

To Be A Pilgrim

The 700th Anniversary of the Death of Jacques DeMolay,
23rd Grand Master of the Knights Templar.
By Sir Knight Benjamin Williams

This year marks the seven hundredth anniversary of the martyrdom of our Grand Master, Jacques DeMolay, who was burned at the stake in Paris on March 18, 1314. It's a tragic story of injustice and intrigue, one with which you are undoubtedly familiar. Grand Master Jacques DeMolay, prosecuted by the Inquisition, had confessed under torture to the crimes of heresy. He had already been absolved of these crimes by Cardinal Berenger Fredoli in 1308,¹ but he was still a prisoner.

Facing lifelong imprisonment and the impious destruction of his order, he recanted his confession in the shadow of Notre Dame Cathedral on the morning of March 18, 1314, in front of a crowd that had gathered to hear him.

We might imagine that King Philip IV had hoped that DeMolay would confess again, this time publicly, and that his self professed guilt would ring out across the world and exonerate Philip of the mis- appropriation of the order's properties. Instead, Jacques DeMolay and Geoffrey de Charnay, Preceptor of Normandy, admitted only the crime of acceding to forced confession. They declaimed their innocence and that the order was spot- less and accused the prosecutors of malicious lies.

Quickly no doubt, they were shuffled off as fast as Philip's henchmen could carry them with the crowd cheering.

By sunrise, both Templars would be dead. The fires of orthodoxy were laid at their feet and kindled that very evening. In the early hours, before the sun broke above the river Seine, anonymous admirers swam out to the mudflats where the embers still smoked and collected the bones.

This is a telling tale of medieval greed and corruption, of the abuses of and lusts for power, yet a shining example of fortitude and principle, of enduring truth. Resplendent from those ashes a phoenix would rise, and seven hundred years later, the name of Jacques DeMolay remains the stuff of legend, but remember that this stuff really happened.

King Philip IV, King of France, called by the moniker "Phillip the Fair," not for any inference of justness on his part but because of his complexion and the color of his hair, had racked up a fair debt to the Templars. His vanity was costly. He'd inherited a debt ridden kingdom after his father's campaigns in Aragon, yet he attempted princely expansion against the English and sustained lordly living above his people. He maintained military pretensions against Flanders. In 1294, he began

a war when he deceived his brother-in-law, the English king, Edward I, who was also Duke of Aquitaine, and expropriated English lands in Gascony. He instituted an overweening bureaucracy to control his government between factions of tiered administration. He borrowed from everyone. The debts piled up.

He arrested Jews and seized their assets. He expelled over one-hundred-thousand of them from his kingdom in the Great Exile of 1306. He expelled the Lombardi bankers from France when their loans to him came due. He plundered the Church. He married his daughter to the Prince of Wales to smooth things over across the Channel, and he debased his currency to extract more gold from circulation until, confronted with diminishing value in the Parisian medium of exchange, riots broke out in the streets. It was the summer of 1306, one year before the arrest of the Templars, and Philip the Fair was running out of options.

For nine days he hid in the Templars' Commandery at Paris as an angry mob raged across the cobblestones, through the marketplaces, and up to the very walls of the palace. There, in the Commandery, with the consequences of financial mismanagement and paucity outside; there, amidst the scintillation of gold within, (the Paris Commandery was a principal drop off for wealthy merchants and pilgrims en route to the Holy Land) Philip's eyes must have gleamed. There was plenty of money to fund his desires. He had just to lay his hands on it.

Some history is important. Philip had already quarreled with Pope Boniface VIII, the Templars lawful sole superior, and in 1296, was condemned by Boniface for his lavish appetites. Threats of excommunication were made. Tensions mounted between Paris and Rome. Across Europe, monarchs were reeling from the weight of the Crusades, and tempers were high. The Pope was unpopular; rumors persisted of his sodomy and simony. Over expenditure to fund the Crusades had everyone up against each other's borders. The militaristic orders, with their vast networks and vows of fealty to the Church, were falling out of favor. They were symbols of the Crusades, of the recent loss of Acre, of the vast, uncountable expense. They were a state within the state.

Fearing increasing losses from his dioceses across Europe, Boniface VIII issued a bull, Clericis laicos on February 5, 1296, forbidding transfer of Church property to the crown. Philip retaliated by royal decree, forbidding the export of goods from France. He banished the Papal tax collectors back to Rome. The divergence between temporal and spiritual dominion had begun, and the Templars were detracted in the middle of it.

Boniface capitulated. He even Canonized Philip's grandfather, Louis IX, to make a point, but the damage was done. In March of 1303, Guillaume de Nogaret, Chancellor at the French Royal Court and Philip's favorite confidant, set himself up in the Louvre and read a list of charges against the Pope, declaring a trial to depose of the Pontiff. Empowered by the king to do whatever was necessary, Nogaret traveled to Italy and united with the Colonna family, rivals of the Gaetani (Boniface VIII's family). On September 7th they marched sixteen hundred men into Anagni

and abducted the Pontiff from his residence there. They mistreated him and prepared to take him to France, but the people rose up to support Boniface VIII (the Colonna had taken to plundering), and Nogaret, suddenly imperiled, released the Pope and fled.

That October, Nogaret was saved when Boniface VIII died, and the head of the Dominicans, Benedict XI, was elected to St. Peter's chair, but Benedict's reign was short. He died suddenly, inexplicably, after a mere eight months in office. Poisoning was alleged, and Guillaume de Nogaret seemed suspiciously close. He happened to be at the Papal palace at the time of Benedict's death, demanding absolution for the King over the feud with Boniface VIII. The absolution had been denied to him.

A conclave ensued for eleven long months. By 1305, Philip's designs were realized when a Frenchman, Bertrand de Got, was elected Pope Clement V. There were riots in Rome.²

By 1306 when the masses compelled him to seek sanctuary in the Temple Commandery, Philip was at a fork in his quest for temporal power over Europe. On the one hand, he was out of cash. On the other, he had a Pope directly under his control, and avenues to power were opening up if he could just cover his debts, maintain his position, and as sure his ascendancy. The plans he had set down to unite the military orders into one potent force, to be directed by the French Crown of course (along with their considerable assets), were becoming possible, but the Templars were resistant. They had even refused his solicitation for membership in 1305, and he owed them money, lots of money.

So it was that, with the assistance of Guillaume de Nogaret,³ the conspiracy was hatched, and that fateful day, Friday, October 13th, 1307, dawned. The Templars were simultaneously arrested, and detained so the Inquisition could work their magic and determine if these allegations of heresy including sodomy, witchcraft, worshiping idols, denouncing Christ, and debasing the crucifix among other niceties were true. Friday the 13th would live in infamy evermore.

For seven years, our Grand Master, Jacques DeMolay, was held captive, until that day in March of 1314 (the exact day is disputed), when the famous recantation of his confession was publicly heard and when the fires were prepared on the mudflats in the midst of the Seine to condemn the men on unconsecrated ground where Jacques DeMolay and Geoffrey De Charnay met their fate with a grim determination and stoicism that still echoes through the ages. It is said that DeMolay denounced the King and the Pope for their iniquitous treachery and that they would both join him before the council of Heaven to answer for their crimes within the year. Indeed, both the King and the Pope died within twelve months time.⁴ Singlehandedly, the greatest order of Medieval times, which had supplied fierce and uncompromising soldiers to shed blood in the Holy Land for nearly two hundred years, was suppressed and destroyed and evidence suggests for no other reason than to sate the appetites of an avaricious monarch and a wily Pope.

Moreover, according to the "Templar origination" theory inspirational to speculative Masonry,⁵ the unjust suppression of the order caused the flight to Scotland and elsewhere, engendered a necessity for secrecy, initiated infiltration into the operative Craft, and thus birthed the beginnings of a secret society tasked with works of charity, benevolence, probity, and justice. The magnitude of this moment in the history of our order cannot be overstated.

So it was that, in the latter part of February earlier this year, I had the pleasure of discussing the impending anniversary of this momentous occasion with a wellinformed Brother at South Denver Lodge No. 93, off of Broadway, in Denver, Colorado. With a sparkle in his eye and a low voice bristled with wonder, our worthy Brother said he knew of the exact spot where Jacques DeMolay was burned and that he had visited it, many years ago.

My curiosity piqued. You see, the infamous Iles des Juifs, no longer exists. In the time of Jacques DeMolay, the Ile des Juifs which means "Island of the Jews," was a series of shifting mudflats; unconsecrated ground where heretics were burned, it was new land forming in the middle of the Seine, aborted land, unfinished and smelly, just west of the Ile de la Citee, that large island where Notre Dame sits in the center of Medieval Paris. If you wanted to burn people and condemn them to the fires of hell for an eternity, few places were better. It was nearby and everyone could take note. It was surrounded by water (those thatched roofs were flammable). There was a boat ride required like traveling across the river Styx perhaps, to meet Cerberus at the gates of Hades, the mud readily took the upended stake, and it cut a stark and striking image. Bones would surely be visible against the black deposits of the river, birds picking at the charred flesh must leap at your approach and take to the air in a flurry of black wings. Cold and wet, clammy with whorls of mist, it was a perfect scene to instill terror, to meet the Reaper's blade.

In the 16th Century, King Henry III used these mudflats as shoring to bolster Pont Neuf, a new bridge spanned to connect the Ile de la Citee with the north and south banks of the Seine. It was quite the feat of engineering, and the Ile des Juifs was built up and connected to the western end of the Ile de la Citee. The Ile des Juifs disappeared, a grotesque of history readily forgotten had not such injustice been perpetrated there to inspire almost a millennium of speculation.

Armed with this new information, with some quick research online back at home later that evening, I resolved to visit the site, stand there on the 700th anniversary of Jacques DeMolay's death as close to the spot as I could approximate, and contemplate the moment in quiet reflection. I was also curious to see who else might show up.

So I bought a ticket and scheduled four days in Paris. I found a hotel that was relatively affordable and near Pont Neuf. When the night of my departure arrived, I bundled my stuff into a cab and went to Denver International Airport with anticipation. I had "Price-lined" my tickets and therefore had been booked on

flights with unholy hours and an eight hour layover in Chicago. It was 2:20 a.m. as the minicab departed east down Evans Ave.

Coincidentally, the cab driver's name was Solomon, and he was from Ethiopia. I took this omen with a smile. I was ready to leave the country, the sooner the better I thought.

More than twenty-four hours later, after sundry naps snatched between gates at O'Hare, I arrived in Paris early on Sunday morning. There were some daring dashes through the narrow streets by an enthusiastic Algerian, and despite the considerable language barrier and a few white knuckle turns, I made it to the hotel on Rue Jean Lantier, right across from Pont Neuf. It was smaller than I expected.

Slinging my bags in the small room (the price began to make sense all of a sudden), I went out into the clear sunlight of those European latitudes, that golden, low-slung sunlight that has been an inspiration to Renoir, Monet, Gauguin, to many others, and to my favorites of the Salon des Refuses. It was a beautiful spring morning with clear skies, and in Paris, blossoms were on the trees.

I took my bearings. I walked down by the river. Even though I grew up in England, it had been a while since I had been in Paris. The history of it all, shining softly in the sun, was made all the more sharp by the newfound purpose I had assumed. I made straight way to Pont Neuf.

Close to the juncture with the Ile de la Citee is a large statue of Henry IV astride a large horse. Padlocks have been fastened upon the railing here. Apparently young lovers lock their hearts together by closing padlocks along the railings that gird this part of the bridge. I looked out across the water. The city was awakening. The sounds of Europe were fresh in contradistinction to America. It's strange to contemplate, but it's true. Every country has its sound, every city its melody, and the melody of Paris was muted that day by the fl ts of water and the soft ss of the sandstones. The newgreen of Spring was vibrant. I was alone in a foreign country. I didn't speak the language well. I felt conspicuous and out of place, and yet somehow, I felt at home.

Behind the statue, a narrow set of stairs descended through the centuries, and opened west to a pair of coffin shaped doors. An idyllic garden came into view; fresh flowers ringed its perimeter. A man was asleep on a bench, but he didn't seem homeless. I descended a series of steps. Behind me a plaque confirmed that this was the place, and to my right, in front of the gates into the garden, a small totem bore a similar message. Oddly, the dates commemorated in each were different - one said March 18th, the other March 11th. (There has been some discrepancy among scholars as to the precise date, so perhaps this was oddly fitting.) I believe that the 18th is the most commonly cited, the date preferred by most. It's the one I had selected, and it was just two days away.



I walked the path that bounds the peninsula, sensitive of my feelings. As corny as it sounds, this was something of a pilgrimage. I had come to pay my respects to the memory of this man, and the scene impressed me. I explored, took a few photos, and left, ready for Tuesday. My plan was to be there at dawn and remain until sunset - the time of his death.

That night I attended mass at Notre Dame. I'm not a Catholic, but I didn't think the Church would mind. (At least not anymore.) The liberal use of frankincense sustained a celestial image. Then to bed for a restful sleep indeed. It had been more than thirty-six hours, since leaving, and I was tired.

Monday was overcast and colder. I spent the day lazily. I walked around the Ile de la Citee, took a visit to Saint Chappelle to see the stained glass my father noted.

I awoke on Tuesday morning early, a couple of hours before sunrise. I had brought with me a replica costume of a Knights Templar tunic from the movie Kingdom of Heaven, made of authentic materials and quite heavy. I had purchased a large sword from Toledo Steel, too, but at the advisement of a Brother, had undertaken to research French laws regarding carrying swords in public spaces and determined it best to leave it behind at home. The French are quite strict, apparently, when it comes to carrying large swords around town.

I bundled up my tunic and walked out into the hour before dawn.

Moving quietly through those medieval streets with purpose, in the quiet of a sleeping city, before that grey half-light of dawn broke beneath the clouds, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of excitement. No one was about except a car or two, perhaps. The hour had come. The city was mine.

I crossed over Quai de la Megisserie to Pont Neuf. In the recess along the stairway down to those two coffi shaped doors, one for Jacques DeMolay and the other for Geoffey de Charnay, I thought. I donned the tunic and cloak. I walked out into the early morning silence in the cold damp, down by the river.



At first I stood by the stairs. I closed my eyes, and prayed. I said a few words into the shadowy expanse. I wondered where DeMolay would actually have stood on those last hours. After fifteen or maybe twenty minutes, I walked to the westernmost end of the island. I felt sure Jacques DeMolay would have faced East, toward Notre Dame. I stood there, the line of the island cutting divergent paths above the black Seine, and I prayed. I sang a hymn. I said more words. In my mind's eye I saw a small wooden boat and the men in chains ascend to the mudflats. I saw the vertical stakes against the darkening world. Here, on the mudflats. I heard the chain clang-clang-clang like the slow methodic hammer impounding the damned. It was conjured by my imagination, inspired by something I'd read no doubt, but it all seemed quite real.

By 8 a.m. I was feeling the cold, that clammy river cold that drips out of the mist. The air was thick with it, and standing still for several hours is hard work for some reason. I have no idea how those bearhatted guards at Buckingham Palace do it each day.

Well I thought, there's been enough suffering on this island already. Maybe I'll get some breakfast. I waited another twenty minutes or so, stilling the mind. Then, doffing the costume in the stairway and curling it up under one arm (it really was quite heavy), I made my way to the Cafe de Pont Neuf on the North Bank to reassess my situation and warm up. After all, I had done what I had come here to

do. Was there any reason to stand there all day long? The whole thing had been beautiful already. Aside from a riverboat captain, driving one of those long flat barges up and down the Seine, who made knightly gestures at me through the window of his cabin, like fencing or something, no one had seen me.



I wiled away an hour and a half over cafe au lait (numerous cups) and a ham and cheese omelet. It was a ponderous morning. I had resolved to head back to the island for a short time, and then go to the hotel.

Upon my return it was nearing 10 a.m., and by now a few other people had shown up. They were busy fitting a large banner to the stairwell wall, visible from the garden. It said something in Italian, some Christian confraternity of Knights Templar or something. I watched bemused as Italian words rang out, orders rolled against the morning. It was like a whole new world. A number of men and women were wearing the mantles of some other Templar order, this Christian confraternity, so I put back on my costume and stood in silence out of the way. A man came up and shook my hand. He didn't speak English, but I surmised he was in charge of the Italian group. He kissed me on both cheeks. That's right I thought, the Continent.



Sometime later, Americans appeared. The International Order of DeMolay had brought a contingent of youth from around the world to commemorate the event. It was nice to be able to talk to people, American Masons, and to enjoy the moment.

Successively throughout the day, different people ambled by. Some were from Switzerland. A couple were from Mexico. A Marquis from France who in broken English proclaimed direct descendency from the founding families of the order in 1118 and did not want his picture taken.

It was a fun day. The Italians had brought a CD player and periodically played some hymn with the Templar motto prominent. Thirty or maybe fifty people from around the globe had de- scended to this island in the Seine to commemorate one man, dead but not forgotten. A small pile of flowers was growing on the steps under the plaque on the wall. Hour after hour, people would come down, drop off a rose or a lily, and walk back into anonymity. It was fascinating. There was beauty in it.

To live respected, and to die regretted. It seems fitting to me that some sort of monument be erected here, nothing over-the-top and conspicuous but something. The plaque is too little. I remember this Frenchman, jogging in the afternoon, came up to me, and noticing my perplexity in response to his question, asked in broken English what was going on.

"The music?" he said, pointing at the CD player on the ground. I pointed at the plaque on the wall. "Mon Dieu," he said. "I have run here for ten years - you know, I've never seen this," and away he went.

Some monument would be fitting. It would render the memory of this man in stone and for future generations mark the spot and what he stood for. Among the crowd that gathered that day were three English ex-pats with wine stained teeth. Each was a professional tour guide. They had to be in their late 40s or early 50s, and they made a living guiding tours around Paris for English speaking tourists. Since the Da Vinci Code, they'd given plenty of "Templar" tours, and of course, this site is one of the stops.

Imagine a small pyramid, unfinished like the one on the back of the dollar bill, maybe with a glass capstone wherein the All Seeing Eye becomes visible and with names of the Grand Commanderies under the jurisdiction of the Grand Encampment carved on the sides. On the front a respectful statement, perhaps in Lati (English in Paris would be garish), honoring Jacques DeMolay, or maybe a cross or something else, even a broken column. It doesn't matter what it is, only that it is, like the final dot in the ellipsis, that closure to an unfinished sentence.

Wouldn't that be cool? It wouldn't be hard to do, and there's a perfect spot already prepared, a square break in the cobblestones where, I imagine, a tree was recently removed.

It really wouldn't be hard to do. Obviously the City of Paris would have to be contacted and a request made. Should the City be amenable, and I think they would be amenable, judging by what is already on that island and the objects around the Louvre which bring a steady flow of tourists to the nearby shops. A fundraising initiative could be undertaken among the Grand Commanderies to pay for the monument. The International Order of DeMolay could get involved, and judging from conversations at the site, they would like to.



Perhaps even an installation ceremony could be arranged whereby Knights Templar from around the world, under the jurisdiction of the Grand Encampment, could convene, say, on the island, line Pont Neuf, and perform a simple ceremony marking the occasion in people's memory for years to come?

The aim, to install a small, tasteful, and enduring monument to the memory of Jacques DeMolay who, like our Grand Master Hiram Abiff before him, was slain before the Temple was complete.

As the dusk slowly fell, after various personages had given their comments to the small assembly, we went our separate ways, back to our civilian lives. I returned to the United States and my over piled desk. Things quickly became the hectic rhythm of contemporary business, but for a day, a spring day in France, a bunch of strangers, unable to communicate with each other, unknown to each other, from all corners of the world, were united in common humanity by the principles of one man.

Jacques DeMolay would have smiled, I thought. His work was good.



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End Notes

1 See the Chinon Parchment, discovered 2001 in the Vatican Secret Archives by Barbara Frale, translation by A. A. Grishin in *The Knights Templar Absolution, The Chinon Parchment and the History of the Poor Knights of Christ*, pg. 129.

2 See *Clement V*, by Sophia Menache, Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pg. 21. Upon Clement's coronation at Lyons, under direction of Philip, a wall swelled with bystanders collapsed killing, among others, John II, Duke of Brittany; to the medieval mind an inauspicious omen regarding the new Papacy. Interestingly, the famous poet Dante Alighieri mentions Clement V in his *Divine Comedy*, saying he "has made a sewer of my sepulcher", (*Divine Comedy, Paradise, c. XXVII, vv.22-7*. Cited in *Clement V.*, by Sophia Menache, pg. 20). Incidentally, Dante placed Pope Boniface VIII in the Eighth ring of Hell, as well.

3 Of note is the fact that, according to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Nogaret attained the title (and pension) of Keeper of the Seal on September 22, 1307, the same day the Royal Council (of which Nogaret was a member) issued the warrant authorizing the arrest of the Templars (to be effected October 13th). See the "Nogaret" entry in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11089a.htm>

4 Philip the Fair died on November 29, 1307, and Clement V on April 20. *The Trial of the Templars*, by Malcolm Barber, Cambridge University Press. 1978. Third printing, 2010. pg. 282.

5 See *Born in Blood*, John J. Robinson, 1989, for a cogent example of this theory in originating the Craft.