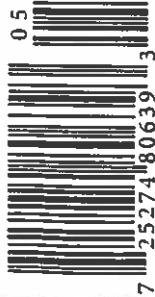
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The Knights Templar

MILITARY SECRETS OF THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR

The Rule

The Knights Templar are famed for failure — when they failed to preserve Christian control over the Holy Land, they were notoriously blamed, disbanded, and suppressed. Yet they had successfully protected pilgrims and provinces for more than a century and a half, despite being vastly outnumbered in an extraordinarily hostile environment. They had earned more and more responsibility for the defense of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, replacing local nobles as the keepers of border castles. From the second crusade on, they played a major role in orienting and guiding crusader armies. They must have been doing something right.

By John Howe

What explains their military successes? Unlike most medieval communities — armies, guilds, farm or-

ganizations, and so forth — where experts taught non-literate trainees by word and example, leaving few traces in the written record, the Templars were a religious order guided by foundational documents. They had a Latin Rule approved by the Council of Troyes in 1129, which, translated into French, soon acquired voluminous additions in French, Catalan, and other languages. Although most of the sergeants and even many of the knights were probably illiterate, nevertheless, to join the order all candidates had to be adults and they had to understand and consent to the written Rule. This explains why it was translated so quickly into the more easily understood vernacular languages. It was a working document, updated over time, describing a military organization continuously tested in the field. The doings of the Templars were also recorded

in sermons, histories, letters, and charters, making them better documented than any other military organization of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Perhaps the primary reason for the successes of the Templars was their belief that they were doing God's work. The battlefield effectiveness of medieval armies depended to a considerable extent upon spiritual hope. It is not by chance that the Latin Rule begins with an exhortation to abandon secular knighthood and "to hasten to associate yourself in perpetuity with the Order of those whom God has chosen from the mass of perdition, and has ordered through his gracious mercy to defend the Holy Church." Bernard of Clairvaux, who had contributed to the codification of the Latin Rule, also produced in the 1130s "a sermon of encouragement" titled *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, where he urged, "March forth confidently then, you knights, and with a stalwart heart expel the foes of the cross of Christ. Be sure that neither death nor life can separate you from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ. In every peril repeat, 'Whether we live or

die we are the Lord's." This religious confidence must have been reinforced by Masses celebrated immediately before battle, since the Latin Rule specifies that "...after consumption of the divine mystery, none should fear to fight but should be ready to earn the martyr's crown."

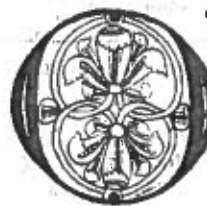
What links divine service to military practicalities is the monastic ideal of obedience. The Templar Rule of 1129 was inspired by the Benedictine Rule which insists on absolute obedience to the abbot and sees humility as the greatest monastic virtue. Although scholars today have moved away from the stereotype of the medieval knight as a loose cannon on the battlefield, fighting on his own without any organizational and strategic restraints, the annals of medieval warfare are undeniably filled with accounts of victories lost through premature charges, unauthorized looting, and other breakdowns of discipline. Monks, on the other hand, were professional examples of good order. In fact, during the time that the Templar Rule was being written, an Occitan epic of the first crusade presented monastic processions as an image for keeping in formation: "All arrived at the mêlée in disorder, but the knights are good / and create a wheeling mass in the midst of the Turks / Such as monks adopt when they are in solemn procession."

Templars practiced monastic obedience. Knights were "to observe unfailing obedience to the master ... as soon as an order has been given by the master or his appointed representative, brothers should put it into action without delay as if it were God's command ... no brother [should] fight nor rest according to his own volition but must put all his effort into obeying the master so that he be able to imitate the word of the Lord: 'I did not come to fulfill my own will but that of him who sent me'." Conversely, humility is so important that a chapter on "Which Sin Should Make a Brother No Longer Acceptable" mandates that any knight who boasts or becomes "somewhat arrogant" is to be disciplined; if he should refuse to make amends and "becomes more and more puffed up with pride," he is to be

"removed from the holy flock."

Of course, obedience requires a chain of command, and here too the Templar Rule parallels the Benedictine observance. Instead of an abbot, the grand master wields overall command authority, though, like an abbot, he was elected and was required to consult the brethren on serious issues. Instead of a prior there was a seneschal who carried the battle standard. Instead of a cellarer there was a marshal who issued all the equipment — including horses, saddles, and armor — though the individual knights were expected to assume responsibility for the horses and equipment they received. In the Holy Land the Commander of the City of Jerusalem protected pilgrims; the Commander of the Kingdom of Jerusalem was in charge of horses, farms, and castles, and he was able to assign personnel to different units. Tripoli and Antioch had similar commanders, as did the various support provinces back in Western Europe. The brother knights themselves were organized into squadrons, each with its own knight commander and banner; although these units are described in the context of campaigns, they may also have existed in peacetime so that their knights would know each other and could train together. The organization of the Templar infantry and of any associated native light cavalry is left unspecified, though the Rule does discuss in detail how to integrate visiting knights into Templar units for fixed terms of service.

All in all, the organizational structure of the Templars seems to have been solid and predictable. It gave rise to a story, relayed by King Louis IX's biogra-



Item prologus regule pau
pū cōmūnū. r. tñplarū
omnibz in salomonici
pauis seiudo m
vngit quicūqz pūpū uolū
tas sequi cōtēpnuit. a
sumo de u regi uulnare an
impūitate cupiunt. ut obediēcie m mātū pēla
iam affmēt mātūmā cūa implēdo pōtāt
z pēuando implēat. Bonamur itaqz qz usqz nūc
mīlīā sēlīe in qua xpi nō fuit capta. s. solo huma
no fauore amplexatū estis: qm hōmū uicari qz dē
mā pāmōm tēgit. a ad defēsiōm sē ecclīe gūam
ta pēuāt cōpōsūt: uos sociandos phennē festinat.
Antē omīa autē quicūqz es o xpi mīlēs. tam scām q
nūmōm eligēs. r. cūqz pēfessionē tuā oportet pūā
adhibē diligētīā ac firmā pēuatiōm. qm a dō
tam digna. scā fābilit. ē. dīnoscīt: ut si pūit a p
fēciant obsecrāt: mīlīarēs qz pū. xpo animas
suas dēcīt: sēat obtemer merēbīs. In ipsa namqz
reflōrūt iam a rēpūit ordo mīlīarīs. qz dēspēto
mīlīe zelo nō paupēs aut ecclīas defēdāt qz
sūt erat. s. mpe. spoliāt. mīficāt cōtēdēbāt.



The opening page of a Latin version of The Templar Rule.

© Brugge, Openbare Bibliotheek, MS 131, f. 2r. Image by Madeleine Stierstaart / Wikimedia Commons

**(Opposite page) The Knights
Templar charging into an
enemy army.**

© Marek Szyszko

pher Jean de Joinville, that the Old Man of the Mountain, the leader of the sect of the Assassins, never targeted the Master of the Temple, and would even pay him tribute for certain territories, because "he knew very well that if he caused one to be killed, another, equally good, would be put in his place. Wherefore he had no wish to sacrifice his Assassins in a service where there was nothing to be gained."

However solid the chain of command might be, combat is always problematic. The Templar Rule has famously been described as a military manual on "How to Deliver a Cavalry Charge," but this is a little misleading in that the Rule pays somewhat less attention to battles themselves, which always involve unique and unpredictable events, than to the campaigns preceding them. Templar strategists would probably have agreed with Carl von Clausewitz that battles can be planned effectively only up to the point where the first shot is fired.

In the Near East it was extraordinarily important to maintain an orderly line of march because the heavily armored Frankish knights and their associated infantry were often confronted by more mobile opponents, lightly armored Muslim knights on swift Arabian horses who could attack and withdraw quickly. Ambushes were common. Any straggling or breaking of ranks could be costly.

There were rules for camp discipline. In breaking camp, the line of march was established, and, although tents and camp gear might be packed, "the brothers should not saddle up, nor load the baggage, nor mount, nor move from their places unless the Marshal has the order called or commands it." Each knight was posted behind his squires and equipment. No one was allowed to break ranks, or ride parallel to them, except to briefly test out equipment (and that downwind so as not to stir up unnecessary dust) or to help a Christian in imminent danger from Muslim attack. There were no distractions from potential hunting opportunities, since Knights Templar were forbidden falcons, hunting dogs, and bow hunting; their only legitimate targets were lions, presumably because of the mission to

protect pilgrims. Even stopping on a march to water horses required special permission unless the standard bearer stopped first. If any brother "charges or leaves the squadron, justice will be done even so far as going on foot to the camp and taking from him all that may be taken except his habit." If the column should come under attack, the knights nearest the danger were to arm themselves and face the foe, while the rest were to report to the marshal for orders.

No brother should turn his horse's head towards the back to fight or for anything else, while they are in a squadron.

In battle if any brother "charges or leaves the squadron, justice will be done even so far as going on foot to the camp and taking from him all that may be taken except his habit." The Rule places great emphasis on the marshal's banner, which signals the attack, orients the battle, and must never be dipped — major concerns include its protection, and how to substitute a replacement banner if that should become necessary. There is also a banner for each squadron, and alternative procedures are specified for any knight who gets cut off from his own so that he cannot rally around it. No knight can leave the field "while there is a piebald banner [the Templar battle standard] raised aloft, for if he leaves he will be expelled from the house forever." Even if he is wounded he still may not retreat without permission; if too wounded to ask permission himself, "he should send another brother to get it for him." There is, however, a distinction made between the knights, who are not allowed to retreat, and the sergeants without heavy armor, who may. It sounds draconian to unconditionally forbid retreat so long as there is still a banner in the field, but the safety of the whole army depended upon maintaining its formation against faster foes who could pick off individual knights if a charge should lose its coherence. The Templar Rule intended to avoid such disintegration, whatever the cost.

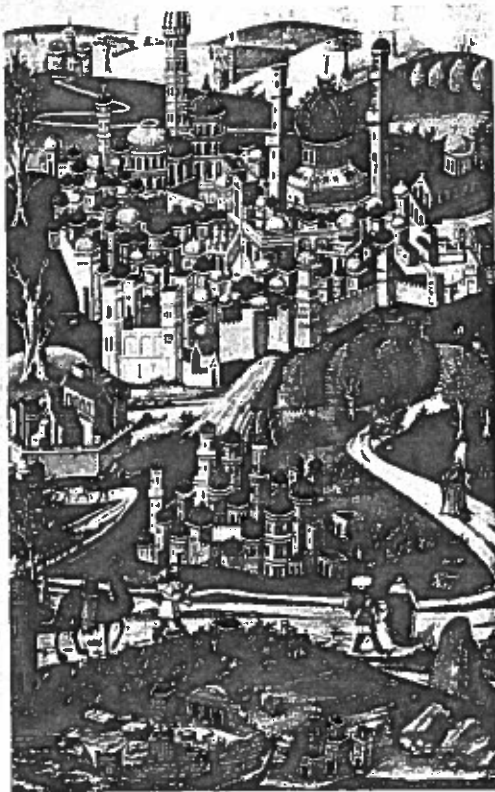
Below the Rule, which seems to have been written with an eye to the more elite knights who would have been most

Image from Liber ad honorem Augusti sive de rebus Siculis by Peter of Eboli, completed circa 1196, depicting Emperor Frederick Barbarossa at the head of a force of Knights Templar.

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An image of Jerusalem, created about 1455, which depicts many of the important religious sites in the city. The Al-Asqa Mosque stands to the right of the Dome of the Rock, and is depicted as a church.

© Created by Jean Mielot, canon of Lille, as part of his translation of the *Descriptio Terrae Sanctae*.

able to consult it, there must also have existed extensive traditions of oral teaching and learning analogous to those found in other medieval communities. European knights posted to the Holy Land would have required lots of mentoring. They had to learn how to fight in an exotic world featuring very different enemies and environments. Templars practiced the "buddy system." In part this was a holdover from the Benedictine Rule, where monks may only leave the monastery in twos. In the Templar Rules, however, it involves a requirement that knights eat in pairs "so that one may look after the other with care lest the harshness of life or secret abstemiousness become part of the communal meal." Also, when in military camp "when the hours are said, a brother should go in search of the one who should be next to him if he is not there."

Fellow knights probably provided much of the basic orientation for new recruits. Usamah ibn Munqidh (d. 1188), a Syrian warrior and trader who spent much time in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, offers an anecdote related to Templar handling of new arrivals:

Whenever I visited Jerusalem I always entered the Aqsa Mosque, beside which stood a small mosque, which the Franks had converted into a church. When I used to enter the Aqsa Mosque, which was occupied by the Templars, who were my friends, the Templars would evacuate the little adjoining mosque so that I might pray in it. One day I entered this mosque, repeated the first formula, "Allah is great," and stood up in the act of praying. Then one of the Franks rushed to me, got hold of me and turned my face eastward, saying, "This is the way you should pray!" The Templars came up to him and expelled him. They apologized to me,

saying, "This is a stranger who has only recently arrived from the land of Franks and he has never before seen anyone praying except eastward."

Although the Templars would ultimately fail in their mission to protect the Holy Land, they had a good run. Through hard experience they discovered how to adapt Western-style heavy cavalry warfare to a hostile Near Eastern environment. Their Rules show how they used monastic discipline to mold an effective military force. **MW**

John Howe is a Professor in the Department of History at Texas Tech University. He is the author of *Before the Gregorian Reform: The Latin Church at the Turn of the First Millennium*.

Further reading

- + Malcolm Barber and Keith Bate, *The Templars: Selected Sources*. (Manchester University Press, 2002)
- + Matthew Bennett, "La Règle du Temple as a Military Manual or How to deliver a Cavalry Charge," in *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. Allen Brown*, eds. Christopher Harper-Bill et al. (Boydell Press, 1989) pp. 7-19.
- + Desmond Seward, *The Monks of War: The Military Religious Orders* (Eyre Methuen, 1972; rev ed. Penguin, 1996)
- + James W. Brodman, "Rule and Identity: The Case of the Military Orders," *Catholic Historical Review* 88. (2001) pp. 383-400.
- + Alan Forey, "The Military Orders and Secular Warfare in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century," *Viator* 24 (1993) pp. 33-55.
- + Jonathan Riley-Smith, *Templars and Hospitallers as Professed Religious in the Holy Land*. (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010)