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In the year 1119, nine French Knights living in Jerusalem formed a religious order devoted to the protection of pilgrims traveling to the Christian holy sites in that city. Together, they took monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in the presence of the patriarch of Jerusalem, and King Baldwin II gave them a place to live near the ruins of Solomon's Temple. This inspired the name of the new order, "The Poor Fellow Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon", more commonly known as the Knights Templar. Aiding pilgrims on their way to sacred sites was a religious duty in the Middle Ages, enshrined in canon law and accepted in the popular culture of the time. The road between the port city of Joppa and Jerusalem, the principal pilgrim route, was infested by robbers and wild animals but only 40 miles long, short enough that nine competent knights devoted to the task could have a real impact on pilgrim safety. The order remained very small for its first decade, and the title "Poor" well described their situation; despite intermittent support from the King of Jerusalem, they had to make do on resources so limited that on occasion two brothers had to ride a single horse. A letter from the first Grand Master, Hugues de Payens, to the members in Jerusalem at the time of the Council of Troyes in 1128 makes it clear that the Poor Fellow Soldiers were struggling for survival. Fortunately for the order, help was on its way. Few people had heard of the Templars until Hugues traveled to Europe in 1128 to publicize it, but his journey brought back a torrent of donations and scores of new recruits. More valuable still, at the Council of Troyes the Catholic Church formally recognized the Templars and made their property exempt from church tithes and ordinary taxes, which the influential Bernard de Clairvaux (later canonized by the Church) helped write a monastic rule for them and penned a widely circulated essay, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, extolling the Templars and encouraging others to support them. Within a few decades donations of land from nobles across Europe gave the Templars so much real estate that a network of local centers, called Commanderies, had to be set up to manage Templar properties and send the profits to Palestine. A Templar navy had to be built to convey recruits and supplies the length of the Mediterranean, and castles rose in vulnerable points throughout the Holy Land as the protection of pilgrimage routes to the defense of the crusader kingdoms against Muslim efforts at re-conquest. Even so, the Templar rule assigned ten knights to guard duty on the Joppa road as long as the crusader presence in Palestine lasted.

By 1170 the Templars had nearly a thousand brother knights in the Holy Land

divided more or less evenly between the crusader kingdoms of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Tripoli. Squires, sergeants (cavalrymen of peasant origin), and Turcoples (mounted archers recruited from the native Palestinian population) expanded the Templars' total fighting force to perhaps 10,000 men. Along with two other major crusading orders of the time, the Knights Hospitallers (Knight of Malta) and Teutonic Knights, the Templars made up about half the effective fighting force of the crusader states, and their training experience, and discipline made the military orders the iron backbone of the Crusades. The Templar's black and white banner, the Beauceant, was seen on every battle field in the Holy Land as long as the Crusades lasted. At the core of Templar discipline was their rule. The original or "Primitive Rule" given to the Templars at the Council of Troyes was closely modeled on the rule of the Cistercian order of monks, and had little relevance to the Templars' military life or the conditions they faced in Palestine. The rule was later expanded by *retraits* or additional sections covering the order's organization, the duties of its officers and members, and the penances imposed on those who violated its law. The rule divided the Templars into brother Knights, who were of noble birth and alone could vote in chapter meetings, chaplains, who administered the rites of the Catholic Church to the brothers, and serving brothers, a class that included squires and sergeants, as well as craftsmen such as armorers, blacksmiths, cooks, and the like who provided all the goods and services needed to keep a medieval military force in action. A fourth class of lay affiliates consisted of men and women who pledged support to the order and received a variety of honorary membership in return. According to the rule, any man who applied to join the Templars had to be voted into membership by a majority of brother knights in the chapter house where the application was made. A simple initiation ritual followed, in which the new member affirmed that he was neither married or vowed to another religious order, had no debt he could not pay, had no hidden illness, had not bribed any member of the order in hopes of admission, and was not a serf. He then pledged himself to the order for the rest of his life, was received into the order, and heard a lecture on his duties and responsibilities.

The Templar rule forbade any member from having any money of his own - if money was found in a brother's possessions on his death, his body was left unburied for dogs to eat - but the order itself quickly became rich. Financial systems evolved to transfer funds from Europe to the crusader kingdoms soon found other uses, and the Templars became the first international bankers in medieval Europe. From the time of King Philip Augustus of France until the end of the order, the French royal house banked its treasury at the Templar center in Paris. The Grand Masters of the order served as advisers, financiers, and field marshals to crusading kings for more than a century.

This is an excerpt from the book *The Element Encyclopedia of Secret Societies and Hidden History, the ultimate a-z of ancient mysteries, lost civilizations and forgotten wisdom* by John Michael Greer covering the formation of the early Knights Templar.