



**Philippe Josserand. *Jacques de Molay. Le dernier grand-maître des Templiers*. Édition revue et augmentée. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2023. 541 pp. ISBN: 978-2-251-44977-7.**

**Philippe Josserand. *Les sept vies de Jacques de Molay*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2023. 185 pp. ISBN: 978-2-251-45458-0.**

Jacques de Molay is most likely the most famous Templar in history. He is also one of the central figures of one of the classic topics in medieval history – the trial of the Templars (1307–1312). So, it is not surprising that historians keep coming back to different aspects of his life and the role he played in the last decades of his Order's history. One of these historians is Philippe Josserand, known above all as a researcher of the military orders in the Iberian Peninsula and the Templars in France. In 2019, he published a new biography of the last grand master of the Templars. A revised and augmented edition of the book was issued last year. The author supplemented it with a survey of the most recent literature. However, the book's original structure has remained unchanged.

P. Josserand's work is not a classical biography. The text is divided into three parts, the first of which is dedicated to the shaping of the image of Jacques de Molay in the historiography and culture of France and other countries from the 14th to the 19th century. This is quite a surprising choice, but one can explain it by the fact that it is the most original part of the book. The author focuses primarily on representations of the grand master in French art and public debate in the 19th century, when the image of Jacques de Molay as a tragic hero was born. He analyzes paintings, revisits the role of François-Juste-Marie Raynouard and his famous play *Les Templiers* (1805) in creating the image of the Templars, and discusses the activities of the creator of the modern Order of the Temple, Bernard-Raymond Fabré-Palapat. P. Josserand's analysis is an important contribution to understanding contemporary perceptions of the Templars and their last grand master.

The book's second part addresses Jacques de Molay's *curriculum vitae*. The author does not try to rewrite his history, but he proposes some corrections, additions and new interpretations. He analyzes anew, among others, the sources concerning the origins of the grand master, his early activities in the Order, the

circumstances of his election as grand master, and various moments of his career until his tragic end in 1314. In the third part, entitled “Reliefs,” P. Josserand discusses select problems concerning the grand master’s personality and his activities as leader of one of the most important military orders at the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries, which have already been of interest to various historians. He reconsiders Jacques de Molay’s efforts to help launch a new crusade and reform his Order, and he engages in the discussion of the grand master’s character traits that determined his leadership and his attitude during the trial. These chapters show that the author is far less critical towards the grand master and his decisions than most modern historians. This approach often leads him to different conclusions than those that have hitherto been almost generally accepted. One of these, probably the most important in this part of the book, concerns Jacques de Molay’s changing attitude towards the accusations against the Templars and the question of defending the Order. P. Josserand rejects the opinion, shared by most modern scholars, that the grand master changed his testimony and declined to defend the Order because of his weakness. Rather, P. Josserand maintains that Jacques de Molay was well aware of the changing situation at various stages of the proceedings, and because of this, his attitude changed, but his intention was always to defend the Order one way or another (pp. 214–221). The author also believes that the grand master was “played” by the pope, in whose help he had long believed (pp. 144–145). I completely agree with this interpretation, which puts the grand master in a rather different light.<sup>1</sup>

However, not all conclusions and arguments put forward by the author are equally convincing. For example, when discussing the reasons for Jacques de Molay changing his testimony in 1308, P. Josserand claims that the grand master was forced to re-confess to the accusations at the beginning of January 1308, when he was still in the royal prison in Paris, and not in August 1308, when he was interrogated by the cardinals in Chinon (pp. 142–143). He bases this supposition on an undated text which mentions the third incriminating testimony of Jacques de Molay. However, there is no mention of this confession in any other source: neither in any procedural documents nor in papal sources, nor even in the speech of Guillaume de Plaisians at Poitiers in June 1308, which was supposed to convince

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on my interpretation of Jacques de Molay’s position, see my articles: Magdalena Satora, “Przyczyny zmiany zeznań wielkiego mistrza zakonu templariuszy, Jakuba de Molay w latach 1307–1314,” in *Kaci, święci, templariusze*, ed. B. Śliwiński, *Studia z dziejów średniowiecza 14* (Malbork: Muzeum Zamkowe w Malborku, 2008), 265–284; ead., “The Role of the Cardinals in the Templars’ Affair 1307–1308,” *Ordines Militares Colloquia Torunensia Historica. Yearbook for the Study of the Military Orders* 16 (2011): 93–105.

Clement V to reopen the investigation against the Order. So, there is no convincing reason to think that the grand master was interrogated between December 1307, when he retracted his first confession, and August 1308, when he met the cardinals in Chinon.

Another example concerns the grand master's literacy. During his second appearance before the pontifical commission in Paris in 1309, Jacques de Molay defined himself as *miles illiteratus et pauper*. P. Josserand thinks that these words are just a figure of speech, aiming to show the grand master's humility, while, in reality, he was educated and understood Latin (p. 203). However, this particular situation did not require a show of humility; rather, it required an explanation why he was not able to defend the Order. Jacques de Molay had already explained this in more detail during the first meeting with the commissioners.<sup>2</sup> To support his argument, P. Josserand mentions the transcript of the interrogation of Chinon in August 1308, in which it was recorded that two dignitaries interrogated alongside the grand master confirmed their confessions only after they were read to them in the vernacular, and there was no such mention concerning Jacques de Molay (p. 203). However, in this document, there is also no mention that the record of his confession was read to him in Latin, and his violent reaction when he heard it read (in the vernacular!) a year later in Paris<sup>3</sup> shows that he did not know the content of the document before. Therefore, I share the opinion of most researchers that Jacques de Molay was indeed *illiteratus*.

These observations do not undermine the great value of P. Josserand's work. The book shows his great erudition and very extensive knowledge of the literature on the subject (especially Western European literature). It is a very important contribution to the research on the last decades of the Templars' existence and to the discussion on Jacques de Molay's role in the events that preceded the Order's and his own tragic end.

In 2023, Philippe Josserand also published another book on the last grand master of the Temple, which is a postscript to the previous one. *The Seven Lives of Jacques de Molay* is a collection of essays at the intersection of historiography and literature. The author gives a voice to a few persons from the grand master's entourage, to members of his family, and to authors who wrote about him hundreds of years after his tragic death. These texts show what historians often avoid revealing in

<sup>2</sup> Processus contra Templarios in Francia. *Procès-verbaux de la procédure menée par la commission pontificale à Paris (1309–1311)*, ed. Magdalena Satora, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 84–85.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

their scientific works, namely, their subjective ideas concerning the persons and events they write about. However, all the images created by P. Jossierand are based on his research. He decided not to use footnotes in the texts, as they “keep the reader at a distance” (p. 19), but he did not completely give up referring to sources and historiography. At the end of the book there is a chapter which contains a bibliography for each essay, presented in “literary” form (p. 19).

The first four texts are: a monologue of Jacques de Molay’s valet Giacomo; a letter by Pere de Santjust, a former commander of the Order’s province of Aragon and Catalonia, addressed to a young ex-Templar, Guillem de Montornés; a letter by Hugues de Pairaud, visitor-general of the Templars, addressed to a royal clerk, Guillaume de Hangest; and a dialogue between the second wife of the grand master’s father, Lucie, and his brother, dean of the cathedral in Langres. The author does not explain why he has chosen these particular narrators, but this information is not indispensable to understand their stories because, in fact, they all speak his voice (p. 18). They speak about different moments in Jacques de Molay’s life and various aspects of his activities as Templar grand master. P. Jossierand compares their stories to “polyphonic singing” (pp. 17–18), when different voices come together in one song – the image of the hero of the book. This is certainly a very interesting addition to the scientific biography. However, it is not an easy read. The author mentions so many details from the history of the Templar Order that, to fully understand these texts, one needs to read the first book very carefully.

In the subsequent three essays, historians act as narrators. The first is a letter by the 18th-century erudite and author of the play *Les Templiers* (1805), François-Juste-Marie Raynouard, addressed to the actor François-Joseph Talama, who played the role of Jacques de Molay on stage. The second is also a letter, this time by Alain Demurger, who published his biography of Jacques de Molay in 2002, and addressed to P. Jossierand. In the third essay, P. Jossierand speaks himself. The second text is particularly interesting, because it is based on a real letter written at the request of the author. It shows a discussion between two specialists concerning not just scientific arguments but also their relationship with their “mutual friend” (p. 104) whom both have known for many years.

The penultimate chapter is a historiosophical and methodological essay, in which the author summarizes his thoughts on the links between literature and historiography and the role of the latter. It is addressed mainly to specialists well versed in French historiography. The author quotes many historians without giving any context, which makes the text difficult to understand for non-specialists.

In conclusion, P. Josserand's book on *The Seven Lives of Jacques de Molay* is a very interesting experiment, and it offers a new perspective on the life of the last grand master of the Templars, but unfortunately it is only a postscript to the scientific biography, not a separate work, which significantly limits its audience.

*Magdalena Satora* (Warszawa)\*

---

\* ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2393-5592>