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# Secure Base and Constraints of Mobility: The Rheno-Flemish Bailiwick of the Teutonic Knights between Regional Bonds and Service to the Grand Master in the Later Middle Ages

KLAUS VAN EICKELS

When studying mobility in the military orders, one must carefully distinguish between two forms. On the one hand, there was 'mobility by transfer': brothers were transferred from one house to another – be it within the same region, between regions or to and from the order's main areas of activity (i.e. the Holy Land or whatever was substituted for it after the loss of the kingdom of Jerusalem). On the other hand, there was 'secure base mobility': brothers were travelling in the service of the order while remaining attached to their house of origin. Constant affiliation to one house of the order over a long period of time must therefore not be mistaken for immobility. Neither was the appointment to a new office always indicative of real mobility, since officials were sometimes appointed without taking residence in their respective new commanderies.

These aspects of mobility can be studied on a small scale in the Rheno-Flemish bailiwick of the Teutonic Knights. Traditional historiography has argued that the Teutonic Order – after a dynamic period of expansion – began to ossify because of the increasing immobility of brothers who considered their commanderies as personal benefices rather than as offices to be held on behalf of the order.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this development was not as linear as it may seem. From the very beginning, there was a marked tension between the individual brothers' attachment to certain regions or houses and the unrestricted mobility required by the order's central administration. The order's houses could only exist and

thrive as long as the brothers maintained local networks and social bonds; at the same time, the order as a whole could only function as long as the brothers remained available for tasks outside their region of origin.

Brothers who remained attached to their original houses were not necessarily immobile; in fact, they were often prepared to travel rather extensively. Examples of this kind of local attachment can be found at a very early date: Giles Berthout the Bearded, lord of Oudenburg, entered the order in 1227/8 at a fairly advanced age. He had been lord of Oudenburg for twenty years by virtue of his marriage to the heiress of the lordship, but after his eldest stepson had reached adult age he could no longer claim the title. Instead of accepting this loss of status, Giles renounced his marriage and entered the Teutonic Order.<sup>2</sup>

It seems that he did not make any substantial donations to the order at that time, since his own rather mediocre inheritance was passed on to his own sons. Rather, the order accepted him because of his involvement in local networks of power and friendship and because of his close relationship to the English court. In 1216, he had fought, together with other Flemish knights, for King John of England against the invasion of the Lord Louis (later King Louis VIII of France) who was then claiming the English crown.<sup>3</sup> In 1235, Giles the Bearded negotiated the marriage between the sister of the English king (Isabella) and Emperor Frederick II, and in the following years he repeatedly travelled to London to receive the payments agreed upon as the bride's marriage portion.<sup>4</sup> During his fourteen years as a brother-knight Giles probably resided at Oudenburg, for in 1219, when he and his wife had been sick during the Fifth Crusade's siege of Damietta, they had founded a hospital there.<sup>5</sup>

Giles the Bearded probably insisted on staying on the Flemish possessions that he and his relatives had given to the order. He had entered the order to avoid the loss of social status. Moving to a distant house of the order would have made him a subordinate member of that house because of his late entry into the order. As long as he resided at Oudenburg, however, he remained independent. At the same time, he was more than willing to undertake long journeys, especially those that added to his honour – such as the embassy to the English court on behalf of the emperor. However, he also voyaged to fulfil administrative tasks, as in 1237 when he received in person the first documented payment of the annual rent that King Henry III had granted to the Teutonic Knights during Giles's stay at his court two years earlier.<sup>6</sup>

The willingness of brothers and commanders to travel on behalf of the order did not disappear during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

In 1419, the commander of Koblenz led 200 knightly mercenaries to Prussia (and it is of no concern here that his journey ended somewhere in the middle of Germany when he was informed that a truce had been concluded and that the knights were no longer needed).<sup>7</sup> Louis of Saunshiem (1501–24) repeatedly served as the grand master's ambassador to the imperial court, the imperial diet and several princely courts of the empire.<sup>8</sup> In 1444, the commander of Althaus came from Prussia to Mechelen, the administrative centre of the Teutonic Knights in Brabant and Flanders, in order to raise 20,000 guilders for the grand master by selling eternal and life annuities.<sup>9</sup>

The conflicts that occurred usually had an economic background. In the fifteenth century, the brothers of Koblenz protested against the annual wine transport they owed to the grand master and his officials. Yet, their protest was not directed against the obligation to have the ship accompanied by a brother down to the North Sea; rather, the conflict stemmed from the question of whether their house or the grand master would have to pay for the travel expenses.<sup>10</sup>

Not all brothers preferred the secure base of their region of origin. Moving to the centre of the order's activities was riskier, but it also offered attractive career opportunities. Much depended on how the socio-economic situation of a brother's region of origin compared to that of his potential area of relocation; the order's military success in the target region was also a significant factor. In the order's early years, the grand master seems to have had no problem recruiting brothers who were ready to serve outside their region of origin. As long as the order expanded, the prospect of advancing in the order's hierarchy provided a strong incentive.

In the fourteenth century, when expansion stagnated, this incentive was counterbalanced by other factors. As access to advancement became more restricted – simply because there were no longer as many vacancies to be filled every year – the brothers insisted more and more on remaining in, or only moving to, an environment where they would fit in. Social background and regional origin became decisive factors. Livonia, for example, was dominated by Westphalians. Brothers from other bailiwicks had almost no chance of being promoted to leading positions in Livonia. In the fifteenth century, the grand master's attempt to take over the Livonian branch of the order by sending Rhenish brothers to Livonia in great numbers failed.<sup>11</sup>

In the bailiwick of Koblenz, social background was equally important. Brothers from the patrician families of the Rhineland's big cities occupied the leading positions in most of the order's houses there.<sup>12</sup>

Outside their region of origin, however, their claim to be of noble descent was often considered doubtful. Thus, the threat to transfer unruly brothers to Prussia against their will became a particularly effective punishment.<sup>13</sup> Yet, service for the grand master remained an attractive option: since the mid-fourteenth century, all commanders of Koblenz were Rhenish brothers who had served in Prussia for some time before being appointed to their position. Obviously, the Rheno-Flemish bailiwick was one of the most attractive positions the grand master could offer to a brother from the Rhineland.<sup>14</sup>

When the order's size decreased significantly in the fifteenth century, the factors impeding mobility increased dramatically. In 1454, when great parts of Prussia were lost at the beginning of the Thirteen Years War, the grand master sent a considerable number of brothers from Prussia to Koblenz with letters requesting to receive them there. In 1456, the commander complained about their insubordination and, specifically, about their excessive funding demands for themselves as well as their friends, squires and servants.<sup>15</sup> Once again competition for resources, not mobility as such, was at stake. The conflict was also fuelled by social disparities and regional networks of power. The brothers from Prussia were knights and found it rather difficult to live in a bailiwick that was almost entirely dominated by priests of the order. Moreover, some of the 'Prussian brothers' originated from families near Koblenz and even tried to invoke the assistance of the archbishop of Trier in their struggle against the commander of the bailiwick who was then residing in Cologne.<sup>16</sup>

The example of Koblenz at the end of the fifteenth century warns us against the misconception that mobility indicates unity and that local ties might be indicative of fragmentation: Werner Spiess of Büllesheim, appointed commander of Koblenz in 1486 and deposed in 1501, found himself in conflict with the brothers of the commanderies under his direct control soon after his appointment. His struggle against losing his attractive position resulted not only in armed conflict, but also in numerous journeys to Prussia where he defended himself against the charges put forward against him by the brothers of the order. At the same time, these same brothers actively sought the support of regional princes, especially the archbishop of Trier who intervened on their behalf. The grand master as well as the archbishop became involved in the conflict. What appears in the sources as a confrontation between a mobile commander and immobile brothers (who relied on local networking rather than the order's hierarchy), should rather be read as symptoms of inner strife (and not in terms of mobility or immobility).<sup>17</sup>

While ‘mobility by transfer’ is more easily discerned in the sources, ‘secure base mobility’ was equally important for the Teutonic Order as a whole. A brother’s socio-economic situation largely determined whether he would exchange the security of a position in his region of origin for the chances of advancement by transfer. It seems that conflicts concerning the mobility and transfer of brothers were often conflicts about revenues, expenditure or social selection. Therefore, mobility has to be studied in its broader context.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Hans Prutz, *Die geistlichen Ritterorden: Ihre Stellung zur kirchlichen, politischen, gesellschaftlichen und wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung des Mittelalters* (Berlin, 1908); Marian Tumler, *Der Deutsche Orden im Werden, Wachsen und Wirken bis 1400 mit einem Abriß der Geschichte des Ordens von 1400 bis zur neuesten Zeit* (Vienna, 1955); Erich Maschke, ‘Die inneren Wandlungen des Deutschen Ritterordens’, in Waldemar Besson (ed.), *Geschichte und Gegenwartsbewusstsein, historische Betrachtungen und Untersuchungen: Festschrift für Hans Rothfels zum 70. Geburtstag dargebracht von Kollegen, Freunden und Schülern* (Göttingen, 1963), pp. 249–77.
- <sup>2</sup> Theo Luykx, *Een typisch vertegenwoordiger van den XIIIe eeuwse adel in onze gewesten: Gilles Berthout met den baard, kamerheer van Vlaanderen en broeder van de Duitsche Orde in Pitseburg te Mechelen* (Antwerp, 1944); Jean Theodore de Raadt, ‘Égide Berthout Ier dit à-la-barbe’, *Annales de la société d’archéologie de Bruxelles*, 2 (1888–9), 100–7.
- <sup>3</sup> In 1207, he and his brother accepted an English money fief. In May 1213, he is recorded as present at the English court. On 16 July 1216, King John granted him safe-conduct for his return to Flanders; Luykx, *Een typisch vertegenwoordiger*, pp. 17–22.
- <sup>4</sup> Hans Koeppen, ‘Die englische Rente für den Deutschen Orden’, in *Festschrift für Hermann Heimpel zum 70. Geburtstag am 19. September 1971* (Göttingen, 1971–2), pp. 402–21, here p. 406.
- <sup>5</sup> Klaus van Eickels, *Die Deutschordensballei Koblenz und ihre wirtschaftliche Entwicklung im Spätmittelalter* (Marburg, 1995), pp. 24–8.
- <sup>6</sup> Koeppen, ‘Die englische Rente’, pp. 403, 407; cf. Eickels, *Die Deutschordensballei Koblenz*, p. 30.
- <sup>7</sup> Hans Limburg, *Die Hochmeister des Deutschen Ordens und die Ballei Koblenz* (Bad Godesberg, 1969), p. 80.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 158–66.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85–6; cf. Eickels, *Die Deutschordensballei Koblenz*, p. 206.
- <sup>10</sup> Eickels, *Die Deutschordensballei Koblenz*, pp. 200–3.

- <sup>11</sup> Klaus Militzer, 'Rheinländer im mittelalterlichen Livland', *Rheinische Vierteljahrsblätter*, 61 (1997), 79–95.
- <sup>12</sup> Eickels, *Die Deutschordensballei Koblenz*, pp. 53–6.
- <sup>13</sup> Limburg, *Die Hochmeister des Deutschen Ordens*, p. 69.
- <sup>14</sup> Eickels, *Die Deutschordensballei Koblenz*, p. 203; Limburg, *Die Hochmeister des Deutschen Ordens*, pp. 69ff.
- <sup>15</sup> Heinrich Reimer, 'Verfall der Deutschordensballei Koblenz im 15. Jahrhundert', *Trierisches Archiv*, 11 (1907), 1–42, here doc. X (June 1456), p. 33: the commander of Koblenz complains to the grand master about the insubordination of the 'brothers from Prussia'. Cf. Eickels, *Die Deutschordensballei Koblenz*, pp. 203–5; Limburg, *Die Hochmeister des Deutschen Ordens*, pp. 110–12.
- <sup>16</sup> Reimer, 'Verfall der Deutschordensballei Koblenz', docs XI (Landeshauptarchiv Koblenz, Abteilung 1 C 17044, fols 35v–41; 7 April 1460) and XI (Landeshauptarchiv Koblenz, Abteilung 1 C 17044, fol. 35r; 31 May 1460). The Prussian brothers in Koblenz (archdiocese of Trier) jointly complain to the archbishop of Trier as their local bishop about their commander who is from Bonn (archdiocese of Cologne); cf. Limburg, *Die Hochmeister des Deutschen Ordens*, p. 110. The brothers from Prussia insisted that the commander was discriminating against them (i.e. he did not respect the prerogatives they claimed by virtue of their local origin). Moreover, they pointed out that the priests of the order were so overcharged with administrative duties that they could not even celebrate mass at the commandery regularly. Here again, mobility is at stake: claiming that priests of the order should celebrate mass in person (rather than employ vicars) meant, in fact, that they should resign from their offices, since their duties as office-holders required that they be able to travel freely, unbound by regular duties of divine service.
- <sup>17</sup> Limburg, *Die Hochmeister des Deutschen Ordens*, pp. 126–57.