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Swords and crucifixes: Functions and duties of the Order of St John in Fribourg (Switzerland) in the mirror of Late Medieval inventories

By Chantal Camenisch

In the context of the crusades, Christian military orders were created, amongst them the Order of Saint John. These orders were involved in the organization and the politics of the Crusader states. At the same time they maintained a network of smaller houses in the Occident, which had different functions. This paper aims to introduce some aspects of the daily life in a commandery of the Order of Saint John in the Occident. The focus is on the functions and the duties of the Knights Hospitaller concerning the order itself, but also concerning the community within they lived. These functions and duties were mainly the care for pilgrims and the sick, the military defence of the faith, and the pastoral care.[1] Therefore, a short overview of some aspects of the history of the order of Saint John is given, followed by the presentation of the results in regard to Fribourg, a town in the western Swiss plateau, founded in the middle of the twelfth century.

[1] Forey, Alan: Die Ritterorden 1120 bis 1312, in: Riley-Smith, Jonathan (ed.*): Illustrierte Geschichte der Kreuzzüge*, Zurich 1999: 214–250*; Lexikon des Mittelalters*, Munich 2002, vol. 5: 613–614.

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The commandery in 2005 (Photograph: Chantal Camenisch)

In the period between 1224 and 1520, about 200 charters, rent rolls and other documents of different content concerning the commandery of Saint John were preserved and are today available in the County Archive of Fribourg. Amongst them, the deed of donation from 1259 and the two inventories from 1480 and 1515 are especially interesting for the topic of this paper.[2]

In the decades after the first crusade, a number of Christian military orders were established in the Holy Land such as the Knights Templar, the Teutonic Knights or the Knights Hospitaller—also known as the Order of Saint John. The origins of the Order of Saint John most probably go back to a hospice in Jerusalem already

[2] Staatsarchiv des Kantons Freiburg (StAF), Komturei St. Johann 6; StAF, Komturei St. Johann 520u, p. 1–9; StAF, Komturei St. Johann, 471/11, p. 18–27; see Camenisch, Chantal: Die Hausratsinventare der Johanniterkomturei Freiburg aus den Jahren 1480 und 1515. Materielle Kultur einer Ritterordensniederlassung, in: *Freiburger Geschichtsblätter* 85 (2008): 69–89.

founded by merchants from Amalfi (Italy) in the first half of the eleventh century.[3] The earliest function of the members of this hospice was to take care of the Christian pilgrims in the Holy Land.

After the first crusade, the order of the Knights Templar was founded with the duty to protect the pilgrims on their way to and in the Holy Land. Following the example of the Knights Templar, the Order of Saint John experienced a reorientation to a religious military order.[4] The exact date is not known since no traces of this alteration can be found in the early statutes of the Order or in other sources. In the middle of the twelfth century, the Order of Saint John came into possession of several castles in the Holy Land such as the famous Crac des Chevaliers or the fortress Margat, but this does not mean that the transition into a military order was already accomplished.[5] At the end of the twelfth century, the military branch of the order became visible in the sources and the beginning of the thirteenth century saw most military structures established.[6] The religious military orders were involved in many of the military and political actions of the crusader states.

From the beginning onwards, care for pilgrims and the sick, including pastoral services, belonged to the functions and duties of the Order of Saint John. They are already mentioned in the rules of Raymond du Puy which were written down between 1150 and 1160.[7] The military defence of the pilgrims and the Holy Land were not mentioned before the statutes of Margat around 1203. However, it can be assumed that some military aspects were already established.[8]

[3] Forey: Die Ritterorden 1120 bis 1312: 214–216; Rödel, Walter Gerd: Einleitung. Der Johanniterorden. Der Orden des Hl. Johannes vom Spital zu Jerusalem, in: *Helvetia Sacra* IV/7 (2007): 32–35.
[4] Nicholson, Helen: *The Knights Hospitaller*, Woodbridge 2001: 1–10.
[5] Demurger, Alain: *Die Ritter des Herrn. Geschichte der geistlichen Ritterorden*, Munich 2003: 43–44.
[6] Sarnowsky, Jürgen: Die Johanniter. *Ein geistlicher Ritterorden in Mittelalter und Neuzeit*, Munich 2011: 21–22.
[7] Nicholson: *Knights Hospitaller*: 88–89.
[8] Demurger: *Die Ritter des Herrn*: 45. As mentioned before, the exact moment of this is still part of the scientific discussion.

When the Holy Land was lost, the Knights Hospitaller first turned to Cyprus and then —after 1309—established their own state on Rhodes. With this island as a base, the Order continued its military operations against the Moslems in the Mediterranean Sea. After the conquest of Rhodes through Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in 1522, the Knights Hospitaller installed themselves on Malta, where they stayed until 1798 when a Napoleonic armada forced them to surrender.[9]

Besides its state, the Order of Saint John was entitled to dispose of a considerable number of commanderies in the Occident. Most of the Knights Hospitaller lived there. On the one hand, they generated the capital, which was necessary to maintain military forces and the armada of the order. On the other hand, the commanderies provided the subsistence of the Knights living there, which means they had a function not far from that of a fief. Usually these commanderies were established after a significant donation and became richer due to further donations.[10]

On the territory of today's Switzerland, a considerable number of smaller and larger commanderies existed. The commandery in Fribourg was founded in the years before 1229 and belonged to the German tongue and the priory of Germany, both subdivisions of the order.[11] Fribourg was rather a small commandery because often young Knights were equipped with this house before they obtained other richer commanderies as they advanced in their career. After 1593, only priests of the Order obtained the commandery as sustentation.[12] In 1828, the commandery was

[9] Luttrell, Anthony: The Hospitallers of Rhodes Confront the Turks, 1306–1421, in: Gallagher, Philip F. (ed.): *Christians, Jews and Other Worlds: Patterns of Conflicts and Accommodation*, Lanham 1988: 80–86.
[10] Sarnowsky: *Die Johanniter*: 60–62; Ziegler, Peter: Die Johanniter in der Schweiz und in Freiburg, in: *Patrimoine Fribourgeois. Revue du Service des biens culturels* 20 (2014): 6.
[11] Ziegler: Die Johanniter in der Schweiz und in Freiburg: 5–12; Seitz, Johann Karl: Die Johanniter-Priesterkomturei Freiburg i. Ü., in: *Freiburger Geschichtsblätter* 17 (1910): 17.
[12] Seitz: Die Johanniter-Priesterkomturei: 126.

abolished by the state of Fribourg. It was the last commandery of the German tongue that still existed.[13]

The main building of the commandery in Fribourg was erected at the beginning of the fourteenth century and extended during the following centuries. Around the middle of this century, the perimeter wall of the commandery and an adjoining building were constructed. At the end of the seventeenth century, the commandery was further extended. After the abolishment of the commandery, the buildings served as a prison, as a dormitory for students and as military barracks. A few years ago, the County Heritage Centre of Fribourg moved their offices into the former buildings of the Order of Saint John.[14]

In 1259, the mayor, town council and citizens of Fribourg committed an extended parcel of land to the Order of Saint John. Before this donation, the Order possessed a house and a chapel in the Auge district on the other side of the River Sarine. At this time, the new parcel was situated outside the town walls. However, the donators attached conditions to their gift. The Order of Saint John promised to build and maintain a church, a graveyard and a hospice on this parcel.[15] These conditions are at least in parts close to the duties given to the Order in their own statutes.[16]

Furthermore, two inventories written at the end of the Middle Ages shed light on the daily life of the Knights Hospitaller with regard to their functions and duties. The first inventory of 1480 was written down in the context of the commander Benedict Frölich's death during the siege of Rhodes by the Ottomans in the same year. According to the statutes of the Order, after the death of a commander, the *spolium*

[13] Braun, Patrick: Freiburg, in: *Helvetia Sacra* IV/7 (2006): 204–205.
[14] Bourgarel, Gilles: La commanderie sous toutes ses coutures, in: *Patrimoine Fribourgeois. Revue du Service des biens culturels* 20 (2014): 19–32; Lauper, Aloys: La commanderie au temps des intrigues, in: *Patrimoine Fribourgeois. Revue du Service des biens culturels* 20 (2014): 71–76.
[15] Guex, François: L'installation des hospitaliers sur la Plance, in: *Patrimoine Fribourgeois. Revue du Service des biens culturels* 20 (2014): 13–17.
[16] Camenisch, Chantal: Prier, guerroyer, soigner des inventaires très révélateurs, in: *Patrimoine Fribourgeois. Revue du Service des biens culturels* 20 (2014): 49–52.

had to be paid. This *spolium* consisted of the equivalent of a fifth of the movable belongings found in the commandery. In the introduction to the inventory, it is mentioned that it was made after the death of Benedict Frölich and this is the reason why it can be assumed that the calculation of the *spolium* was the reason for the compilation of this document. In the older literature, it was assumed that the commander's debts were the reason for it, but there is no other evidence for this thesis and the customs of the Order allow another interpretation. The context of the second inventory is slightly different. The Order recommended that its Knights settle their affairs before they undertook a dangerous journey or when they were sick. Commander Peter of Englisberg left Fribourg in 1515 in order to travel to Rhodes, where he stayed for a long while.[17]

The obligation to pastoral care for the people in Fribourg arose with the deed of donation from 1259 when the Order of Saint John promised to build and maintain a church and a graveyard on their parcel of land. From the end of the thirteenth century onwards, donations made by citizens exist that included the right to burial in the graveyard after their death. Both inventories mention a book with a register of the anniversaries of the donators' death. Only in 1511—after a trial that involved the mightiest parish of the town, the German Prior of the Order and even the Pope—was the church elevated to a parish church for the district of the commandery. From this time onwards, the previously privately organized pastoral care became official.[18]

In both inventories, a considerable number of liturgical vestments are mentioned as well as the necessary missals and graduals. In the inventory of 1480, the church was equipped with the most necessary items. In 1515, however, the liturgical vestments, missals and Eucharistic objects increased. Two arm reliquaries of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist are remarkable. They were donated by the commander Peter of Englisberg and were made in the workshop of Martin Gramp in 1514/1515. The reliquaries were inspired by another arm reliquary of John the Baptist that was a gift from Djem, the younger brother of Egypt Sultan Bayezid II, to the grandmaster

[17] Camenisch: Hausratsinventare: 71–73; Camenisch: Prier, guerroyer, soigner: 49–50.
[18] Braun: Freiburg: 204–205.

Pierre d'Aubusson. Peter of Englisberg was most probably a novice (and an eyewitness) in 1501 when this gift was made in Rhodes.[19] Furthermore, a number of flags with the emblems of the Order are mentioned in the church.

The construction of a hospice was also a condition linked to the donation the town made in 1259—most probably it was not a house with the purpose of nursing the sick that was meant by the town authorities, but the accommodation of pilgrims. In the two inventories, clearly a considerable quantity of beds and bed linen are mentioned. However, no rooms are designated as guest rooms in the inventories, whereas most rooms are named after their purpose or their features. Also, in other written documents, no traces survived that the Knights Hospitaller did regularly accommodate pilgrims. However, in the frame of the excavation made during the restoration of the commandery during recent years, the archaeologists found evidence for guest rooms in the side building of the commandery (such as the vestiges of a chimney, which would not make any sense in a room which was not used for the accommodation of respected people).[20]

Another duty concerned the military protection of the pilgrims and the defence of the Christian faith. Before 1291, the Knights Hospitaller focused on the Holy Land. After the fall of Acre, the Holy Land was lost. From 1310 onwards, the island of Rhodes formed the base for their military operations against the Mamelukes and later the Ottomans. Since Rhodes was conquered in 1522 by the Ottomans, Malta replaced Rhodes in that function. It was customary in the Order that young Knights had to spend their noviciate in the headquarters of the Order. Obviously this also concerned the commandery in Fribourg, since there is evidence that sons from local noble families who became Knights Hospitaller followed this duty as well as Knights that presided over the commandery at a later stage of their career. After this noviciate, most Knights lived in the commanderies of the Occident, though, in the case of a threat, the Knights were obliged to join the Order and defend its headquarters. A

[19] Andrey, Ivan: La commandeur Pierre d'Englisberg. Rhodes à Fribourg, in*: Patrimoine Fribourgeois. Revue du Service des biens culturels* 20 (2014): 33–35 ; 40–41.
[20] Bourgarel: La commanderie: 23.

number of Knights from Fribourg also fulfilled this duty. John of Ow, who was commander of Fribourg from 1438 till 1469, travelled several times to Rhodes: first for his noviciate, then in 1440, 1444, and probably in 1455 again on the occasion of the Mameluke and Ottoman siege of Rhodes. In 1480, Sultan Mehmet gathered his troops again and besieged Rhodes. John of Ow, at this time no longer commander of Fribourg but commander of Münchenbuchsee in the Bernese area, hurried a last time to Rhodes. On his way back to Berne, he became sick and died shortly after in his commandery. As we know from the first inventory of 1480, the commander of Fribourg Benedict Frölich also headed for Rhodes but died there. His successor as commander, Philipp Stolz of Bickelheim, was also in Rhodes during the siege, but he survived and was able to come back to Fribourg.[21]

The second inventory was also written down in the context of a journey to Rhodes, as mentioned a bit earlier in this presentation. The reason for Peter of Englisberg's journey in 1515 rather had the purpose to advance his career. However, Englisberg travelled to Rhodes again in 1522 when the island was threatened once more by the Ottomans. Englisberg was too late, however. When he reached Lyon, he received the message of the fall of the Order's headquarters. In both inventories, a considerable number of weapons and armaments are mentioned. In the older inventory, the complete armour of a knight, four swords, a crossbow, battle-axes and helmets are mentioned. The younger inventory only lists a few such items and most of these are described as old or not complete, so a Knight would not have much use of it. The reason for this is maybe that in 1480 the weapons and the armours were brought back to the commandery after the commander's death. Maybe the fact that the former owner, the commander, was dead meant that these items belonged to the commandery whereas the weapons and armours of Peter of Englisberg were still his personal belongings since he was alive when the second inventory was compiled.

The paper has focused on the functions and duties the Knights Hospitaller carried out in the town of Fribourg and elsewhere in respect of the Order, such as the care for

[21] Camenisch: Prier, guerroyer, soigner: 51–52.

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pilgrims and the sick, the military defence of the faith, and the pastoral care. Concerning the care for pilgrims, it can be summarized that even though no written evidence exists on it, the archaeological excavations prove the existence of a hospice. Several examples show that the Knights followed their duty to the Order when the grandmaster called them for war. In regard to the pastoral care in Fribourg, it can be said that at the beginning this was limited to private donations. After 1511, the church of the commandery was elevated to a parish church. As a consequence, the pastoral care became more important and from the end of the sixteenth century onwards, the commandery was given to priests and no longer to Knights.