Did the Templars Lose the Holy Land? The Military Orders and the Defense of Acre, 1291

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At the beginning of 1290, a handful of Christian enclaves remained on the coastal littoral of the Holy Land: Tortosa, Tyre, Sidon, Beirut, Château Pèlerin ... and the city of Acre. Three of these were directly in the hands of the Order of the Temple (Tortosa, Sidon, and Château Pèlerin) and the Temple and the other military orders were prominent in a fourth, Acre, though they were not apparently voting members of its city council.¹

By the end of 1291, the Christians had lost them all. How did this happen? Some writers in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries blamed the military orders. Were the military orders – especially the Templars – responsible for this cataclysm?

Let us examine the events of 1290–1291, especially with regard to Acre, to find tentative answers, at least, to that question.

First the outlines of what happened.² In 1289, owing to a quarrel between the commune of Tripoli and its ruling family over a disputed succession, the Mamluk Sultan Kelewan³ of Egypt besieged and took the city, with great loss of life to its Christian inhabitants. A typical pattern then played itself out. As usual, the West was shocked by a disaster in the Christian East, and began to make plans to assemble a crusade either to rectify the problem, or at least to shore up their remaining Christian brethren. An initial element of this crusade, drawn from northern Italy, arrived in Acre in 1290. Something then went very wrong – depending on whose account one follows, either the newcomers objected to an insult offered by a Muslim to a Christian lady, or else the crusaders, who seem to have been predominantly lower-class Italians, attacked the Muslims who were in the city under the prevailing truce, for reasons unclear, and killed many of them.

³ Or Qalawun, Qalavun, etc., depending on the transliteration system used.
According to the “Templar of Tyre,” a Cypriot knight who served as secretary to Grand Master William of Beaujeu and who apparently played a key role in maintaining the Templars’ intelligence network, Kelewan “was planning to do grievous harm to the city of Acre [anyway],” and he therefore seized upon this violent episode as an excuse to prepare to attack the city. He demanded that Acre hand over the perpetrators of the deeds to stave off an attack, knowing full well that the demand could not possibly be met. The Templar master, William of Beaujeu, proposed to the Acre city council that they empty their various jails – it is a symptom of the organizational disunity which plagued the city that there were at least five separate prisons and associated jurisdictions in Acre – but this suggestion, which some have viewed as Solomonic and others more as demonic, was rejected out of hand by the council. William, forewarned of the seriousness of the situation by the Templar intelligence network, tried to warn the council again, but was again ignored. Kelewan then set out in October 1290, with a large army, to besiege the city.

Fortunately for Acre – or so it seemed – the Sultan took sick and died along the way. Relieved, the city fathers settled down to enjoy the period of instability and fratricidal violence that usually characterized a Mamluk succession. But unfortunately for them, this time there was no disputed succession. One of Kelewan’s sons, Khalil Al-Ashraf, immediately took over the Mamluk government and continued his father’s jihad against Acre. Al-Ashraf sent a letter directly to the Templar master, which is significant, as it suggests that he viewed William of Beaujeu as the real power in Acre. In it, he wrote, “Because you have been a true man, so we send you advance notice of our intentions, and give you to understand that we are coming into your parts to right the wrongs that have been done. Therefore we do not want the community of Acre to send us any letters or presents [regarding this matter], for we will by no means receive them.” Master William passed this on to the council, but they hopefully sent messengers anyway – messengers who were promptly “thrown into prison ... where they perished miserably,” according to the “Templar of Tyre.”

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4 Templar, §481.
5 The ‘lords of Acre’ were comprised of, at least, the Patriarch and papal legate, Nicholas of Hanapes, the master of the Hospital, John of Villiers, the Teutonic Knight commander (acting for the master who was on the outs with the rest of the council and had gone back to Italy), and, presumably, the master of the Templars. It is implied that the Pisan consul and Venetian bailli were also among the ‘lords.’ The military orders, however, could apparently advise but not vote or otherwise compel – an awkward situation! See Templar, §485.
6 Templar, §481: Royal, Templar, Hospitaller, Pisan and Venetian.
7 Templar, §487.
8 Ibid.