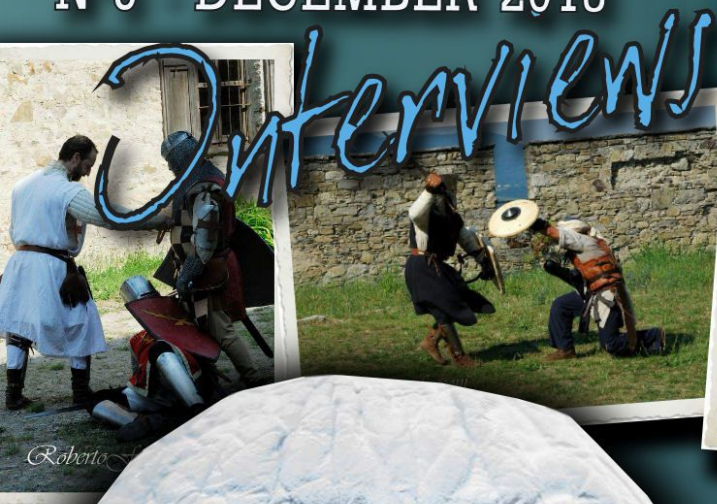


PLAYING HISTORY

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Roberto Colla
*Historical
Re-enactment*

Interview by

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Dear Anna Lisa,

I will begin by answering you, starting from your last question: which of the two worlds is in your heart and why (the question refers to which of his two main passions pertaining to the world of historical re-enactments is more related: the Middle Ages and the Napoleonic world).

I want to answer you with words of Giorgio Gaber (Italian singer-songwriter, playwright, theater director and theatrical actor among the most influential of post-World War II show and Italian music) that I have always retained in my heart. One of his old songs said: "And I've never seen anyone throw anything there and go away". This refrain has always accompanied me as if to say build, grow but it will never make you master of anything or anyone.

I founded the Mansio Templi Parmensis and I founded the Grogards de l'Armee d'Italie but I never became the owner. As much as I have put my body and soul into it, I am not its owner. I didn't want to be, nor do I want to become so.

This is a strict rule that I have imposed on myself, an insurmountable limit in my heart and in reality. And the reality has followed the heart.

I made Mansio grow until she was able to walk alone and I was happy like that. I was satisfied. And that day I resigned as president. So I'm doing with Les Grogards.

I am a president not a master. If there is a master this is the story, the re-enactment, the passion it entails, the enthusiasm and the sacrifices that are necessary. And therefore, even before a material good is a spiritual good that satisfies me every day.

And every day I repeat the refrain of that old song from 1975: "And I've never seen anyone throw anything there and go away".



Roberto Fusconi

1) We first met you while you were playing the role of Emperor Napoleon in the hunting lodge of Stupinigi*. In the world of re-enactments you are without doubt one of the most famous and respected characters. However, we have heard that you have another great passion... would you like to tell us what it is?

My passion for the Napoleonic epic has a precise beginning: in the third grade the school took us to see Bondarčuk's film "Waterloo" with Rod Steiger as Napoleon. It was like a thunderbolt. At a time when the internet didn't even exist and films were made with real people that show on the big screen marked me permanently.

Rod Steiger became for me the Napoleon par excellence, the one I always wanted to be inspired by, the one I wish I could at least imitate.

But this "electrocution" fell on already fertile ground. Since then, drawing, history and books have been my window on the world. And the books told me about epics in worlds distant in time but so fascinating.

Among these worlds I was so fascinated by the Middle Ages that, with the few means I had at that time, I tried to reproduce weapons and armour of knights to wear in a game that, for me, reflected so much the reality. Accomplice was the television that broadcast the adventures of Ivanhoe played by Roger Moore still in black and white, full of anachronisms and inaccuracies but with so much charm.

The years passed until we decided to participate with a group of friends in the medieval festivals held in Brissaglia. Our clothes were little more than theatrical props but the experience was useful for us to reflect. We decided to create a group of historical reconstructions, dressing, as far as possible then, in armour and dresses in accordance with the originals. And we were the ones to make them ourselves. We made the clothes, but also the helmets and the knitted fabrics, first by cutting and then by putting together hundreds of me-

*Nota *:*

Savoy Residence for Hunting and Festivities built from 1729 on a project by Filippo Juvarra, the Palazzina di Caccia di Stupinigi is one of the monumental jewels of Turin, 10 km from Piazza Castello, in perfect direction. Today it is owned by the Fondazione Ordine Mauriziano, a government body dedicated to its conservation and enhancement. It is a place of loisir for hunting in the life of the Savoy court, a sumptuous and refined residence preferred by the Savoy family for parties and weddings during the 18th and 19th centuries, and a residence chosen by Napoleon in the early 1800s. At the beginning of the twentieth century it was chosen as the residence of Queen Margaret, and since 1919 is also home to the Museum of Furniture. It constitutes the eminent element of the Mauritian historical-artistic heritage.

metal rings. And we spent more than one winter there. But which group to give life to?

The choice fell on the Knights Templar whose story we began to study. So it was that at one of the events in Brisighella appeared a group of twelve men all dressed in white, red crusaders with helmets "a staro" that hid his face, with a spear in his hand and a white shield red-chromium at the side.

It was a beginning but also an emotion that we still remember as founding members of what one day in April 1994 officially became, with a statute deposited by the notary, the "Mansio Templi Parmensis" or "The house of the Temple" in Parma.

And there really was a house of the Temple in Parma, now transformed into the headquarters of various associations, but with a convent for pilgrims on the way to Rome now home to a high school of science and language. And so the circle closes and the reason for a choice is explained. Far from any intent of political or esoteric neotemplarism, the statute of the association speaks clearly about it, so was born one of the longest-lived groups of medieval reconstruction in Europe.

In 2005 we were invited to France to Comps on the Artuby by a similar group of historical reconstruction that had had the same idea as us the "Blanc Manteaux".

We ended up twinned and even wrote, in the respective statutes, that we were a single group, a family of friends as our French neighbours like to be called. Since then, I don't remember how many events we took part in, so many, in Italy and France. We were involved in theatre shows, in a short film for the Venice Film Festival "La luce sul sentiero" (The light on the path), whose soundtrack we also took care of, etc. We have published books and magazines, in short we have grown up and become adults, even veterans ... Alternating battles and teaching from life the Mansio Templi Parmensis continues to keep alive the passion for a world, the Middle Ages, that was not so sad and dark, indeed as I will tell you by answering your other questions.

2) When I started to read up on the history of the Templars for this interview it seemed to me to perceive a common thread that links the French territory both to the Templars and to the Napoleonic world. Is it a coincidence that your two great passions are linked to this land?

Whether it's a coincidence or something else I don't know but it's a fact that my two great historical passions have their roots in the land of France. And to think that I had chosen to study English and German!

3) Can you explain to us the difference that runs between the various medieval orders of knighthood in the service of God, namely the Orders of the Cross and why there was a need for so many different orders? Wasn't monastic life and ferocity**

in battle a contradiction? The Knights Templar were of different nationalities. Which language did they speak to each other? In battle, how were orders given to this group of different nationalities? You want to know what are the differences between the various "knightly orders in the service of God", well before wanting to describe the differences it should be specified what was the Middle Ages and what were the knights in it. And we must do so with a mentality different from the current one. Reading the past with today's glasses is a very serious mistake. A dear friend said that the Middle Ages was the great attempt to unite earth and sky, to open a preferential way so that what was realized in the kingdom of heaven could be realized on earth.

Medieval man is a spiritual man in the sense that for him there is no dichotomy between heaven and earth or the current concept of secularism. There is no earth without heaven and vice versa; on the contrary, they are one. In the same way one must see the figure of the knight. If by knight we mean the one who fights on horseback, this is too narrow, indeed it is even misleading and sincerely false.

I, too, well or badly, know how to ride a horse but I am certainly not a knight. The knight is first of all a spiritual man in the sense that he has to sum up in himself virtues that pinpoint and distinguish him from the masses. Knowing well and thoroughly the trade of weapons is not, for example for a samurai, to be a knight: it is only being a skilled technician of weapons; it is the renunciation of their egocentricity that turns this technician into a knight. With these two lenses very clear in front of us,



*Nota **:*

Other important Orders of the Cross of the time were the Knights Hospitallers of St. John in Jerusalem, the Teutonic Knights (Order of the brothers of the House of Santa Maria in Jerusalem), the Knights of St. George (Sacred Military Constantinian Order of St. George), the Knights Templar (Poor comrades in arms of Christ and the Temple of Solomon).



we can talk about orders in the service of God.

So the Templars were not alone and were not the only ones.

They were joined by other similar "orders" in uniting a spiritual mission with a material one: the defense of the pilgrim with weapons and prayer, hospital care and armed militancy, always in any case combining the two ideals.

It is not, as it might seem, a matter of syncretism (amalgamating different religions, cultures and schools of thought) but of the purest style of medieval thought: the man of the Middle Ages really believed that what is done in heaven is done on earth. The prayer of the Our Father, perhaps the only one known by heart by the Templars, was for medieval man a very concrete and real prayer.

The Templars were flanked by the Hospitallers, with their black habit and white cross, the Teutonic, with their white habit and black cross, the Knights of St. Lazarus, with their grey habit and green cross, and so on, many others, the Sword Carriers in northern Europe, the Knights of St. James in the Iberian Peninsula and so on.

The Templars did not, however, fall into a fatal error, that of binding themselves to a territory, as the Teutonic in northern Europe did, on the contrary, they always and only bound themselves to a mission. This mission came to an end with the end of the Crusades, perhaps making it superfluous, but remained forever to distinguish them.

Here I would like to open a parenthesis to remind you that on the seal of the Order there was the representation of the dome of the Temple of Jerusalem that is the real house, the legal seat we would say today, of the Templars. But also the sign of the Templar geography that saw the Holy Land as the centre of the Order's life and Europe as the peripheral, exactly the opposite of what we think today: we always remember the lenses with which we look at history.

The historian Jules Michelet wrote about them: "The monk has rest, the soldier has war. The Templar rejects one and the other. He brought together what these two ways find the hardest: dangers and abstinence". These were actually the Templars.

The Templars came from lands that in the East were generically defined as francs and there is reason to

believe that the language spoken by the members of the Order was the lingua franca. Not to be confused with the lingua franca that developed in the Mediterranean basin, but only after the end of the Crusades. The latter was a commercial language dictated by commercial needs, but it was taken after the end of the Order.

If we look at Ridley Scott's film we see in it a disproportionate use of flags and banners almost to adorn the scenes of mass and battle.

After all, flags that flutter in the wind are always spectacular. But if we had been Templars we would not have understood anything because the banners at the time were used to give and transmit the orders of battle. As in the Roman legions.

The use of banners, their shape, and their tactical use are strictly regulated. At the base of the tactics of the Templars is discipline and absolute obedience to orders. Discipline was the real strength of the Templar squadrons, the multiplier of power to put it in a modern language.

4) Red Cross on the chest, possession of the Holy Grail, etc., are just some of the inaccuracies that history and cinema has led us to believe concerning the Knights Templar, you can reveal the most common errors related to the legend of the Knights Templar. Why do you think that around the Knights Templar hovers all this aura of mystery, which does not characterize the other Orders?

Some time ago I wrote complaining about the destruction of buildings that in one way or another saw the presence of the Templars.

Legions of deluded researchers, ignorant of history, have removed stones from castles, houses and various buildings in vain search of their treasure. They found nothing because there they could never find anything. They simply looked for the wrong thing in the wrong places.

It would have been better for them to search for the Temple's archive than the Templar's gold. The Templars had gold but they also knew where and certainly nowhere secret; as the King of France Philip the Fair knew full well.

After the fall of the last bastion of the Kingdom of Jerusalem to Acre in 1291, the penultimate master of the Temple Tibaldo Gaudin took the archive with him to Sidon and then to Cyprus, the true treasure of the Templars.

They did not possess the Grail, not even the Shroud, and they were not the guardians of the Pope and of the Holy Sepulchre.

In fact the Grail was not and is not an object but is a spiritual quest. The Holy Shroud of which some of

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today's texts speak, associating it with custodians with white cloaks, is nothing more than an extrapolation and an association with the Templars on the basis of the "sacred sheets" that were used on feast days to carry the relics in procession. The pope never recognized the Templars as his bodyguards.

It is rather the "black legend" of the Templars made exclusively of secondary sources and posthumous inventions that attributes to the Templars all sorts of fantasy, all sorts of esoteric secrets and the possession of the most sacred relics of Christianity.

5) During one of our very interesting conversations, you explained to me how the Knights Templar managed to solve the age-old problem that besieged pilgrims along their journey to the Holy Land, a solution still in use today.

Here I risk a little, but not so much. If we all look in our pockets, or almost, we have a pile of plastic cards. Among these is a credit card owned by the institution that issued it. In fact, we bring with us a valuable Templar artifact. Money in paper money is nothing more than a mere act of trust; in fact, it is out of trust that we attribute a value to paper money. In the Middle Ages it was not like that: money, real, was valid for its content of precious metal measured by weight. Imagine capital to be transferred for any commercial transaction: imagine the weight, the volume and above all imagine the dangers. A letter, on the other hand, does not have much real weight, but it can be worth a lot.

So instead of transferring money, the Templars transferred letters of credit. The mechanism, similar to the vouchers, was very simple but effective. The sum of money was physically deposited at a seat of the Order which issued a letter of credit in order to be able to collect a similar sum at the place of destination. A simple and secure system, the Temple guaranteed custody and cre-

dit. The compensation for the service rendered, which could not become usury, was the gain for the coffers of the Temple.

6) The history of the crusades* for the reconquest of the holy places of Jerusalem, evokes many names known from history books rather than from the cinema: the ferocious Saladin who regained Jerusalem and succeeded in unifying Islam; Richard the Lionheart, British sovereign who tried to regain it; Saint Louis of the French "King Louis IX" who expressed his deep religiosity in the tireless search for precious relics, constituting a reason for popular veneration and prestige for the dynasty, such as the acquisition of the crown of thorns of Christ now kept in France; King Philip IV of France, known as "il Bello", who on 13 October 1307 had all the Templars on French territory arrested and then tortured and their property seized, thus decreeing the end of the Order of Knights Templar.....which historical personage of the time do you admire most and which one do you despise?**

I will reply by recalling my battle name, which is also my e-mail address: Brother Oddone of Saint Amand feudes. A character not really nice or crystal clear but a son of his time, a strenuous defender of the Order and especially of its autonomy, a man who preferred death in prison rather than abjuration. Lights and shadows and perhaps more shadows than lights, he stood up to the king of Jerusalem Almaric and often made his own head follow his own policy, but a temple from head to toe faithful only to his mission. I will repeat it

*Nota ***:*

The Holy Wars were religious wars launched by the feudal nobility and the European maritime republics, with the support and encouragement of the Church, to free the holy places (Jerusalem and Palestine) from Turkish-Muslim rule. The expeditions were eight and covered a period of time ranging from 1095 to 1274. The word "crusade" was never used in historical sources, which refer to these expeditions with generic terms such as travel, passage and pilgrimage. It was used for the first time at the beginning of the eighteenth century in reference to the cross that the participants in the missions had sewn on their clothes, symbol of the pilgrimage and the vows made. During the early hours of dawn, the operation that the king had conceived almost a month before and that he had warped in secret until then was carried out throughout France. The aim was to arrest all the Templars present on French territory and seize their property. The order in this sense had long been branded to all the bailiffs and syncychalxes of the kingdom, with the imposition of silence until the date set, which was precisely Friday, October 13, a date that from this episode became a symbol and metaphor for "great misfortune" and misfortune.



until I get bored: our mental categories are not the categories of that time; one must read the story from within not from outside, with a critical spirit but without prejudice. Sympathies and antipathies are not suitable for historical research.

They were all protagonists in their time, more or less capable, and even on those on whom the sun shines many spots stand out. But our imagination cannot stop: Richard, King of England, will always be a brave, a lion's



heart; Saladin will always be ferocious because he is an enemy and Louis will always be a saint, despite his boundless ambition and bigotry.

7) How does a medieval re-enactment linked to the Templars usually take place? Do you rebuild a military camp and recreate a battle which really happened? During the re-enactment do you follow the strict Templar "Rule" as at the time?

Here comes the beauty...the litmus test

When we try to make our study, our research into a reality, what an effort!

And there are not only vans to load to reach a location but you need to get into a role.

And yes, the "Rule" is the basis of any reconstruction.

The camp, with its tents, is nothing more than a "convent" and as in a convent so things must be done. From the places at the table to the quantity and quality of the food, from talking, if required, to the dress you wear, from taking up arms to obeying orders, everything is done according to the rule. Not easy at all.

First the chapel tent is raised, after all the Templars are monks; then that of the Commendatory and the Marshal and so on and only at the end there is the order to break ranks for a little rest. At table the knights sit with the knights, they do not wear armour, they do not eat disorderly. And so do the sergeants who sit with the sergeants and the women who sit with the women. The Order was the mirror of medieval society where everyone had a place and a role and so we try to do in the historical reconstruction.

Obviously, for reasons that can easily be imagined, we cannot replicate battles in the Holy Land and so here we choose locations in Europe that have relevance to the

Templars or with some other order for rallies in which they also present armed clashes, but also moments of education when, for example, the field is opened to the public.

A peculiarity to which we are very attached: often the first day of the commemoration is dedicated exclusively to the reenactors; this allows us to strengthen friendships, to share our passion, to exchange gifts; in a word to live in the family whose desire is to make history.

I want to tell you about a small episode that has remained in the heart of all of us. We were in France at the village of La Barben, not far from Salon en Provence (Napoleon somehow always reappears in my life! - It's like cheese for us parmesans - or as Cardini says, the Templars are always involved!) Two boys from the Blanc Manteaux group asked the two managers of the Italian and French groups to exchange the promise of marriage there in that place, in front of the Siniscalco and the Commendatory, myself, and in front of all the reenactors.

And so it was: in front of the chapel tent at the Siniscalco and the Commendatory exchanged rings and promise of marriage. And there was a celebration and many gifts were given to them. Three months later they were husband and wife and all the French friends were present at their wedding.

I want to close this chapter with a little controversy; there is no demonstration where there is no exchange of gifts. It's the first gesture to be made immediately after setting up the camp; it is an essential ritual that promotes harmony. Maybe in the world of Napoleonic re-enactment we still have something to learn!

8) How did one become a knight of a temple at the time? Was this role available to all classes of society? Before leaving for the Holy Land, were they given special training or were they simply obliged to follow the "Rule"**?**

*Nota ****:*

The Rule approved at the Council of Troyes in 1129, inspired by St. Bernard, is a unique document in the Middle Ages. For the first time, monastic life was reconciled with the culture of war in the name of God. It substantially recreates the Cistercian one in terms of prayer and the daily life of the monks. The additions, undoubtedly innovative, and that make it a unique document in the Middle Ages, concern the indications on the art of war and the activity of armed struggle against the infidels. It makes precise references to the discipline to be observed in the convent, on the battlefield, during the movements. It develops an ideology of courage, of the spirit of sacrifice, of the sense of duty, of the pride of the flag and of the habit. The Order's banner, the famous baussant (or baucant) banner, a gathering point for the brothers during combat or in the field, is the symbol of the Order's cohesion. There are two versions of the Rule: the first written in Latin, the official language of the ecclesiastical bu-

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reauracy, by the cleric Johan Michiel (also known as the primitive rule), the second of 1140, written in French for the "illiterate".

8) This is another key point. There are many who today call themselves Templars outside of historical reconstruction. But those who affirm this affirm a falsehood. First of all because the Order is suppressed, or suspended, but in any case non-existent, and then because one cannot inherit or transmit a vocation. There is no such thing as a knight templar and it is completely illegitimate to claim to reconstitute the order, except for a new directive of the Pope that annuls forever the bull "Vox in excelso". Those who affirm the contrary cannot but be considered heretics. The Templars lived an epic with well-defined contours and it was fascinating because it was the child of its time; unique and unrepeatable.

Historical reconstruction also has its own "rule". It is not the money but the passion that drives some people to want to be part of a group.

But as then, it is a very hard choice because you start from the bottom, doing your bit at the top, making a career for merit, making many personal sacrifices.

If, after more than twenty years, however, we are still evoking the Middle Ages, evidently the charm of that world has not yet died out. For those who want to meet us with the sword in hand and the rosary at the waist there are many opportunities: on the social media there is our page but above all there are our photos and our faces so often tired but happy after.

Roberto Colla
fratel Eudes de Sant Amand

Anna Lisa Desiati



A big thank you to
Roberto Colla
for sharing with us
his passion for the
history of the Templars.



For the new year
a new leap in time ...
straight to World War II
with Claudio Morino.