The Hospitallers’ Historical Activities: 1291-1400

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During the fourteenth century, while the Hospitallers were colonizing and defending Rhodes, there was — apparently — no attempt to produce a proper chronicle of the Order’s history (1).

Many brethren of the Hospital came from petty noble, knightly or urban patrician families in which, like the rest of their class, they normally received little formal education; probably a good many were unable to read or write. They were destined for a military life or for the administration of the Hospital’s numerous European estates, and even the more outstanding brethren, some of whom served as royal or papal captains and counsellors, were not normally intellectuals. Yet the gibes of extremists like Marsiglio of Padua, who wrote that in the Hospital and other such Orders “both literate and illiterate persons are accepted indiscriminately” (2), were not really justified. The Hospital did, in fact, contain educated men with literary and historical interests; there were, in addition to the ordinary chaplains or fratres presbiteri, a number of university-trained brethren. Yet, although the Hospital-
from Syria by the Treasurer of the Hospital; another, completed in Cyprus in or before 1303, was possibly intended in part to repair the loss of records suffered in 1291. A man of wide reading and erudition who cited not only Cicero and Gratian but Augustine and other fathers of the church, Fr. Guglielmo's strong critical sense enabled him to interpret documents with considerable historical shrewdness. His legal interests were reflected in a discourse on law which contained practical advice for Hospitallers sitting in judgement in their own courts. He had copies made of the Hospital's rule, statutes and usages, and he was apparently responsible for their arrangement in the form in which they were known for two centuries. Fr. Guglielmo's compilations also contained a version of the list of the deceased Masters, the King of Naples' project for a new crusade, and various contemporary documents concerning the Hospital. Some of this material was selected and presented in such a way as to constitute a kind of historical source book. Furthermore Fr. Guglielmo, who showed great awareness of the Order's historical development, wrote a critical dissertation on the vexed question of the Order's origins in the Hospital. He introduced some new material into this treatise, disagreeing on certain points with Guillaume of Tyre and rejecting many legends in the miracles; none the less he included a text of these legends in one of his compilations. However, Fr. Guglielmo di San Stefano's sober treatises, inspired by a respect for historical accuracy, never achieved the popularity of the miracles; on his death in about 1303 he left no continuous history of the Order, and he had no successor as a historian of the Hospital (3).

A more typical product of the Hospitallers' cultural interests was the clumsy translation of the Psalter made, apparently in Cyprus, by Pierre de Paris for Fr. Simon le Rat (4), who was Marshal of the Hospital and succeeded Fr. Guglielmo di San Stefano as Preceptor of Cyprus (5). In addition to these comparatively dilettante intellectual activities on the fringes of court life in Outremer, there developed a more professional group of brethren educated in the schools of the West. The fratres presbiteri and the occasional late entrant naturally possessed a certain standard of literacy, and the Order showed some interest in educating men who were not members of the Hospital. The Order's hospice at Toulouse had been endowed to maintain poor students, but in 1360 and 1366 there were complaints that it was failing to do so (6). Perhaps that was why in 1366 Johannes de Acone, who was not a Hospitaller but a chaplain in the Conventual church of the Order at Rhodes in which he had served since his boyhood, was granted a pension out of the Order's incomes to enable him to continue his theological studies in the studium at Toulouse (7). Furthermore, from the middle of the fourteenth century the Order regularly had certain brethren trained in Canon Law. The Hôpital Ancien, which was situated among the law schools at Paris, became a kind of unofficial studium for these legal Hospitallers; some of them even taught Canon Law at the university, where a few attained real distinction. The Hospitaller Canonists gave useful service to their Order at the papal curia and in all manner of law courts. They also held important judicial posts at Rhodes, and by 1381 there was a Chancellor of the Master who was a licentiatus in Canon Law. Rhodian society lacked the brio of courtly circles in Cyprus, but the Hospitaller lawyers swelled the growing ranks of the intelligentsia of Rhodes, which already included notaries, scribes, judges, merchants, clerics and the

(4) Histoire littéraire de la France, xxxvii (1938), 441-443 (kindly indicated by Mr. Richard Dwyer of Purdue University, Indiana).
(6) C. SMITH, The University of Toulouse in the Middle Ages (Milwaukee, 1958), 117-119.
(7) Royal Malta Library, Archives of the Order of St. John, cod. 319, f. 39.
physicians attached to the Hospitallers' great infirmary (8).

Among these educated brethren Fr. Jean and Fr. Simon de Hesdin were outstanding as, apparently, the only Hospitallers of their time who were Masters of Theology. Fr. Jean de Hesdin, Dean of the Faculty of Theology at Paris by 1365, composed biblical commentaries and a rather crudely classicizing epistle against Francesco Petrarcha, in which he defended the choice of France against the claims of Italy to be the seat of the papal curia. Fr. Simon de Hesdin's traduction commentée of Valerius Maximus, the first four books of which were dedicated to his patron Charles V of France in 1375, contained a good deal of jumbled historical, theological and classical learning; he even declared that historians were the best moralists. Either of these two scholars was capable of writing a history of the Hospital, but their careers were based on the schools of Paris and their interests were in theology and the classics. Probably neither visited Rhodes or knew much of their Order's history (9).

A very different type of man was the Aragonese Hospitaller Fr. Juan Fernández de Heredia, Master of Rhodes from 1377 to 1396. He lacked formal training but possessed the wealth and enthusiasm to patronize an extensive programme of historical translations and compilations in the style then in vogue at the Aragonese court. At Rhodes he took advantage of the presence of classical manuscripts and bi-lingual scribes to procure the first translation into a Western tongue of Plutarch's Lives and other Greek texts. Fernández de Heredia sponsored an ambitious series of translations apparently designed to form a continuous history of Greece down to his own times. Yet his Aragonese version of the Chronicle of the Morea closed in the very year in which he led an expedition to Greece, and while he was interested in "universal" history, and especially in Spain and Greece, Fernández de Heredia apparently showed no interest in recording the history of his own Order (10).

If the Hospitallers did not chronicle their own activities, they took good care, for motives of practical and particularly of legal convenience, to preserve the records from which part of their history could be written. As early as 1262 it had been decreed that the European priors should keep a register of their lands and rents. In 1291 the Hospital lost many of its documents at the fall of Acre, and in 1300 Pope Boniface VIII issued a new confirmation of the Order's rule (11). In 1330 it was ordained that all priors and preceptors should make an inventory of their estates, keeping a copy for themselves and sending another to Rhodes (12). The result of such ordinances was the survival, either in the originals or in copies, of various series of bulls, privileges, registers, accounts and other administrative records, both in the Hospital's central archives at Rhodes and in those of its priories. An outstanding example of this activity was the enormous six-volume Cartulario Magno compiled in Aragon at the command of Fr. Juan Fernández de Heredia, which was intended to preserve important materials likely to decay or be lost and to facilitate their use in litigation (13).

Some brethren at least must have had a desire for a knowledge of their own Order's past, and their curiosity was satisfied in a very rudimentary way by the official chronologies of the deceased Masters. These apparently derived from a Provençal prototype which was no more than a list of Masters presumably used for purposes of commemoration and

(11) Cartulaire, iii, nos. 3039 para. 23, 4496.
(12) Malta, cod. 280, f. 12.
prayer; they contained brief eulogistic remarks about each Master, and were periodically extended and embroidered. These lists, in Provencal, Latin, Italian and other tongues, were usually included in the manuscripts containing the rule and statutes of the Hospital which were preserved in the Order’s houses all over Europe. From about the beginning of the fourteenth century the remarks added about each Master as he died, though still very brief, became more detailed and often less laudatory. This did not result in anything like real history, but it did lead to the constitution for the fourteenth century of a varied and often conflicting body of contemporary comment on the Hospital’s affairs (14).

(14) One of these texts, dating to 1357 and in Latin, was published by L. de Mas-Latrie, in *Archives des missions scientifiques et littéraires*, ser. I, vi (1857), 26-30. The collation of the numerous Mss. is an important though complex desideratum, since they contain precious historical information; the present author has collected a considerable amount of the relevant material.

The Hospitallers were not illiterate, nor were they altogether uninterested in history. For example, the inventories of certain Catalan preceptories taken in about 1377 mentioned not only prayer-books, psalters and un proser veil de art de cant de pocha valor, but also some storials (15). In general however the Hospital, unlike the Teutonic Order (16), apparently failed during the fourteenth century to chronicle its own activities, thus neglecting an opportunity to publicize its real achievements and to improve its general image. This failure probably contributed to the damaging current of criticism which influenced public opinion against the Hospitallers and diminished support for their activities (17).


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**RÉSUMÉ**

La plupart des Hospitaliers étaient soldats et administrateurs plutôt que savants. D’autres même étaient sans doute illétrés. Il y avait cependant des esprits cultivés, surtout parmi les fraters presbiteri et ceux qui avaient étudié le Droit Canon. Plusieurs Hospitaliers étaient très versés en jurisprudence, en théologie et en histoire. L’Ordre avait grand soin de ses archives et un, au moins, des Maîtres de Rhodes était un promoteur éclairé de la compilation historique. Cependant, aucun effort sérieux ne semble avoir été fait pour rédiger une véritable chronique ou histoire de l’Hôpital, quoi qu’il y eût des listes des Maîtres défunt auxquelles on ajoutait périodiquement quelques annotations historiques sommaires. L’Hôpital ne s’est jamais soucié de faire connaître ses activités et ses réussites, ce qui aurait pu servir à combattre les critiques qui mettaient le discrédit sur sa réputation.