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Editorial

The diet of Templar Knights: Their secret to longevity?

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The Templars – a brief history

Anno Domini 1071: the Turkish Sunni Muslim Seljuq dynasty is expanding its dominion all over the Middle East, threatening the Byzantine Empire. Alessio I Comnenum, the Byzantine Emperor, is concerned about the Muslim threat and the killing of Christian pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem, the main symbol of Christianity. The need for a permanent army aimed at protecting people visiting the Holy Sites became then mandatory for Europeans [1]; Geoffrey of Bouillon arrived in Jerusalem with a group of crusaders and conquered Jerusalem in 1099 (1, 2). After the First Crusaders did reconquer Jerusalem, the city was quite secure, while the remaining part of the Holy territories still remained dangerous and the killing of pilgrims resumed. Around 1119, the French knight Hugues de Payens asked King Baldwin II to create a military-monastic order for the protection of pilgrims; it was initially composed of 9 knights and initially named "Poor Knights of Christ" who were given a palace built above the ruins of Salomon's Temple: hence the name Templars [1]. They were vowed to poverty, chastity, obedience and, differently from the other Christian Orders, to take up arms, based on the Saint Bernard of Clairvaux rule [2,3]. The Order was officially accepted by the Catholic Church in 1129, gaining noble-born sons, money, lands, farms and castles from families willing to help Europeans in maintaining the dominion of the Holy Land, thus meriting salvation. They rapidly became a "State among States" as they could pass freely through all borders, answering only to the Pope. Their motto was "Non nobis Domine, non nobis, sed Nomini Tuo da gloriam", which means "Not to us, o Lord, not to us, but to Your Name give glory". As bankers they conferred personal loans and this practice was very common among European Kings, especially Philip IV of France, who was desperate to cover war expenses and to pursue a conspiracy against the Templars [1–4].

Longevity was a peculiar characteristic of Templars. Hugues de Payens died in 1136 when he was 66 years old; the last Grand Master, Jacques the Molay was killed at the respectable age of 67, after 7 years of imprisonment; Geoffrey de Charney, preceptor of Normandy, was about 63 years old when executed [1,2]. Moreover, as reported by the official documents of the Vatican, many of them lived longer compared to other people of the Middle Ages, whose life expectancy was averaging 25–40 years [1]. The exceptional longevity of Templar Knights was generally attributed to a special divine gift. However, the strict observance of specific lifestyle habits conferring beneficial effects, may explain the reasons of their greater life expectancy.

1. The Templars' dietary habits

It is known that the whole life of Templar Knights followed the precepts of the Bernard of Clairvaux Latin Rule [2,4]. Interestingly, some of those clauses are strictly related to diet and nutrition. Some of the passages include:

VII – The Monastery refectory: "we believe you take your food communally in one place, or rather, refectory".
IX – The consumption of meat: "now during the week, except when Christmas or Easter or the Feast of the Holy Mary or of All Saints occur, meat will be sufficient for you on three occasions, since it is known that habitual eating of meat causes a hateful corruption of our bodies. However, if a fast day occurs on a Tuesday with a ban on meat, you should get an abundant supply the following day. On Sunday, however, for all permanent Knights and chaplains, two meat dishes seem right and suitable in honour of the Holy Resurrection".
X – How knights ought to eat: "in general brothers ought to eat in pairs so that one may look after the other with care lest the harshness of life or secret abstemiousness become part of the communal meal".
XI – How on other days two or three dishes of vegetables are to be sufficient: "on other days, namely Monday, Wednesday and Saturday, we believe two or three dishes of vegetables or other foods, such as cooked potage should be sufficient for everybody". XII – What food should be eaten on Friday: "we recommend on meal of Lenten food in reverence for the Passion to suffice for all the congregation except for the weak and feeble, and this form the Feast of All Saints until Easter".

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XIII – Thanks to be given after every meal: “bits of bread should and must be distributed with brotherly love to the servants and the needy”.
XV – The collation should be a decision of the master: “when the sun deserts the Eastern region and descends to the West, at the sound of a signal, which is the custom of that region, you ought to go to Compline, but we ask that before you go you take a general collation. This collation we leave to the judgement and decision of the master that according to his will it will be taken with water or, if he judges with compassion, with a reasonable amount of tempered wine. Truly the amount should not be too great; rather it should be given sparingly, since wine makes even wise men forsake their religion”.
LXII – Food to be equally distributed among all: “for all permanent brothers food should be distributed equally according to the resources of the place”.

Besides written rules, there were other regulations specifically designed to avoid the spreading of infections; washing hands was mandatory for everyone before eating or praying, while brothers in charge of manual tasks outside the house were exempted from food preparation or serving. Moreover, the refectory was very clean and tablecloths were always available, except for the Friday before Easter when Templars used to eat on previously well washed uncovered tables [1,2].

Food supply was another very important issue for Templars; they basically avoided obtaining food from foreign Countries but preferred to import animals and seeds directly from Europe. Hunting was strictly forbidden while seafood was much appreciated and fish farming was initiated by Templars. Other foods very commonly consumed by Templars were cheese, olive oil and fresh fruit [1,2].

Effect of Templar diet on health and disease

In the middle ages, the diet of the rich was very rich in fat and calories, but with little variety. In fact diseases strictly related to an excess of meat consumption, such as gout, were very common [5]. At the same time, obesity was considered to be a sign of wealth and was quite common among the elite. Diabetes mellitus was also frequent and high levels of cholesterol and triglycerides may also be presumed [6]. While the metabolic syndrome was common, the Templar diet was specifically designed to fight this condition: can one imagine an overweight knight fighting a dozen enemies?

Templar Knights used to eat meat only three days a week, in contrast to people of the same social class. Meat in the middle ages was mostly grilled, containing high levels of carcinogenic heterocyclic amines and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons [7]. Moreover, meat is a primary source of fat; by decreasing meat intake, blood lipid concentration decreases together with body weight [8]. Interestingly, Templars considered seafood to be a very good substitute for meat, thus taking advantage of the positive effect of omega-3 fatty acids on blood levels of cholesterol and triglycerides [9] and their anti-oxidant, antiarrhythmic and anti-depressant activity [10] [11,12].

Templars used to eat a higher amount of fruits, vegetables and pulses [1,2]. The fact that a higher intake of fruits and vegetables is associated with a reduced risk of cardiovascular mortality or cancer is not a mystery [13,14]. Pulses, moreover, are the most powerful natural source of prebiotics, producing positive changes of the gastrointestinal microflora composition [15–18].

Several studies pointed out that metabolic syndrome may be strongly influenced by gut microbiota composition and that food intake may increase or decrease the concentration of different bacterial species [19,20]. This is why we may hypothesize that one of the secrets of the Templar Knights’ diet may reside in the positive effect exerted on the gut microbiota. It is known, in fact, that a higher intake of red meat and animal fats, and a lower intake of fruit and vegetables [21] decrease the concentration of protective *Lactobacilli* and *Bifidobacteria* spp, [22,23] and increase that of the harmful Clostridia and Bacteriodes spp [24,25]. We also know that the production of pro-atherosclerotic metabolites, such as the trimethylamine-N-oxide is strictly dependent on metabolism by selected intestinal microbiota [26].

Finally, Templars used to drink low-to-moderate amounts of wine during meals [1], which can decrease mortality from cardiovascular causes [27,28]. Moreover, they also used to mix wine with Aloe pulp, a plant endowed with antiseptic, bactericidal and fungicide actions, very useful in Countries with hot desert climates [29,30].

In conclusion, we believe that diet and lifestyle habits maybe the explanation for the extraordinary longevity of the Templar Knights; if this is the case, the motto “learning form the past” has never been so appropriate.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

Appendix A. Supplementary references #11–30

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.dld.2014.03.013.

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