

The Knights Hospitaller of the English Langue 1460–1565

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The history of the Hospitallers in the later-middle ages is still to be written, both in general terms and in many particular respects. Although there has been some recent research on specific aspects of these institutions, this has been mainly concerned with the previous centuries (1), while general surveys on the Hospitallers of the British Isles, like that of Edwin J. King, are generally outdated (2). We are, however, quite well informed about the central policies of the order on Rhodes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (3), the order's wars against the Mamluks and Ottomans, especially the sieges of Rhodes in 1480 and 1522 (4), and individual priories (a priory comprised the group of houses located in any one country), especially in France and Spain (5). But although there are some very good regional archives (for example for Spain, Southern France, and Bohemia), relatively little is known about the inner life and administration of the order, the interrelationships of the priories, their representation in the convent (the headquarters of the order, established on Rhodes from 1309 until 1522 and then, after 1530, on Malta), and their relationship with kings and princes. These areas are all discussed by Gregory O'Malley in this book, which is an extended version of his Cambridge PhD dissertation of 1999. This thesis was concerned with the English houses of the order in the crucial years between 1460 and 1565; that is before, during, and after the Reformation and the dissolution of the order in England. For this book, the houses in Ireland and the single house in Scotland (which formed a part of the English priory) have been added, so as to provide a complete picture for the British Isles. Although the archives of the priories are almost completely lost for the British Isles, there are many other sources—especially from the central archives now in the National Library of Malta, Valletta, and various royal and other documents from England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland—that provide rich information for a study of this kind.

The introduction starts with a survey of the order's history up to 1565, the date of the Turkish siege of Malta, which concentrates on the Rhodes (1460–1522) and Maltese (1530–1565) periods (insofar as they are covered by the span of the book). General remarks on the Hospitallers in the British Isles are followed by a survey of the relevant sources and a short discussion of the existing historiography. The main content of the book can be divided into two parts. The first section (comprising chapters two to six) deals mainly with England and Wales. The second part (chapters seven to nine) discusses the houses in Ireland and Scotland, the knights of the English langue (that is, the representatives from the priories of England and Ireland based in the convent on Rhodes and, later, Malta), and the situation that followed the dissolution of the order in England. This is followed by a short conclusion and by lists of priors, various other important officials, and the members of the langue for the period between c.1460 and 1565. These provide very useful biographical and prosopographical information on families and offices.

The second chapter is mainly devoted to the careers of the brethren. It discusses admission to the order, the recruitment of knights, their family relationships and status, life in the preceptories and convent, promotion to offices, and spirituality and literacy. Between 1460 and 1560 there were no admissions of sergeants, and, the church at Clerkenwell set aside, secular clergy, rather than ordained members of the order, served in most of the order's churches. Thus the brother knights formed the dominant part of the order's membership, most of whom came from noble or gentry families from the North or North Midlands, or at least from their cadet branches. Their chance to be promoted to office within the order was limited by the number of preceptories—there were just twenty of them. Administration and finance are the topics of the third chapter, which considers the changes in the management of the order's estates after the inquest of 1338, the consequences of the Black Death, the income, the responsions (payments sent to the convent on Rhodes), and other payments to the common treasury, and the collection of these monies. In the period around 1500, more and more land was leased out, often for long terms, with the leases being granted by provincial chapters—although from the 1490s the income from leases remained stable. Other sources of income were confraternity payments and spiritualities (tithes, oblations, indulgences, burials, and so on). The yearly income from farms and rents alone still amounted to £3,000 in the sixteenth century, but the responsions—based on the priory's income—paid to the convent in around 1500 amounted to just £945, which was only half of the sum sent in 1338. Nevertheless, the English brethren took their obligations to the convent seriously, and contributed more than £6,000 in 1522 when the Ottoman siege of Rhodes had begun. This is illustrated by the discussion in chapter four of the reception of the order in society, the influence of

crusading ideas, the mentality of the brethren and their adherence to the original ideas, and their spiritual, commercial, and personal links to lay people. During the period covered by this book, the order still had some success in recruiting confratres, selling indulgences, and providing extra-parochial spiritual services. The brethren were integrated in their personal and family networks, but concessions were mainly made to non-members who were influential at the royal court.

The central chapters, chapters five to six, discuss extensively (and for the most part chronologically) the relationship of the Hospitallers with the English crown, first for the period covering the reigns from Edward III to Henry VII (1327–1509), and then for the reign of Henry VIII (1509–1547). The crown had a recurring tendency to limit both the payments to (ecclesiastical) authorities outside England, and the journeys, foreign activities, and obligations of Englishmen, including the provision of (ecclesiastical) offices. Nevertheless, even though responsions were at times stopped, the order was regularly allowed to send men and money to Rhodes, especially in the fifteenth century, when this was an effective English way to contribute to the defence against the Turks—something made manifest in the English tower at the order's castle of St Peter (Bodrum). The price for this was a close relationship between kings and priors which sometimes led into conflict, as, for example, when Edward IV tried to influence two prioral elections—that of Langstrother in the period 1468–70, and that of Robert Multon, whose bid failed in the face of the convent's hostility, in 1474–77—and when Prior John Kendal became involved in the Perkin Warbeck affair during the reign of Henry VII. The cooperation continued during the first fifteen years of Henry VIII's reign, although for Prior Thomas Docwra this doomed him to spending more and more of his time working for the royal administration. But during the second Ottoman siege of Rhodes the king had no sympathy for sending men or money, and when Rhodes was lost relations deteriorated—at least after 1526. Thus, when Docwra died in April 1527, the sequestration of the priory followed, only to be lifted after his successor, William Weston, had paid a heavy fine—albeit that it was afterwards 'generously' handed over to the master when he came to England. In the meantime, some of the goods of the late prior and the priory had been alienated and now had to be recovered. Furthermore, the ambitions of Clement West, the turcopolier (the officer responsible for the mercenaries known as 'turcoples') since 1531, caused problems both to the English langue at Malta and in England itself. Finally, after the king broke with Rome, the order was dissolved in England on 1 May 1540.

Chapter seven at first discusses the history of the Irish houses of the order. These mostly lay within the parts of Ireland dominated by the English, and the consequence of this was that many of the priors also served as royal officials. In the fifteenth century, the Irish priory became the object of quarrels between the leading Anglo-Irish families, while English brethren nominated as priors by the English langue or the convent at Rhodes mostly failed to establish themselves in the country. This was very different from the situation that pertained in Scotland, where the preceptory at Torphichen (and the other Scottish properties of the order) was subjected to, and dominated by, the English priory—something that was backed by a 'grudging cooperation of the two crowns' (p. 266), which was only ended by the Dissolution.

In the convent, which moved from Rhodes first to Italy and then to Malta, the English, Irish, and Scottish houses were represented by the English langue. Its role, and that of its members, in the convent is examined in chapter eight, which discusses the journey to the convent from Britain, the numbers of brethren who made up the langue, the maintenance of the auberge in which they lodged, commercial operations, problems of discipline, the contributions of the members of the langue to the defence of Rhodes, the caravana of the younger brethren, the office of turcopolier and the employment of turcoples, and the members' service on commissions and as officials. Finally, chapter nine deals with the fate of English brethren after the dissolution, while the conclusion stresses the relative importance of the English langue, and the commitment of its brethren, to the order's tasks.

Based on an impressive bulk of materials, which becomes even denser for the sixteenth century, this book is the fundamental study on all aspects of the history of the Hospitallers in the British Isles in the later middle ages. The diligent and thorough approach of the author allows intensive insights in the structures and procedures of the British branch of the order. Even if the situation here was different from that in the other langues, the results of the study will form a good basis for comparison with other branches and regions.

Additionally, the descriptions of the life of the knight brethren complement studies on the English nobility in the later middle ages, while the order's relationship to king and government forms part of the political history of England around 1500. In sum, this book is an important study that contributes much to our understanding of late-medieval history.

Notes

1. See the articles of Helen Nicholson and Jürgen Sarnowsky in *Mendicants, Military Orders, and Regionalism in Medieval Europe*, ed. H. Nicholson and J. Sarnowsky (Aldershot, 1999). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. E. J. King, *The Knights of St John in the British Realm*, third edition revised by H. Luke (London, 1967). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See, for example, the collected studies of Anthony Luttrell: *The Hospitallers in Cyprus, Rhodes, Greece and the West, 1291–1440* (London, 1978); *Latin Greece, the Hospitallers and the Crusades, 1291–1440* (London, 1982); *The Hospitallers of Rhodes and their Mediterranean World* (London, 1992); *The Hospitaller State on Rhodes and its Western Provinces, 1306–1462* (Aldershot, 1999); and J. Sarnowsky, *Macht und Herrschaft im Johanniterorden des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Münster, 2002). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Cf. N. Vatin, *L'Ordre de Saint-Jean-de-Jérusalem, l'Empire ottoman et la Méditerranée orientale entre les deux sièges de Rhodes, 1480–1522*, Collection Turcica, 7 (Paris, 1994). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. For example by P. Bonneaud, *Le prieuré de Catalogne, le couvent de Rhodes et la couronne d'Aragon 1415–1447*, Milites Christi, 2 (Larzac, 2004). [Back to \(5\)](#)

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