TEMPLARS
AND
HOSPITALLERS
as Professed Religious in the Holy Land

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University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

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Military Orders are orders of the Roman Catholic Church, the brothers (and occasionally sisters) of which are professed religious, subject to the usual obligations of, and constraints in, canon law, except that some of them had the right and duty to bear arms. Priests are forbidden by canon law to use force and these orders were—one of them still is—unusual in that they were run by their unordained brothers.¹ Many flourished in the central Middle Ages, engaged in warfare not only in the eastern Mediterranean region but also along the shores of the Baltic and in the Iberian Peninsula. They ranged from international corporations, such as the Temple and the much smaller St Lazarus, to regional ones, such as the Iberian Orders of Calatrava, Aviz, Santiago, Alcántara, Christ and Montesa, the German Brothers of the Sword and Knights of Dobrzyn, and the tiny English Order of St Thomas. Only two, the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem (now known as the Sovereign Military Order of Malta) and the Order of St Mary of the Germans (the Teutonic Order), survive today as orders of the Church, although they are no longer military in practice. The priests of the Teutonic Order run parishes, and the members of the Order of Malta care for the sick poor.²

Military Orders are to be distinguished from Secular and Christian Orders of Chivalry. Secular Orders of Chivalry are subject not to the Church and canon law (except in so far as their members are baptized Christians) but to the sovereignty of their princely founders.
and their constitutional or dynastic successors. They acquire legitimation, therefore, not through the recognition of them as religious orders by the Church, but through the acts of secular Founts of Honours. Their knights are not such through profession but by virtue of the action of a sovereign power or its successor, and although it was common for some private devotional obligations to be imposed on them their role was, and is, honorific. As one of their most recent historians has written, “The only goal common to [these orders] was the promotion and reward of loyal service.”

Christian Orders of Chivalry evolved out of the Iberian Military Orders, the secularization of which by the Spanish and Portuguese kings was underway from the fifteenth century. In a few cases, however, the secularization was only partial because elements from the past were retained for a significant period of time. The resulting hybrids were no longer orders of the Church, since they had become confraternities legitimized by secular Founts of Honours, but their membership continued, unlike Secular Orders of Chivalry, to entail public, as opposed to private, obligations relating to the defence of Christendom or the Faith. Their knights—particularly those of Santiago and Christ—continued to serve in North Africa or in Mediterranean galley fleets or in the Portuguese empire. They were the models for other Christian Orders of Chivalry—in Italy, France, Germany, Holland, and Britain—that were established between the sixteenth century and the end of the nineteenth.

This book is concerned with the members of the two earliest and most famous Military Orders and with their service in Palestine and Syria in the central Middle Ages. Much has been written about them—indeed it could be said that they have never been as popular with researchers as they are today—but historians have tended to concentrate on them as military phenomena, international institutions, economic powerhouses, and landowners. Very little attention has been paid to their primary role as religious orders. They make no appearance in Cottineau’s great inventory of monastic and religious houses, al-
though they were added, at Neville Hadcock’s insistence, to Dom David Knowles’s gazetteer of medieval English religious communities. A striking example of unconscious neglect was a recent PhD dissertation on the veneration of St John the Baptist in England, which was outstanding, but which did not recognize the significance of the many commanderies of the Hospitallers of St John.

The Hospital and the Temple were endowed with estates throughout Europe, where their leading representatives were often major figures in the kingdoms in which they resided. They were used extensively by the papacy in the promotion of crusades and the collection of crusade taxes. Their more articulate contemporaries, who subjected them to quite severe criticism and in the late thirteenth century debated how they could be merged, appear at first reading to have believed that they were very similar to one another, but I will try to explain why this impression, which has helped to fashion almost all the history written about them, is a false one. A theme of this book is that they had distinct personalities, formed by the purposes for which they had been founded. The Templars had one overriding goal. The Hospitallers had several.

The source material for their history is rich. Many of the documents generated by the Hospitallers in Palestine and Syria have survived, together with a substantial body of statutory legislation, case law, and custom. The Templars’ central archive, on the other hand, has almost entirely disappeared, although it may have been in Europe in the fifteenth century, and their statutes, enacted in Levantine chapters-general, very few of the meetings of which can be identified, survive only in summary form, incorporated in a code which was built up layer upon layer over the years.

In one respect, however, the Temple provides us with material that is more revealing than anything that is associated with the Hospital. On 13 October 1307 most of the brothers in the kingdom of France, including the grand master James of Molay, who had come from Cyprus on a visitation, were arrested and accused of blasphemy, idolatry, and heresy. The Church’s response was to set up investigations, the earliest group of which comprises an examination by the papal inquisitor in
Paris, some episcopal enquiries, and depositions made before the pope at Poitiers and a team of cardinals at Chinon in the summer of 1308. These were followed by a string of others, including a papal commission which was sitting in Paris from 1309 to 1311. The testimony of individual Templars recorded during the interrogations provides us with details about their careers and with glimpses of the situation in Palestine and Syria during the last thirty years of western occupation.

— I shall be concentrating on the activities of the two orders in the Levant, but it should never be forgotten that from the middle of the twelfth century the bulk of their membership at any given time was running their estates in the West. The resources their central convents (or headquarters), situated in Jerusalem before 1187 and in Acre on the Palestinian coast from the 1190s to 1291, needed in manpower, cash, and matériel could only come from these lands, and there is ample evidence for the relative efficiency with which they managed their vast property portfolios and for the systems of communication that enabled them to direct eastwards the income they derived from them. The brothers in Europe lived a community life in commanderies (or preceptories), which were gathered into provinces called priories by the Hospitallers and grand commanderies or provincial masterships by the Templars. The provinces could be grouped into even larger circumscriptions, managed by Hospitaller grand commanders of outremer (a word which in this case meant Europe) and by Templar masters deça mer or visitors-general. The provinces and commanderies themselves generated masses of archival material and it is not surprising that their economic roles have been at the forefront of the minds of many of the historians who have written about them.

The orders’ hunger for cash drove them to turn themselves into the first true orders of the Church. These have supranational, or rather supradiocesan, structures. The brothers and sisters, wherever they are, share the same privileges, including that of exemption which liberates them from the powers of local bishops; the same regular life; and the same obedience to a common central authority, which can transfer
them from place to place. It is true that other congregations of religious evolved in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but none of them initially showed the features of a true order. Either the monks, wherever they were, pretended to be where they were not, so that a Cluniac monk at an overseas priory was treated as if he was within the walls of a virtual abbey, located at Cluny in Burgundy, or there was a confederation of independent abbeys, like the Cistercian ones.

The chief reason for the precocity of the Military Orders was that they were institutions that had to focus not on some geographically convenient location within Europe but on the eastern fringe of Christendom. Their headquarters were therefore dependent on resources that were being generated a long way away from them. The early stage at which they began to evolve intermediate government suggests that they had been forced to delegate. There was no obvious model for them to follow, and their provincial representatives had to work out through trial and error a means of controlling scattered dependencies. The first Hospitaller provincial chapter can be found meeting in 1123, and by the 1160s the terms of the relationship between the local houses and the provincial heads in both orders was becoming clear.22 The structures the Hospitallers and Templars were establishing were to be the models for later religious orders, including those of the Franciscans and Dominicans.

The brothers in the East must always have been conscious of a western hinterland that was a source not only of income and supplies, but also of fresh blood and possibly new ideas.23 Most of them had been born and raised in Europe and many of them would return there for a period of service or for good. As members of religious orders they were dependent on, and ultimately answerable to, the popes in Italy; and committed as they were to the defence of the settlements in the east and, in the case of the Hospital, to the care of pilgrims, they knew that the flow to them of resources was subject to the moods of western rulers and to the arbitrary nature of political developments in the west. It is not surprising that their leaders took the trouble to correspond regularly and informatively with European rulers,24 but they were usually impotent in the face of events over which they had little control.
Master Hugh Revel of the Hospital wrote bitterly in 1268 of the dire effects European political disturbances were having on his order’s income. He described how an unauthorized armed contribution made by Philip of Egly, the Hospitaller prior of France, to Charles of Anjou’s cause in southern Italy, had swallowed up the order’s revenues in Italy and Apulia and had left the priory of France itself deeply in debt. Hospitaller properties in Sicily and Tuscany had been devastated. Elsewhere, civil war in England had drastically reduced the value of its priory’s responsibilities, the levy on the order’s houses that helped fund the central convent. The Iberian Peninsula had contributed nothing except some mules, and the priories of Auvergne and St Gilles and the bailiwick of Germany had sent less than expected.25

It was essential, as we shall see, that some of the most able brothers be put into positions of responsibility in the West. But in spite of the wars and periods of insecurity, life in rural and even urban communities in Europe must have been less stressful than that of the brothers in the East and it may have been the case that the norms of religious community existence could be followed more closely in relatively peaceful locations in France and Italy. It cannot be denied that against one contemporary measure of success—a reputation for holiness—the Templar and Hospitaller communities in the Levant performed poorly. Both orders were credited with remarkably few saints in an age when in the eyes of the faithful heaven was filling up with men and women belonging to the new religious orders. And, of the three holy men associated with the Temple—Everard of Barres, Bevignate, and Gerland26—and (after putting to one side those saints who were fabricated or appropriated from elsewhere) the four in the modern calendar of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta—the founder Gerard, Ubaldesca, Toscana, and Hugh of Genoa27—only three, or possibly four, were full members of their respective orders, and only two of those who were order members appear to have served in the East. Of course, it may have been that the cults of brothers once known in the Levant for their piety were forgotten once their graves could no longer be visited.28 Who now hears of St William, a local Latin bishop, or St Eudes, a count of Nevers, whose tombs were healing shrines in Acre in the thirteenth century?29
But although the evidence is slight, life in the European houses could have provided the brothers and sisters with more intellectual and spiritual stimulus than was possible in the threatened convents on the frontiers. It came to be believed that the Hospitaller priest Hugh’s record of prayerful service to the sick in Genoa demonstrated that while the brothers in the East fought the Muslims, their confrères in the West supported them by engaging in their own spiritual battles “against invisible enemies.”30