The Templars: The Rise and Spectacular Fall of God's Holy Warriors

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An instant New York Times bestseller, from the author of Crusaders, that finally tells the real story of the Knights Templar-"Seldom does one find serious scholarship so easy to read." (The Times, Book of the Year)

A faltering war in the middle east. A band of elite warriors determined to fight to the death to protect Christianity's holiest sites. A global financial network unaccountable to any government. A sinister plot founded on a web of lies...

In 1119, a small band of knights seeking a purpose in the violent aftermath of the First Crusade set up a new religious order in Jerusalem, which was now in Christian hands. These were the first Knights Templar, elite warriors who swore vows of poverty and chastity and promised to protect Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land. Over the next 200 years, the Templars would become the most powerful network of the medieval world, speerheading the crusades, pionerring new forms of finance and warfare and deciding the fate of kings. Then, on October 13, 1307, hundreds of brothers were arrested, imprisoned and tortured and the order was disbanded among lurid accusations of sexual misconduct and heresy. But were they heretics or victims of a ruthlessly repressive state? Dan Jones goes back to the sources to bring their dramatic tale, so relevant to our own times, to life in a book that is at once authoritative and compulsively readable.
Dan Jones is the New York Times bestselling author of The Templars, The Plantagenets, Wars of the Roses, and Magna Carta. He wrote and presented the popular Netflix series Secrets of Great British Castles and appeared alongside George R.R. Martin in the official HBO film exploring the real history behind Game of Thrones. He is the historical consultant to Knightfall, an A&E drama on the legend of the Templars produced by Jeremy Renner.1

"A Golden Basin Filled with Scorpions"

It was a foul autumn morning in Jaffa when the pilgrims came out of the church. They were immediately swept up in the stampede of a crowd heading toward the sea, drawn by a dreadful cacophony: the scream of timber being wrenched apart and, scarcely audible below the roar of the wind and explosions of waves, the shrieks of terrified men and women fighting for their lives. A violent storm, building over the previous day, had burst during the night and thirty or so ships anchored off Jaffa's steeply shelving beach were being hurled about upon great mountains of water. The largest and most robust among them were ripped from their anchors, driven into sharp rocks and hammered into sandbanks until, in the words of one onlooker, all had been "torn to pieces by the tempest."

The crowd on the shore watched helplessly as sailors and passengers were washed from the decks. Some tried to stay afloat by hanging on to splintered masts and spars, but most were doomed. "Some, as they were clinging, were cut apart by the timbers of their own ships," wrote the observer. "Some, who knew how to swim, voluntarily committed themselves to the waves, and thus many of them perished." On the shore, corpses had begun to wash up with the surf. The dead would eventually number one thousand, and only seven ships would survive the storm unwrecked. "A greater misery on one day no eye ever saw," the pilgrim wrote. It was Monday, October 13, 1102.

The pilgrim to whom we owe this account was an Englishman known as Saewulf. He had been traveling for several months, having left Monopoli, on the coast of Apulia (the heel of the boot in modern Italy) on July 13, a day he described as hora egyptiaca, as it had been thought since the age of the Pharaohs that this was an astrologically accursed date on which to begin an important task. And so it had proved to be. Saewulf had already suffered one shipwreck on his passage from England to the eastern Mediterranean. Mercifully he had survived. His subsequent route had taken him to Corfu, Cephalonia and Corinth, overland via Thebes to the Aegean Sea, then southeastward through the Cyclades and Dodecanese islands to Rhodes. Several more days at sea had brought him to the Cypriot port of Paphos from where, after exactly thirteen weeks during which he had traveled some two thousand miles, he finally arrived in Jaffa, the main port of the Christian kingdom of Jerusalem. He was rowed to shore just hours before the fatal storm struck.

Despite the many privations and terrible risks of seafaring, Saewulf had seen great things on his journey east as he and his fellow travelers had alighted their boat every few days to beg accommodation from islanders whom he called, generically, the Greeks. He had gazed on the silk workshops of Andros and had been to the site of the long-vanished Colossus of Rhodes. He had visited the ancient city of Myra, with its beautiful semicircular theater, and had been to Finike, a windswept trading port founded by the Phoenicians in an area known by the local people as "sixty oars," due to the roughness of the seas. He had prayed at the tomb of Saint Nicholas and had walked, in Cyprus, in the footsteps of Saint Peter. Yet his real prize lay one step farther. Once the storm had abated, he would be heading to the most important city on earth: he would set out on the road southeast to Jerusalem, where he intended to pray at the tomb of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and savior of mankind.

For a Christian like Saewulf, who piously described himself as "unworthy and sinful," a visit to Jerusalem was a redemptive journey to the center of the world. God had told the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel that he had set Jerusalem "in the midst of the nations," and this was regarded as more than a mere figure of speech. Maps produced in Europe at the time represented the Holy City as the kernel around which all of earth's kingdoms, both Christian and pagan, grew. This fact of geography was also a fact of cosmology. Jerusalem was understood to be a place where the heavenly was made manifest, and the power of prayer magnified by the presence of relics and holy sites. It was not just seen, but felt: a visitor could personally experience the sacred details of biblical stories, from the deeds of the Old Testament kings to Christ's life and Passion.

Approaching Jerusalem on the road from Jaffa, Saewulf would have entered through David's Gate, a heavily fortified portal in the city's thick defensive walls, guarded by a large stone citadel built on the remains of a fortress erected by Herod: the king who the Bible claimed had put every baby in Bethlehem to death in an attempt to kill the infant Christ. In the southeastern quarter of the city was the Temple Mount, crowned with the shimmering cupola of the Dome of the Rock, which the Christians called the Temple of the Lord. Beside this was the al-Aqsa Mosque, a wide, low, rectangular building also topped with a dome, built in the seventh century and converted to Christian use as a palace for the Christian king of Jerusalem, a wealthy soldier from Boulogne known as Baldwin I.

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Beyond the Temple Mount, on the other side of Jerusalem's eastern wall, lay a cemetery, and beyond that Gethsemane, where Christ had prayed with his disciples, and where he was betrayed by Judas on the night of his arrest. Farther on lay the Mount of Olives, where Jesus had spent many weeks teaching, and from where he had eventually ascended to heaven. Saewulf wrote in his diary that he himself climbed the Mount of Olives and looked down over the city of Jerusalem, examining where the city's walls and boundaries had been expanded during its occupation by the Romans.

The most holy place of all, and the real object of every Christian pilgrimage, lay within Jerusalem. It was the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which Saewulf called "more celebrated than any other church, and this is meet and right, since all the prophecies and foretellings in the whole world about our Saviour Jesus Christ were all truly fulfilled there."

It was a double-storied complex of interlinked chapels and courtyards, many of which commemorated, and were thought literally to mark the sites of, the central events in the Passion. Saewulf listed them: the prison cell where Jesus was kept after his betrayal; the spot where a fragment of the Cross had been found; a pillar against which the Lord had been bound when he was flogged by Roman soldiers and "the place where he was made to put on the purple robe and crowned with the crown of thorns" and Calvary, where Christ was crucified-here Saewulf examined the hole in which the Cross had been held, and a rock split in two, as had been described in the Gospel of Matthew. There were chapels dedicated to Mary Magdalen and Saint John the Apostle, to the Virgin Mary and Saint James. Most important and impressive of all, though, was the great rotunda at the western end of the church, for here lay the Sepulchre itself: the tomb of Christ. This was the cave in which Jesus had been buried following his Crucifixion, before the Resurrection. The shrine was surrounded by continuously burning oil lamps and paved with slabs of marble: a still, fragrant place for prayer and devotion. Nowhere on earth or in history was more sacred to Christians. Saewulf acknowledged as much in the very first line of his memoir: "I was on my way to Jerusalem to pray at the Lord's tomb." To stand before the Sepulchre was to venture to the cradle of Christianity, which was why pilgrims like Saewulf were willing to risk their lives to go there.

Pilgrimage was a centrally important part of Christian life in the early twelfth century, and had been for nearly one thousand years. People traveled incredible distances to visit saints' shrines and the sites of famous Christian deeds. They did it for the good of their souls: sometimes to seek divine relief from illness, sometimes as penance to atone for their sins. Some thought that praying at a certain shrine would ensure the protection of that saint in their passage through the afterlife. All believed that God looked kindly on pilgrims and that a man or woman who ventured humbly and faithfully to the center of the world would improve his or her standing in the eyes of God.

Yet Saewulf's perilous journey was not just devout. It was also timely. Although Christians had been visiting Jerusalem on pilgrimage since at least the fourth century, it had never been entirely friendly territory. For most of the previous seven hundred years the city and surrounding area had been under the control of Roman emperors, Persian kings, Umayyad

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caliphs and Seljuq rulers called beys (or emirs). From the seventh century until the end of the eleventh century, Jerusalem had been in Muslim hands. To the followers of Islam, it was the third-holiest city in the world, after Mecca and Medina. Muslims recognized it as the location of al-Masjid al-Aqsa (the Furthest Mosque), the place where, according to the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad was brought on his "Night Journey," when the angel Gabriel transported him from Mecca to the Temple Mount, from which they ascended together into the heavens.

Recently, however, conditions had changed profoundly. Three years before Saewulf's journey, a dramatic upheaval had torn through the city and the wider coastal region of Palestine and Syria, which had fundamentally changed the appeal and nature of pilgrimage for men and women of the Latin West. Following a bitter and sustained war that raged between 1096 and 1099, major parts of the Holy Land had been conquered by the armies of what would come to be known as the First Crusade.

Several large expeditions of warrior pilgrims had traveled from Western Europe to the Holy Land (sometimes they called this "Outremer," which translates simply as "overseas"). These pilgrims were known collectively by Christian writers as the "Latins" or the "Franks," a term mirrored in Muslim texts, which referred to them as Ifranj. Reacting to a cry for military assistance from the Byzantine emperor Alexius I Comnenus, backed by the enthusiastic preaching of Pope Urban II, these men and women had marched first to Constantinople and then on to the Levantine coast to fight the Muslims who held sway there. Urban promised, alluringly, that going on crusade could be substituted for all penances the Church had imposed on individuals for their sins-an entire lifetime's wrongdoing could theoretically be wiped out in a single journey. Initially these armed pilgrims had been little more than an undisciplined, violent mob led by rabble-rousers such as the French priest Peter the Hermit, who whipped his followers into a frenzy of devotion, but was unable either to provision them properly or to control their violent urges. Subsequent waves of crusaders were led by noblemen from France, Normandy, England, Flanders, Bavaria, Lombardy and Sicily, driven by a genuinely righteous sense that it was their Christian duty to liberate the holy places from their Muslim occupiers, and encouraged by the fact that Jerusalem and the surrounding area were politically and militarily divided between numerous mutually hostile factions of the Islamic world.

The fissures were political, dynastic and sectarian. On one side were the Seljuqs, originally from central Asia, who had built an empire stretching from Asia Minor to the Hindu Kush, blending Turkic and Persian culture and observing religious loyalty to the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, the spiritual leader of Sunni Islam. For twenty years before 1092 the Seljuq empire was ruled by Sultan Malikshah I, but on his death the empire split between his four sons, who fell into fractious dispute.

Pitted against the Seljuqs was the rump of the Fatimid caliphate, with its heartlands in Egypt, whose leaders claimed descent from Muhammad's daughter Fatima. From the mid-tenth century the Fatimids ruled most of North Africa, Syria, Palestine, the Hijaz and even Sicily, loyal to their own Shi'a caliph in Cairo. In the late eleventh century the Fatimid empire was also breaking up, losing territory and influence and contracting back toward its

Egyptian heartlands. Sectarian and political rivalry between the Seljuqs and the Fatimids, as well as within the Seljuq empire itself, had caused a period of exceptional disunity within the Islamic world. As one of their own chroniclers put it, the various rulers were "all at odds with one another."

So it was that the Christians of the First Crusade had enjoyed a staggering series of victories. Jerusalem had fallen on July 15, 1099, an astonishing military coup that was accompanied by disgraceful plundering and massacres of the city's Jewish and Muslim inhabitants, whose beheaded bodies were left lying in piles in the streets, many with their bellies slit open so that the Christian conquerors could retrieve gold coins their victims had swallowed in a bid to hide them from the marauding invaders. Greek Orthodox priests in Jerusalem were tortured until they revealed the location of some of their finest relics, including a fragment of wood from the True Cross on which Christ had died, embedded in a beautiful gold, crucifix-shaped reliquary.

The crusaders took the major northern cities of Edessa and Antioch, as well as smaller towns including Alexandretta, Bethlehem, Haifa, Tiberias and Jaffa. Other coastal settlements including Arsuf, Acre, Caesarea and Ascalon remained in Muslim hands but agreed to pay tributes to be left alone and were in time conquered. A series of new Christian states was established along the Mediterranean coast: the county of Edessa and the principality of Antioch in the north were bordered to the south by the county of Tripoli and the kingdom of Jerusalem, which claimed theoretical feudal lordship over the whole region-although this was only ever very loosely enforced.

Given the unprecedented conditions of their arrival, the sheer distance from home and the sapping nature of waging war in such an unforgiving climate, the Christians' hold on these lands was still incomplete. By the time of Saewulf's pilgrimage to Jerusalem, troops, boats and holy men arriving from the West had helped expand the territories subject to the rule of Jerusalem's first crusader king, Baldwin I. But there were not very many of them and they were threatened by multiple enemies from outside, and internal divisions among the crusaders, drawn as they were from parts of the West not renowned for easy cooperation.

In the summer of 1102, Saewulf thus found himself in a new, small, occasionally beleaguered but aggressive Christian kingdom of the East, whose very existence was thought by the zealots who had established it to be evidence that God had "opened to us the abundance of His blessing and mercy." The Muslims who had been displaced not surprisingly saw things otherwise. They referred to their new neighbors as the product of "a time of disasters" brought about by the "enemies of God."

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