

The DeMolay Degree Fact or Fiction?

by **Sir Knight Seth C. Anthony**

I think few would argue that the DeMolay Degree can be one of the most impressive experiences in all of Freemasonry, let alone in DeMolay. Yet, one line of that degree always tugged at me a little. While I don't have a ritual book in front of me to quote it, the Orator, at the beginning of the ceremony states that the events portrayed in the degree are essentially a condensed version of several trials used to depict the point of the degree. So, the ritual itself acknowledges that the events portrayed are not historically accurate. This led me to wonder - what did exactly happen?

Thanks to the wonders of the Internet, this research isn't hard to find. It took me a little while to dig through it all and get to the real meat of the story, so I decided to condense the narrative to the most important points and share it with you here.

The day was Friday the 13th, 1307. This day literally lives on to the present as an ill omen. Yes, you can thank Jacques DeMolay for Friday the 13th being bad luck, but I digress. Just a day before, Jacques was in Paris, attending a royal funeral for the sister-in-law of the King of France. Early in the morning, King Phillip of France dispatched the military to round up any Templars in Paris and arrest them on charges of heresy and blasphemy (fancy words that mean "doing things against the church.") Why would Phillip do such a thing? It seems that the monarchy of France was a little short on cash - repeatedly. When they found their coffers dry, they would head over to the local Templar Preceptory and borrow some cash. And borrow they did! Phillip was in deep debt to the Templars who he knew were very wealthy. He figured that if he could seize all of the Templar assets and dissolve their organization, he would be out of debt and very wealthy in one fell swoop! So the arrests were made, and Jacques was imprisoned.



The Templars were taken to the University of Paris, and about ten days later, were viciously interrogated in an attempt to get a confession. During this interrogation, Jacques confessed to the King's torturers that the Templars did indeed commit acts of heresy such as trampling on the cross and denying Christ. Having gotten this confession, the interrogators then forced Jacques to write a letter to all of the Templars that implored them to confess and give themselves up. It seemed the game was over.

There is still one character left in this story however, and that would be Pope Clement V. You see, Phillip couldn't have all of the Templars arrested without his express permission. Without Clement's approval, Phillip would have been out of luck. However, Phillip was a devious man who had caused lots of trouble with the Papacy in the past. His latest fight, before the Templar issue, had forced the Pope to move his headquarters from Rome to Southern France, right under the thumb of Phillip. The Pope didn't have much choice in the Templar matter thanks to all of this, and quickly gave his blessing. Clement wasn't a complete pawn though, and even after Jacques had confessed to the King's torturers, he still wanted to hear Jacques story for himself.

In December of 1307, Clement dispatched two high ranking Cardinals to talk to Jacques face to face. When the Cardinals confronted him about the charges and the confession, he quickly recanted, taking the position that he had no choice but to confess after being tortured and that he knew the King's men wouldn't take no for an answer. However, he believed that the Cardinals, being men of the cloth, would give him a fairer trial, and so he recanted to them, believing that the Church would trust his word and save him. Upon hearing this, Phillip and Clement began to argue about who should be in charge of trying and convicting the Templars.

This squabble lasted until the summer of 1308 when it was decided that the King could preside over a trial of the order, which of course would involve its disbanding, with its monies being turned over to the King of France. However, Clement and the Church would retain control of the trials of the Templars themselves, and so in 1309, the Church began hearings for Jacques and other Templars. He again recanted his confession to the Pope and his Cardinals. The Pope then believed that the case was pretty clear and called an ecumenical council (a meeting of several church officials to make a decision on an important matter) in the spring of 1310, to be held at Castle Chinon, in Vienne, France.



At this conference, Cardinals again questioned Jacques about the order and his confessions in 1307. The problem was that the King didn't trust the Pope and his officials to get the confessions out of Jacques a second time, so he sent royal officials to the trial. Upon seeing these officials, Jacques again confessed to the crimes. The case was now right back where it was in 1307. To make matters worse, Phillip used the confessions gained in 1307 to burn fifty-four Templars at the stake. With all of the evidence being so convoluted and several Templars having been tried, convicted, and executed, the council was not able to come to a decision until 1312. The council then decided to abolish the Templar order as a part of the Church and to continue imprisoning DeMolay and several other high level Templar officials. So for two more years, Jacques and his companions lay rotting in a French prison.

Under pressure from Phillip, and wanting to finally put the issue to rest, Clement dispatched several Cardinals to meet with DeMolay in 1314 and decide his final fate. The Cardinals met with DeMolay and three of his highest officials, Hugh de Pairaud, Geoffroi de Charney, and Geoffroy de Gonnevillle. After hearing testimony, the Cardinals decided to imprison the four men for the rest of their lives and to spare them execution. Upon hearing this, Jacques (who was now close to seventy years old) gave a stirring speech that again proclaimed his

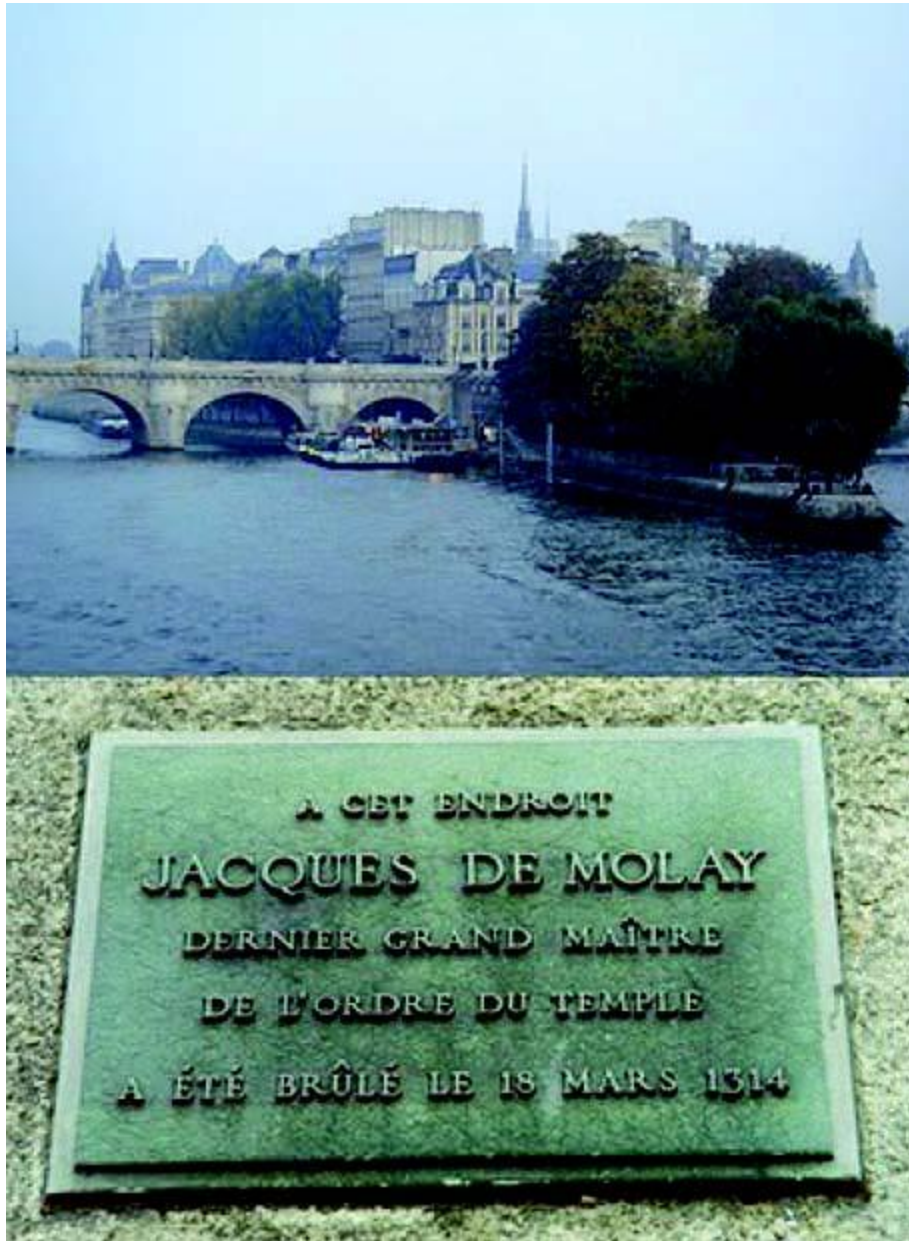
innocence. Joining Jacques in this speech was Geoffroi de Charney, who loudly protested the verdict. After hearing of this public disruption to the trial, Phillip ordered both men to be burned at the stake as "relapsed heretics." So it was to be that very night that Jacques DeMolay and Geoffroi de Charney were burned at the stake.

There are several legends surrounding Jacques's death. Some say that he asked that his hands not be tied, so that he could die praying. Another tale says that Jacques cursed both the King and the Pope, and that within a year of his death, he would meet them at the right hand of God to be judged. Interestingly enough, the Pope died a few months later due to an illness, with the King soon following him to the grave thanks to a hunting accident.

Thus, it came to pass that the Templars were abolished, and Jacques DeMolay would be their last Grand Master. Today, we as DeMolay's, recreate this scene in the DeMolay Degree. Now that you know the whole story, it's easy to see where embellishments have been made, and liberties taken to provide a better story. The basic principle, however, remains the same. Jacques died proclaiming his innocence, along with his brother Templars. This my Brothers remains a truly commendable act.

That's not the whole story though! Documents were discovered at the Vatican, in 2002, that show that Pope Clement absolved DeMolay of wrong doing in 1309 while on trial at Chinon. Even this Papal decree of innocence was not enough to purchase Jacques his freedom and life.

After reading this, I hope that each time you watch the DeMolay Degree you think about this story. You remember that Jacques spent the last seven years of his life defending his name, under brutal conditions, only to be declared innocent, and then guilty again, ending in his demise.



"Hail thee noble Martyr..."

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