

The Middle Ages and Their Military Monastic Orders

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The study of history usually awakens in scholars a peculiar passion — especially when they are confronted with organizations that existed then and would never be permitted today. I refer specifically to the military monastic orders of Europe during the Middle Ages.

The Middle Ages, a period that historiography customarily places between 476 and 1453, was marked at its outset by the fall of the Western Roman Empire, with the overthrow of the last Latin monarch, Romulus Augustulus, and the replacement of its single political entity by a Europe fragmented into several barbarian kingdoms, whose geographical outlines had already been taking shape. The principal new European societies of that first year were: the Visigothic Kingdom (capital at Toledo), the Suebic Kingdom (capital at Bracara Augusta), Navarre (capital at Pamplona), the Domain of Syagrius (capital at Soissons), Brittany (capital at Rennes), Frisia (capital at Dorestad), Alamannia (without a fixed capital, being a confederation of Germanic tribes), Thuringia (capital at Erfurt), the Frankish Kingdom (whose capital changed constantly according to the will of the Merovingian rulers, later passing to Aachen in the time of Charlemagne), the Gepids (capital at Sirmium), Lombardy (capital at Pavia), the Ostrogothic Kingdom (capital at Ravenna), the Domain of Nepos (capital at Salona), and Burgundy (capital at Lyon). There were also the Saxons, in central Germany, as well as separate societies outside continental Europe: the Scots in what would be Ireland, the Picts of present-day Scotland, the Britons of today's Wales, and the Angles, occupying southeastern Britain — besides the Vikings, concentrated in Denmark and to the north. Here, however, I shall concentrate on the first societies.

That political configuration had been forged by the invasions of Roman territory from the north, and by the seizure of the great rural estates that supplied the Empire, on which the system of *hospitalitas* was imposed, with part of the produce ceded to the invading barbarian chiefs, whom their subordinates revered and blindly obeyed as their elders: this was the *comitatus*. The same happened when orders were given to invade territories already occupied by other groups. Since relations among the different barbarian societies were tense, some took lands not only from the Romans but from other invaders as well — which in the end resulted in the final overthrow of Romulus Augustulus and the consequent new political map of the continent, now without the Roman Empire, in 476.

Earlier, the Emperor Constantine had legalized Christianity throughout the Empire, and Theodosius I would make it the official religion in 380 — a determination that echoed well beyond 476, allowing the Christian Church to take advantage of the wars among the barbarians to expand its doctrine by force. This intensified when, within the mentality of *comitatus*, the fiefs were formed inside the territories of the kingdoms: lands taken from others by hordes at the command of the barbarian chiefs, who by then usually held the condition of kings, and who imposed upon those warriors relations of vassalage and fealty, with political promises of exercising their own commands in the conquered territories in exchange for a title of nobility, and religious promises of eternal salvation, extended also to the conquered and forcibly converted populations. Thus arose the feudal system, whose vassal lords owed to the suzerains who granted the fiefs a part of the agricultural produce — planted and harvested by the invaded and plundered — besides tribute and military service. Vassals could also be suzerains of other vassals, and this whole set of events was encouraged by the Church, which furnished spiritual support to the clashes so long as they resulted in conversions.

This expansion among the barbarians stimulated the building of castles, as places for storing food, as prisons, and as military residences of the feudal lords — serving as points of attack or defense — inside or outside cities fortified for the same purposes. Together with the Viking invasions that took place from the middle of that millennium, it slowly altered the political map that had existed in 476, with the emergence, expansion, retraction, and extinction of kingdoms and fiefs. A situation that, beyond a political phenomenon, revealed itself as the fullest expression of a religiously fanaticized mentality.

This became clear when, in the name of the Church, there arose the Franco-Germanic conqueror Charlemagne, who extended the political and Christian limits of his kingdom over much of western Europe, leading the Church to honor him, at Christmas of the year 800, as the first Holy Roman Emperor. The feudal lords and rulers of the whole territories that his empire embraced now owed obedience to the Holy Roman Emperor and to the Pope. By the year 1000, Central Europe was entirely dominated by the feudal system, controlled by the Romano-Germanic theocracy. Central Europe — but not the Iberian Peninsula.

In 711, before Charlemagne, the Peninsula was invaded by the Arab Umayyad Caliphate, which in Iberia endured as the Emirate and later the Caliphate of Córdoba — the Umayyads having fled there from the Abbasids — until 1492, with the reconquest of Granada, the final chapter of the Iberian Christian Reconquest. For that reason there was never a classical feudal regime in the Iberian Peninsula, but a seigneurial one, whose nuances I shall not detail here, since they are not the object of this article.

Feeling, in that interval, that it had much to lose to the Arabs in a territory it considered its own, the Church, besides combating the Muslim powers, was eager to send military expeditions to the holy city of Jerusalem, then held by the Muslims. To that end it organized the Crusades, composed in large part of feudal lords hungry for cumulative status of nobility before the clergy — but above all before their own enserfed and enslaved populations — and also of fugitives from the unjust feudal system, of beggars, of the destitute, and of prisoners of every sort, who had nothing to lose and everything to gain: salvation, so promised by the Church. In 1095, Pope Urban II summoned all Christendom to expel the infidels from Jerusalem.

Here we arrive, after a long text, at the Order of the Knights Templar. Created between 1118 and 1120, their vows were of poverty, chastity, and obedience to the Pope alone. Their initial function was to escort, from the meeting point to Jerusalem, the faithful who hired them for protection against criminals they might encounter on the way. They are also credited with inventing the first singular system of banking deposits ever to exist. But their primary function went further, joining the other Christian combatants in the taking of the Holy Land. Highly militarized monks, with armor to protect them entirely, swords and lances for attack and defense, and horses to aid them in the clashes, these men entered the history of the West as fierce warriors in the service of religion. It is not too much to say that, during their campaigns, they founded small theocratic states in Palestine, which would endure for a good while.

But their attributions also included aid to Christians wounded in battle, with medical services and the supply of water, food, and rest. What happened is that they were accused of assisting only the Templars from the regions of western Europe. The Germans, so it is told, were attended only by the Hospitaller Order; in other cases they died in agony.

For that reason, soon after the defeat of the Third Crusade at the hands of the leader Saladin in 1187, the Germans instituted in 1190 their own organization: the Order of the Teutonic Knights, created at Acre and likewise approved by the Pope to fight against the infidels. The Germans had an order of their own, to fight and, above all, to succor them if they suffered casualties.

The thirteenth century passed and the Crusades accumulated. Until then, several political leaders had supported them, such as the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, the English king Richard the Lionheart, and the successive Popes. With the end of the campaigns, at the close of that century, the result of so many attacks was ambiguous. There was no clear political and military victory for the West, Jerusalem remaining without a coercive Christian power over it, which enraged kings and Popes. On Friday, October 13, 1307, the French king Philip IV ordered the mass arrest of the Templars in his domains and the confiscation of all their goods; the suppression of the Order was subsequently ratified by Pope Clement V in 1312. There remained, as the great military monastic order of the West, the Teutonic, which came to act in central and eastern Europe — the so-called Baltic or Northern Crusades — fighting Poles, Lithuanians, the peoples of the future Prussia, and other populations called infidel. The combats were not fought without allies, such as mercenaries from Saxony, Swabia, Bavaria, and other German regions.

In that way they constituted their own state, the Monastic State of the Teutonic Order, in an area of approximately two hundred thousand square kilometers, situated to the east of what is today Germany. In that context they also intervened in the Polish-Lithuanian wars, encouraged as well by the Polish nobleman Konrad I of Masovia, until their final defeat at the Battle of Grunwald in 1410. From there a Prussia was formed, in part as a fief of Poland, until its full affirmation as a secularized Protestant regional power of the future Germany, in the year 1525.

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