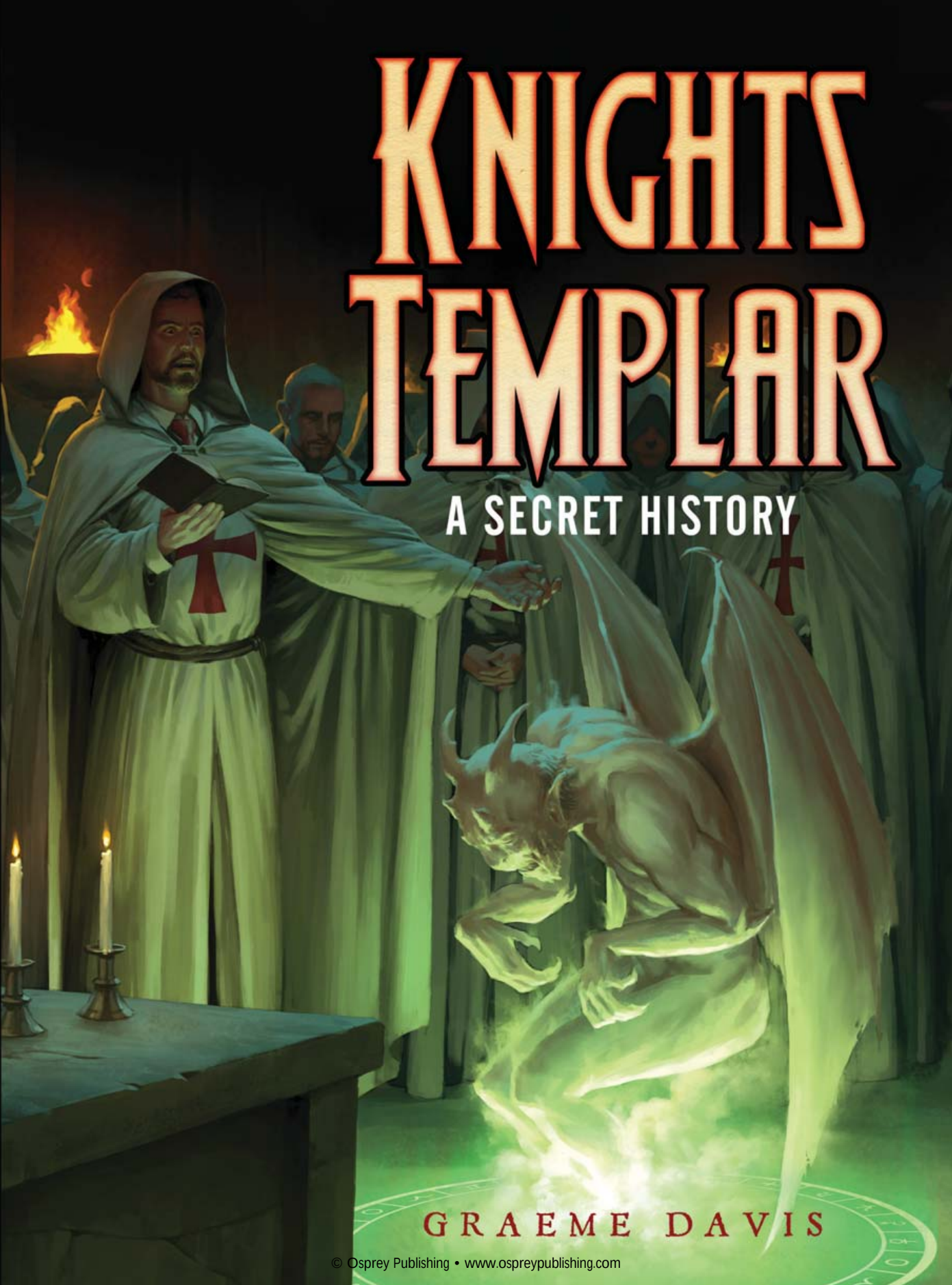

THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR

A SECRET HISTORY

GRAEME DAVIS

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Introduction

The death of Dr Émile Fouchet in the spring of 2012, in an automobile accident outside Troyes, excited little comment. The police report concluded that Dr Fouchet had been drinking but was not drunk, and that darkness and rain contributed to the crash. The question of suicide, prompted by the recent and unexpected loss of his teaching post at the University of Toulouse, was raised and quickly dismissed.

I had met Dr Fouchet briefly at the International Congress on Medieval Studies in 2007. He gave a paper tracing the history of what he called the "Plantard conspiracy"[1] which lay behind *The Da Vinci Code* – wildly popular at that time – and the 1982 bestseller *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail.* The topic seemed too lightweight for an academic conference, but Fouchet's presentation posed several intriguing questions. In particular, while dismissing the books and film as blatant fiction, he wondered who would spend so much effort to obfuscate historical facts, and why.

After his presentation I took the opportunity to request Dr Fouchet's help for one of my graduate students who was researching links between the Templars and the Teutonic Knights. I also made some politely noncommittal remarks about his choice of topic and his courage in broaching it before an academic audience. He complimented me on my French and promised to read my student's abstract.

Nothing in our conversation made me think Dr Fouchet would remember me once he was out of the room. His letter in response to the abstract was polite but distant. He listed some archives and the names of a few librarians, but regretted that he was extremely busy with his own research.

Shortly after Fouchet's death I received a package. Inside was a mass of papers and a letter dated three days before the crash. Fouchet had apparently kept up with my work and seemed impressed by my publication record, for his letter begged me to have his research translated and published as quickly as possible if anything should happen to him. He sounded very afraid – almost paranoid – and hinted that his recent research had cost him his job and somehow placed him in danger.

In 2006, construction work on a new Metro station in Toulouse uncovered part of the ruined Château Narbonnaise. Also found, though not reported,

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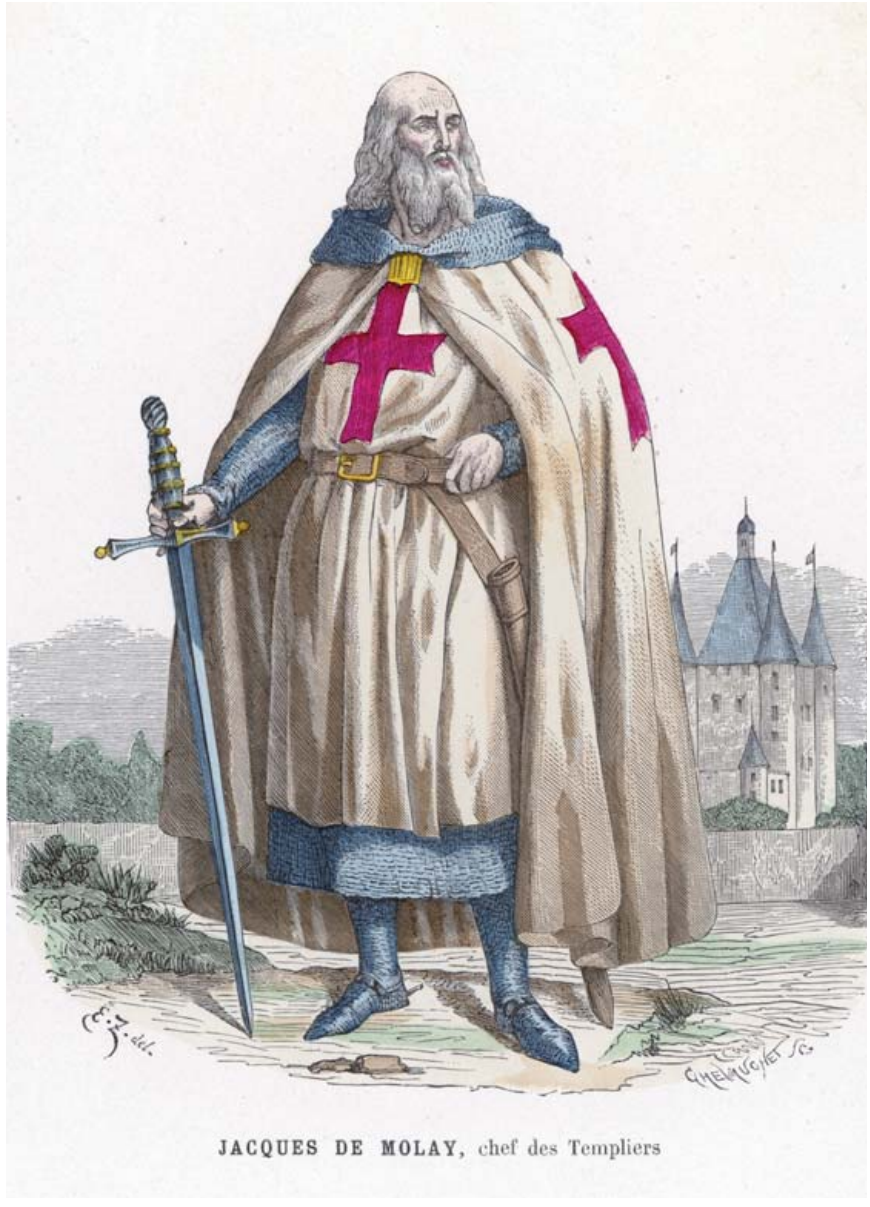
1. Although it dates back to the 1950s, the Plantard conspiracy came to worldwide prominence following the publication of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* in 1982. It is covered in more detail on pp. 61-62.

was a cache of documents dating from the siege of the castle in 1217-18 during the Albigensian Crusade.

The documents were mostly religious and philosophical texts relating to the Cathar heresy, and Fouchet was an expert on Cathar history. As he studied the documents he found some relating to the Knights Templar, who survived the Albigensian Crusade but were disbanded about a century later.

I spent the whole of that night poring over Fouchet's notes. At first I suspected Fouchet had fallen prey to the kind of conspiracy theories that have always dogged serious Templar scholarship. To my surprise I found Fouchet's facts unassailable, his arguments sound, and his tone manifestly sane. I decided to do as he asked, and you hold the first results of that process in your hands. It is hoped that deeper and more detailed coverage of Fouchet's research will appear over the next few years in peer-reviewed journals.



Jacques de Molay, last official Grand Master of the Knights Templar. In the absence of convincing contemporary likenesses, this later image has become the most influential depiction. (Mary Evans Picture Library / Alamy)

One sentence in Fouchet's letter still puzzles me. "You must publish," he said, "before they can cover the old fiction with a new one." If "they" are the Templars, or some group claiming the inheritance of their legacy, then it seems the "Plantard conspiracy" – and other Templar myths – were deliberate and well-constructed fictions.

For now, readers must come to their own conclusions and hope, as I do, that someone with the necessary expertise and resources will take up the research that Émile Fouchet can no longer finish.

Origins and Growth

The history of the Knights Templar, from their founding in 1119 to the execution of the last Grand Master, Jacques de Molay, in 1314, is sufficiently well known that it need only be covered here in outline. More details can be found in many excellent sources, some of which are listed in the bibliography.

In addition to the generally accepted history of the Order, the following pages also discuss various points raised in Fouchet's notes, and the startling conclusions he drew from his research.

The Founding

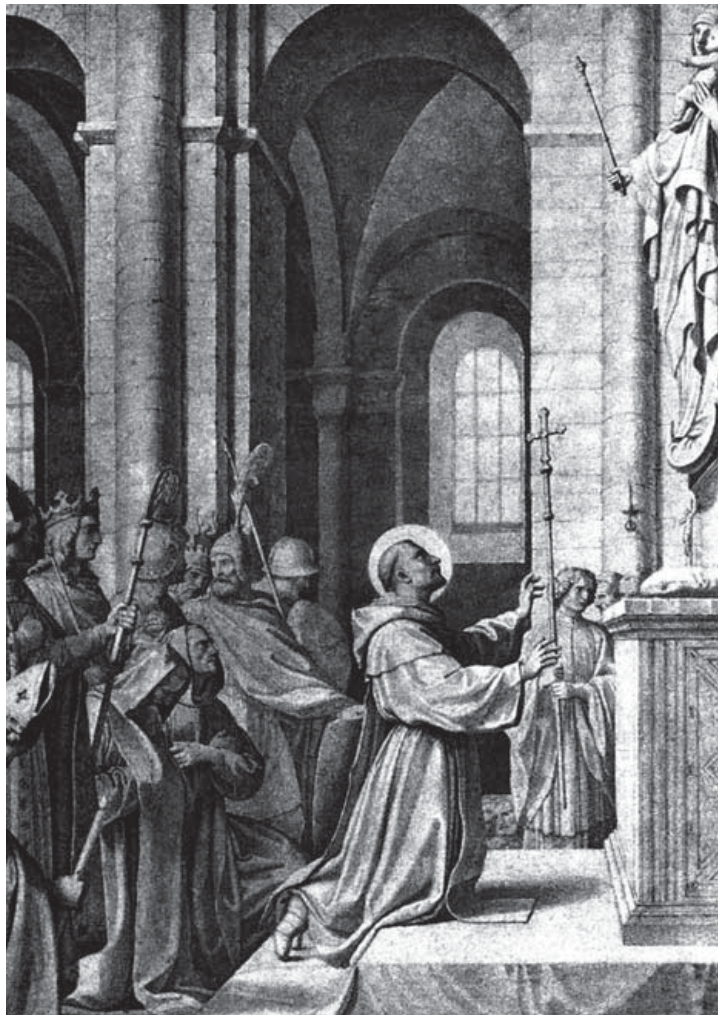
In July of 1099 the armies of the First Crusade captured Jerusalem, bringing the Holy Lands of the Middle East under Christian control after more than 450 years of Muslim domination. Around 1119 nine French knights, including Hugues de Payens, André de Montbard, and Godfrey de Saint-Omer, approached King Baldwin II of Jerusalem with a proposal to establish an order of knights on monastic lines, whose duty would be to protect pilgrims as they traveled to Jerusalem.

The knights were accommodated in the captured al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount, close to the site of Solomon's Temple. They named themselves the "Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon," which soon became abbreviated to "Knights of the Temple" or "Knights Templar."

Pope Honorius II presides over the Order's official foundation at the Council of Troyes. (INTERFOTO / Alamy)

Their fame spread to Europe, where they returned in 1127 to a heroes' welcome. Leading churchman Bernard (later Saint Bernard) of Clairvaux became their champion, writing *De Laude Novae Militae* ("In Praise of the New Knighthood") and playing a leading role in the 1128 (1129 according to some sources) Council of Troyes at which Pope Honorius II gave their order official status. Hugues de Payens was established as the Templars' first Grand Master.

After this official recognition gifts of money and lands poured in, along with a flood of eager recruits. The Order was further strengthened in 1139 by a bull of Pope Innocent II titled *Omne Datum Optimum* ("Every Perfect Gift"), which exempted members of the Order from the laws of the kingdoms in which they operated. They could pass freely across borders, were exempt from taxation, and answered only to the pope. No king could command the Templars.



Bernard was given the Abbey of Clairvaux by Count Hugh of Champagne, the head of the Troyes cabal. (INTERFOTO / Alamy)

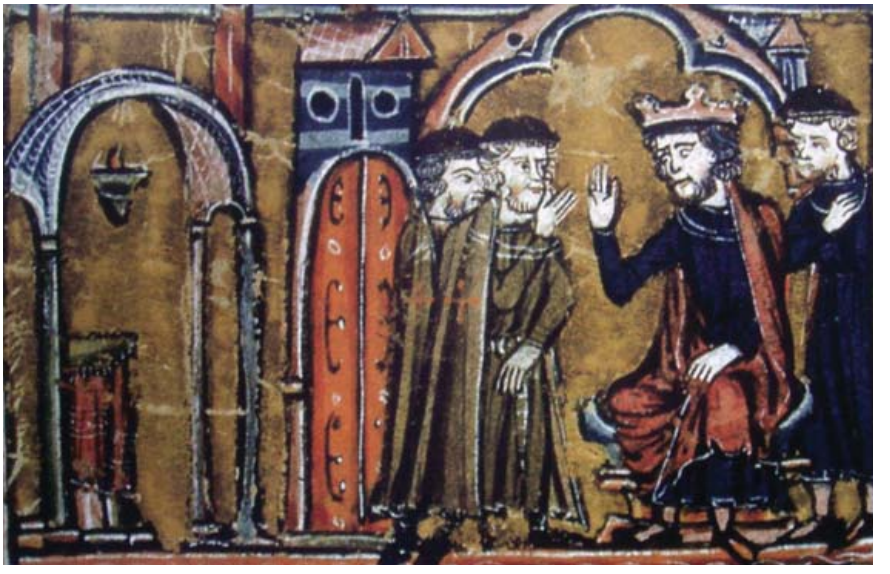
Contemporary Records

Guillaume de Tyre, our main source for the Templars' early history, was born more than a decade after the Order was allegedly founded. When he was writing, between 1170 and 1184, the Templars were already well established and influential.

King Baldwin's own chronicler was his chaplain Fulk, or Fulcher, de Chartres. Fulk himself does not even mention Hugues de Payens. This is curious, as Fulk would surely have witnessed his master's meeting with the nine poor knights.

In fact, nowhere in the records of the time is there any mention of de Payens and his knights being active in the Holy Land. Even the later accounts fail to record any action in which they protected pilgrims. One must wonder how nine impoverished knights could hope to protect so many travelers in such a large area; so far no one has been able to answer this question.

According to Fouchet, the story of the nine poor knights seems less like history and more like a *post facto* origin story fabricated for an organization that already existed.



King Baldwin grants accommodations in the Temple to Hugues de Payens and Geoffrey de Saint-Omer. From a 13th-century copy of Guillaume de Tyre's *Histoire d'Outre-Mer.* (PD-US)

The Troyes Connection

Hugues de Payens was a vassal of Count Hugues (Hugh) of Champagne. The count endowed the abbey of Clairvaux and installed Bernard as abbot. Bernard was a nephew of André de Montbard, de Payens' companion. The counts of Champagne made their capital at Troyes, where the Church council that officially recognized the Templars took place. Fouchet believed that this is more than mere coincidence.

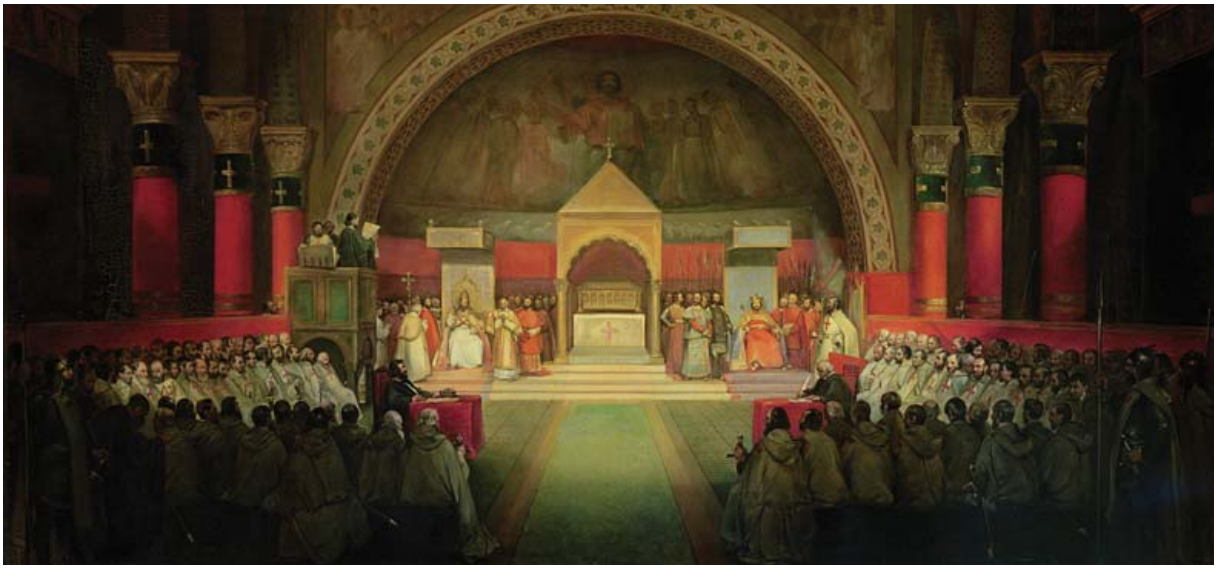
In 1104, more than a decade before the Templars were officially founded, Count Hugh met with certain nobles, at least one of whom had recently returned from Jerusalem. That same year, the count set out on a four-year journey to the Holy Land in the company of Hugues de Payens.

De Payens was more than just a vassal to Count Hugh. His signature appears on several of the count's documents, suggesting that he was a trusted courtier and possibly a friend.

There is no official record of what de Payens and his lord did in the Holy Land. It is known, however, that in 1114 Count Hugh made a second journey there, again with de Payens. A letter from Bernard refers to the count's desire to join *la milice du Christ* – the name was often applied to the Templars, but they would not be founded for another five years. "The Militia of Christ" was a completely new term, but Bernard used it as though it were quite familiar to him.

Count Hugh returned to France within a year, leaving de Payens behind. Almost as soon as he returned, he gave land to the Cistercians for the building of Clairvaux Abbey. Bernard, who was only 25 and had been a Cistercian for just three years, was installed as abbot.

Count Hugh joined the Order in 1124, swearing fealty to de Payens as the Order's Grand Master – and placing himself in the anomalous position of vassal to his own vassal.



A 19th-century depiction of the Chapter of the Order of Templars, held in Paris on April 22nd 1147. (The Bridgeman Art Library Ltd. / Alamy)

The counts of Champagne who followed Hugh were frequent visitors to the Holy Land. One, Henry II, was king of Jerusalem from 1192 to 1197 and died in suspicious circumstances. In 1198, Pope Innocent III chose Count Tibault (or Theobald) of Champagne to lead the Fourth Crusade and recapture Jerusalem.

Fouchet's research included an exhaustive enquiry into Count Hugh and his successors. He also tried to trace the other members of what he called "the Troyes cabal" and chart their connection with the Templars and the kings of Jerusalem. The fact that he died near Troyes suggests that someone – or some organization – wanted to stop his enquiries into events there.

What does emerge from Fouchet's research is the idea that as early as 1104 a powerful group backed by the count of Champagne was working to establish an order of knights and have them housed in or near the Temple. Fouchet suspected that Count Hugh established Clairvaux Abbey specifically so that Bernard could be positioned as a champion of the Order within the Church.

THE CRUSADES

From 1095 to 1272 European armies fought to recapture Jerusalem and other holy sites in the Middle East that had been taken from the Byzantine Empire during the expansion of Islam in the 7th century.

The First Crusade (1095–99) succeeded in recapturing Jerusalem. Four Christian states were established: the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the Country of Edessa, the Principality of Antioch, and the County of Tripoli.

The Second Crusade was launched in 1147 after Muslim forces recaptured the town of Edessa, but ended without any significant victories. For the next 40 years the future of the Crusader kingdoms hung in the balance.

Following Saladin's victory at the Battle of Hattin in 1187 the Crusader kingdoms collapsed: the Third and Fourth crusades failed to re-establish them. Four more crusades (or five, according to some historians) tried unsuccessfully to conquer Egypt.