In October 1307, by order of Philip IV of France, all the Knights Templar within the French domains were arrested. In November, Pope Clement V sent out orders for the arrest of the Templars throughout Europe. The brothers were accused of a variety of crimes, which were said to be long-established in the order. There were, it was claimed, serious abuses in the admission ceremony, where the brothers denied their faith in Christ. The order encouraged homosexual activity between brothers. The brothers worshipped idols. Chapter meetings were held in secret. The brothers did not believe in the mass or other sacraments of the church and did not carry these out properly, defrauding patrons of the order who had given money for masses to be said for their families' souls.

What was more, it was alleged that the Templars did not make charitable gifts or give hospitality as a religious order should. The order encouraged brothers to acquire property fraudulently, and to win profit for the order by any means possible.

During the trial of the Templars witnesses claimed that the order's abuses had been notorious for many years and under interrogation, including torture, many brothers confessed to at least some of these crimes. In March 1312, Pope Clement dissolved the Order of the Temple, giving its property of the Order of the Hospital, and assigning the surviving brothers to other religious orders. Despite this, the question of the order's guilt has never been settled. Just what were the accusations made against the Templars before 1300, and were these related to the trial? What did contemporaries think about the other military orders, such as the Knights Hospitaller and the Teutonic Knights?

The Order of the Temple was a military order, a type of religious order. It had been founded in the early twelfth century, in the wake of the Catholic conquest of the Holy Land, to protect pilgrims travelling to the holy places against bandits. This role soon grew to protecting Christian territory in Spain as well as the Holy Land. The order gained its name because the King of Jerusalem had given the brothers his palace in the al-Aqsa mosque, which the Christians called ‘the Temple of Solomon’, to be their headquarters. In Europe the members' lifestyle was much like that of ordinary monks. The order's rule

During the trials that destroyed one of 14th-century Europe's most celebrated crusading military orders, witnesses claimed all manner of abuses had been going on for years. But how true were these claims? And what did contemporaries think about them and the other military orders – such as the Knights Hospitaller and Teutonic Knights? Helen Nicholson investigates.
laid down a strict regime on clothing, diet, charitable giving and other living arrangements. In theory only men could join the order, but in practice some women were also admitted.

The Order of the Temple was the first military order, but others soon followed. The Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem had been founded as a hospice for pilgrims in the eleventh century, but by the 1250s the Hospital was employing mercenaries to protect pilgrims from bandits, and was soon involved in the defence of the frontiers of the Kingdom of Jerusalem alongside the Order of the Temple. These brothers became known as the Hospitallers.

The Hospital of St Mary of the Teutons was set up at the siege of Acre during the Third Crusade (1189-92) to care for German pilgrims and was then relaunched in 1198 as a military order. The brothers were known as the Teutonic Knights. These were the most famous of the international military orders, but the concept was so popular that others were founded wherever Christians confronted non-Christians: in Spain, where the Muslim frontier was slowly retreating, and in the Baltic and Prussia where pagan tribes threatened Christian settlements and converts. From the 1230s onwards the Teutonic order became prominent in the Baltic area.

The concept of the military order was a natural development from the concept of the crusade. Rather than taking up weapons for a short period to defend Christ’s people, the members of a military order did so for life. In return, they expected to receive pardon for their sins and immediate entry into heaven if they died in action against the enemies of their faith.

In western Europe, far from the battlefield, some of the clergy were doubtful whether a military order could be a valid religious order. Around 1150, the Abbot of Cluny wrote to Pope Eugenius III that he and many of his monks regarded the brothers of the Temple as only knights, not monks, and believed that fighting the Muslims overseas was less important than suppressing bandits at home. Letters written to encourage the early Templars also hint at this sort of opposition. But the bulk of the surviving evidence is warmly in praise of the Templars, and clergy and knightly classes alike welcomed the new order with generous donations. In fact the Hospital of St John seems to have attracted more donations as it became more of a military order. By 1200 the military orders had become part of the religious establishment and criticism of the concept ceased.

However, other criticism arose which tended to fluctuate with events. During a crusade, while crusaders wrote home with accounts of the military orders’ courage and self-sacrifice, criticism was overlooked.
Between crusades, as Europeans received news of territorial losses to the Muslims, they forgot the military orders’ heroism and concluded that these defeats were God’s punishment for sin. For surely God would not allow godly men to suffer such setbacks.

Political views also shaped criticism, especially during the period 1229-50, while pope and emperor were at loggerheads. The Temple, and to a lesser degree the Hospital, supported the pope, while the Teutonic order supported the emperor. So observers sympathetic to the emperor’s policies in the Holy Land, such as Matthew Paris, chronicler of St Albans abbey, criticised the Templars and Hospitallers. Yet there was praise from those who opposed the emperor in the Holy Land, such as Philip of Novara and the powerful Ibelin family of Cyprus who were Philip’s lords.

Chroniclers tended to be critical, for they wished to draw a moral from contemporary events for the edification of future generations. In other forms of literature, romance, epic or farce, the Templars, Hospitallers and Teutonic Knights appeared as brave knights of Christ combating the Muslim menace, or as helpers of lovers, or as good monks. It is interesting that although monks and parish priests came under heavy criticism for their immoralities in the ‘fables’ or farces, the military orders were not criticised. Obviously they were not regarded as womanisers.

Between the Second and Third Crusades of 1148-49 and 1189, the generous donations of money and privileges to the Templars and Hospitallers became a major cause of resentment. This was hardly surprising. All religious orders aroused complaints about their privileges, and the Templars and Hospitallers never attracted such severe criticism as the Cistercians and friars.

But the Templars and the Hospitallers caused particular annoyance because their houses were so widely scattered. Their legal privileges were especially resented. In 1236 Pope Gregory IX wrote to the Templars and Hospitallers in western France ordering them not to abuse the privileges granted to them by the papal see. The brothers had already been summoning their legal opponents to courts in far-off places which they had no hope of reaching by the specified day, so that they were then fined for failing to appear. The brothers had also been taking annual payments from clergy and laity in return for allowing them to share their legal privileges.

Forty years later, when Edward I’s commissioners were conducting the Hundred Roll inquiries to establish where royal rights had been usurped in each locality, there were similar protests. Some people who had no proper connection with the Templars and Hospitallers were claiming their privileges, in Warwickshire and Derbyshire there were complaints that the orders’ privileges ‘impede and subvert all common justice and excessively oppress the people’, while the burgheers of Totnes and Grimsby had been summoned to courts in the four corners of England by the Hospitallers and Templars respectively.

Despite their extensive possessions, the Templars and Hospitallers were always claiming to be poverty-stricken. They sent out alms-collectors on a regular basis, to collect money from lay-people and clergy for their work in the Holy Land. Matthew Paris was probably expressing a widely-felt discontent when he wrote around 1245:

The Templars and Hospitallers ... receive so much income from the whole of Christendom, and, only for defending the Holy Land, swallow down such great revenues as if they sink them into the gulf of the abyss ... Whatever did they do with all their wealth? Some Europeans concluded that they must be using their resources very inefficiently.

The orders were not only wealthy and privileged, they were proud and treacherous. Pride, the first of the seven deadly sins, was already the military orders’ most infamous vice by the 1160s. As the years passed it became a stock complaint against the Templars and Hospitallers, as if it were their sin. Pride made the orders jealous of each other and of other Christians, so that they fought each other instead of fighting the Saracens. The Templars and Hospitallers’ quarrels became notorious, although in fact the orders went to great lengths to ensure peaceful relations. The troubadour, Daspal, writing in around 1270, neatly summed up the problem: because the Templars and Hospitallers had become proud and greedy and did evil instead of good, they were unable or unwilling to defend the Holy Land against the Saracens.

In 1289 a Flemish satirist, Jacquemart Gielée, depicted the Templars’ and Hospitallers’ bitter quarrels in his satire, Renart le Nouvel, the new Renart, based on the old theme of the unscrupulous fox. A Hospitaller is shown denigrating the Templars in order to win Renart for his order. After the final loss of Acre in 1291, Pope Nicholas IV suggested that the military orders’ quarrels had been a contributory factor in the defeat, and many chroniclers and churchmen agreed.

The charge that the Order of the Temple encouraged the brothers to acquire property fraudulently and to win profit by all possible means clear-
ly reflects these complaints against the Templars and Hospitallers. For at least 150 years contemporaries had accused the military orders of lying and cheating because of their greed for wealth. In 1312 the same old criticisms against the Hospitallers arose again at the Council of Vienne, as the pope planned to bestow on them the former property of the Templars.

Interestingly, no critic before 1300 accused the Templars of immorality. In the mid-thirteenth century an English poet, writing in Anglo-Norman French, surveyed the whole of society and accused most of the clergy of womanising, even dropping hints about the Hospitallers. But he exempted the Templars, who were too busy making money to have time for sex:

"The Templars are most doughty men and they certainly know how to look after themselves, but they love pennies too much; when prices are high they sell their wheat instead of giving it to their dependants.

Nor do the lords of the Hospital, have any desire for buying women's services, if they have their palfreys and horses, I don't say it for any evil ..."

A more explicit charge of immorality against the Hospitallers appeared in March 1238, when a French crusade was preparing to depart for the Holy Land. Pope Gregory IX wrote a letter of rebuke to the Hospitallers in Acre. He had heard that the brothers kept harlots in their villages, had been cheating the dying into bequeathing their property to them and (among other crimes) that several of the brothers were guilty of heresy. As for the Templars, he only complained that they were not keeping the roads safe for pilgrims!

Although the Templars were not accused of immorality, they were linked with traditional romantic love. A late thirteenth-century French verse romance, "Sone de Nausay," depicts the Master of the Temple in Ireland as the go-between in a love affair, while a late thirteenth-century romance of the same period, "Claris et Laris," depicts the Templars as friends to lovers. But this was a wholly sympathetic view, and saw the Templars as servants of lovers rather than as lovers themselves. None of the military orders were accused of sodomy, although such accusations were occasionally made against ordinary monks.

There were many other complaints against the military orders before 1300. Perhaps the most significant were the divided opinions over their record of fighting the Muslims (and other non-Christians). Many complained that they were not sufficiently enthusiastic about defending Christendom and winning back lost territory, while others complained that they were too eager to fight those who could be won to Christ by peaceful means.

Some contemporaries alleged that the military orders were unwilling to fight the Muslims because they were secretly in alliance with them. The military orders certainly did make alliances with Muslim rulers on various occasions, but these alliances were intended to promote the Christian cause, not to hinder it.
The chroniclers also alleged that the Muslims exploited the brothers’ greed. There was a legend in circulation which recounted how the Christians had failed to capture a Muslim fortress because some of the Christian leaders had been bribed by Muslim gold to raise the siege. This gold subsequently turned out to be copper. This story appeared in various forms and with various parties in the role of dupe from the mid-twelfth century onwards. By the early thirteenth century the Templars had become the dupes, and by the mid-thirteenth century the Hospitallers had joined them. The fortress also changed identity several times! In fact this is a very old story, and versions of it appear in Gregory of Tours’ History of the Franks, written in the sixth century, and in the collection of ancient Welsh legends known as the Mabinogion.

Many accusations that the military orders were unwilling to attack the Muslims arose from a misunderstanding of the true situation in the Holy Land. The Templars were criticised for refusing to help the Third Crusade besiege Jerusalem in 1191-92, but the brothers believed that the city could not be held after the crusaders had returned home, and that the security of the holy places was better served by attacking Egypt. In 1250, during the crusade of Louis IX of France, Count Robert of Artois decided to lead the vanguard of the crusading army to attack the Muslims in Mansourah. The Templars and Hospitallers advised against this, whereupon the count accused them of laziness and trying to impede the Christian cause and advanced. Anxious not to be accused of cowardice, the military orders accompanied him and, as they had predicted, the Christian army was cut to pieces. This was a terrible defeat, but something of a propaganda coup for the military orders, who had fearlessly died for Christ against hopeless odds.

Other critics felt that the military orders were too eager to fight. Thirteenth-century literature depicted the ideal knight as one who only fought when necessary. The military orders’ self-sacrifice for Christ seemed rash and irrational. Some of the clergy believed that the orders’ love of violence and domination impeded or prevented conversions. This accusa-

(Left) A member of the Teutonic Knights and (right) the martyrdom of the missionary Adalbert at the hands of heathen Prussians – the conversion of the Baltic area was supposed to go hand-in-hand with settlement by the order, but critics accused the Knights of neglecting the former.
tion was made against the Templars in the 1180s by Walter Map, Archdeacon of Oxford, and against the Teutonic order by some unknown critics and around 1266-68 by Roger Bacon, an English Franciscan friar imprisoned in Paris for his unorthodox views.

The unknown critics may have been the Polish princes who opposed the expansion of the Teutonic order's power in Prussia. In 1258, letters were sent to Pope Alexander IV from the order's friends in Poland and Prussia, defending them against various accusations. Apparently the brothers had been accused of forbidding the preaching of Christianity to the pagan Prussians, preventing the establishment of churches, destroying old churches, impeding the sacraments and enslaving new converts. Roger Bacon's criticisms echoed these: the Teutonic order wanted to subjugate the Prussians and reduce them to slavery, and refused to stop attacking them in order to allow peaceful preaching. He added that the order had deceived the Roman Church for many years as to its true motives in Prussia.

The peak of criticism of the military orders came around 1250. After this they faded from the chronicles and critical writings. Many critics of the church omitted them. Others showed little actual knowledge of them. Although there was a vast number of newsletters coming from the Holy Land, so that chroniclers could hardly have been short of information on events, they seem to have chosen to ignore this. News was almost invariably bad, and chroniclers probably believed that the loss of the Holy Land was only a matter of time. There were many crises closer to home to occupy their pens.

As a result, after 1250, the image of the military orders expressed in the chronicles and other writing shows a relative improvement. Day-to-day relations between the military orders and their neighbours and the authorities were usually peaceful. Bishops' registers, royal administrative records, and the records of the nobility where these survive, show that although there were disputes generally the military orders were obedient subjects and reliable servants. As Walter Map had remarked, whatever the Templars did in the Holy Land, in England they lived peacefully enough.

Despite the sorry state of the Latin Christian settlement in the Holy Land, after 1250 the military orders were still well regarded in Europe. Donations to the orders had fallen in most areas, but all religious orders were suffering in this respect. Some commentators, while agreeing that even the Templars had declined in spirituality along with all other religious orders, depicted them as having previously been among the most spiritual of the religious orders. This was a far cry from their original foundation, when some had doubted that the order could have a spiritual dimension at all.

So, how far were the Templars' accusers of 1307 justified in their case against the order? Contemporaries would certainly have agreed with the charge that they lied and cheated in order to satisfy their greed. Yet there is no hint before 1500 that the Tem-

plars did not carry out the sacraments; although the Teutonic order were accused of impeding the sacraments in Prussia. It was true that the proceedings of the order's chapter meetings were kept secret, but this was the custom among military orders.

The accusation that the order did not practice charity and hospitality may have sprung from the rivalry between the Temple and the Hospital. The Hospitallers were always at pains to emphasise their dual hospitable-military role, in contrast to the solely military role of the Templars. A few contemporaries were struck by the difference: a German pilgrim, John of Würzburg, remarked dismissively in around 1170 that the Temple's charitable giving was not a tenth of the Hospital's. Of course, the Order of the Temple did practise charity, as it was obliged to do under its religious rule, but most contemporaries seemed to have regarded the defence of pilgrims as charity in itself.

There is no indication before 1300 of public scandal over the order abusing admission procedures, or of heresy, idolatry or homosexuality within the order. Only the Hospital was accused of heresy. Interestingly, the Teutonic Knights' rivals in Livonia were accusing them of pagan practices and witchcraft by 1306. This suggests that such charges were politically motivated, rather than based on fact.

The 12th-century Templar castle of Ponferrada in Spain, a reminder that the order's remit was to protect Christian territory against 'infidels' everywhere and not just in the Holy Land.
government against Pope Boniface VIII, who had infuriated Philip by asserting the supremacy of the church over secular rulers. Boniface was accused of heresy, sodomy, witchcraft and magic. Later Guichard, Bishop of Troyes, and Louis of Nevres, son of the Count of Flanders, were accused of similar crimes after incurring Philip's enmity.

Certainly any wealthy, privileged religious order with close ties to the papacy, such as the Cistercians, Friars, Hospitalers or Templars, was likely to incur a monarch's enmity. Yet the Templars were no more disliked than other military orders, and less criticised than some other religious orders. They had a long history of faithful service to the French crown. So why were they singled out for attack?

The Templars had a special position in the defence of the Holy Land. According to Jacquemart Gièlée, the brothers claimed to be sole 'Defenders of the Holy Church'. They were depicted as principal defenders of the Holy Land by the Paracan poet Rutebuef in 1277. Templars were mentioned in chronicles and literature in general more than other religious orders. They were invariably listed first whenever anyone thought about military orders. They had been the first military order, and were one of the richest and most far-flung. Yet this particular prominence also left them particularly vulnerable when they failed in their duty.

When the city of Acre finally fell to the Muslims in May 1291, several reports of the disaster depicted the Templars as chiefly responsible for the defence of the city. The chronicler of Erfurt, writing in the summer of 1291, depicted the Templars dying like true knights of Christ, fighting to the last. Thaddeo of Naples, a priest, praised the courage of the brothers of the military orders who died, and portrayed the death of the master of the Temple, William of Beaujeu, as the decisive blow which led to the loss of the Holy Land. For after Acre fell, the remaining Latin Christian possessions in the East surrendered to the Muslims.

But the order's prominence could also be its undoing. The most popular account of the defeat, which was reproduced in many chronicles, dismissed the Templars as totally ineffective and only concerned to save their treasure. The true hero of the tragedy was now Brother Matthew of Claremont, marshal of the Hospital, who was a 'faithful warrior, knight of Christ', and died a martyr's death. Ricoldo of Monte Cucce, a Dominican Friar who was on a preaching mission in the Middle East when he heard of the disaster, compared William of Beaujeu to the notorious King Ahab, husband of Queen Jezebel and the worst king of Israel in the Old Testament. Certainly he was an excellent soldier, but God rejected him because of his sins. The loss of Acre was not mentioned among the charges brought against the Templars in 1307, but it was understood that the brothers' alleged abuses were responsible for the disaster.

From the evidence, the famous, shocking charges brought against the Templars in 1307 were unknown before 1300. The order was certainly guilty of fraud and unscrupulous greed, but so too were other religious orders. The brothers' real crime was their failure to protect the Holy Land after claiming to be solely responsible for its defence.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Helen Nicholson lectures in history at the University of Wales College of Cardiff. She is currently working on a translation of the Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi, a chronicle of the Third Crusade.