

Secondary Publication



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Date of secondary publication: 03.11.2023

Accepted Manuscript (Postprint), Conferenceobject

Persistent identifier: urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-915634

Primary publication

Eickels, Klaus van (1998): „Knightly hospitallers or crusading knights? : Decisive factors for the spread of the Teutonic Knights in the Rhineland and the Low Countries 1216-1300“. In: Helen Nicholson (Hrsg.), The military orders : Proceedings of the Conference London, 5th-8th September, 1996, 2. Welfare and warfare, Aldershot: Routledge Taylor & Francis, S. 75–80.

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Knightly Hospitallers or Crusading Knights? Decisive Factors for the Spread of the Teutonic Knights in the Rhineland and the Low Countries, 1216–1300

Klaus van Eickels

In the Rhineland, as in other parts of the Empire, the Teutonic Knights did not begin their expansion until about a generation after their Order was first founded as a field hospital during the siege of Acre in 1190. In 1216 they received their first donations at Koblenz and Cologne and by the end of the 1220s they had acquired most of the nuclei from which the bailiwick of Koblenz and its main houses were to emerge later in the century.¹

It is obvious that the years after 1216 were crucial in the rise of the Teutonic Knights to their later position as one of the three great military orders. Although they had already been established as a knightly order in 1198, it was only during this period that they received the decisive papal privileges that granted them equality with the Templars and the Hospitallers of St John.² Within a few years, a wave of donations transformed the hitherto relatively insignificant community into the leading military order in the Empire.

It is therefore by no means unimportant to ask how the Teutonic Knights conceived of themselves during these years and how they were perceived by

¹ This paper is based on my PhD thesis, published as: K. van Eickels, *Die Deutschordensballei Koblenz und ihre wirtschaftliche Entwicklung im Spätmittelalter* QuStDo 52 (Marburg, 1995), pp. 17–35. It therefore focuses mainly on the Rhineland and the southern Low Countries, that is, the bailiwick of Koblenz. The corresponding development in the northern Low Countries has been studied recently by J.A. Mol, 'Vechten of verplegen. Ontstaan en begintijd van het huis en de balije van Utrecht van de Duitse Orde', *Jaarboek Oud Utrecht* (1993), 45–66.

² The papal privileges for the Teutonic Order are most conveniently accessible in *Tabulae ordinis Theutonici ex tabularii regii Berolinensis codici potissimum*, ed. E. Strehlke (Berlin, 1869, repr. Toronto and Jerusalem, 1975), nos 296 ff.; cf. J. Voigt, *Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens in seinen zwölf Balleien in Deutschland* (Berlin, 1857), 1, pp. 352–449; H. Kluger, *Hochmeister Hermann von Salza und Kaiser Friedrich II* (Marburg, 1987), pp. 20–30; van Eickels, pp. 36–40.

their contemporaries and especially by their benefactors. Were they seen as hospitallers of knightly origin or as knights of Christ who, like the Hospitallers of St John, administered hospitals alongside their main task of defending the Holy Land?

In a series of articles published between 1962 and 1969, one of the then leading Rhenish regional historians, Herbert Neu, argued that the early spread of the Teutonic Knights in the Rhineland was primarily fostered by their ability to manage hospitals. This ability was rooted, according to Neu, in their original vocation to serve the sick and especially in their acquaintance with the highly developed culture of Eastern hospitals.³

At first glance this explanation is far from implausible, since most of the early donations the Order received in the Rhineland and in Flanders consisted of hospitals. The main house of the emerging Rhenish bailiwick at Koblenz was probably created in 1216, when the archbishop of Trier conveyed to the Order the dilapidated possessions of a local hospital founded by one of his predecessors.⁴ In the same year, a second commandery was founded at Cologne, where a wealthy citizen, Henry Halverogge, endowed the Order with a hospital he had recently founded.⁵ In 1219 the Order received a hospital at Oudenburg in Flanders⁶ and at least two, probably three, further donations of Flemish hospitals were to follow before 1225.⁷

The number of hospitals transferred to the Order is indeed impressive, all the more so as the other bailiwicks in the Empire also received similar donations in their early years. Yet it would be short-sighted to infer from this observation that the Order owed its early expansion to its reputation as a good administrator of hospitals.

³ H. Neu, *Die Entwicklung des Deutschen Ritterordens im Rheinland. Akademische Festrede aus Anlaß der Rektoratsübergabe in der Pädagogischen Hochschule Köln* (Bonn, 1962); *idem*, 'Die Aufnahme des Deutschen Ordens im Rheinland (mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der ursprünglichen Zielsetzung des Ordens)', in *Acht Jahrhunderte Deutscher Orden (Festschrift M. Tumlér)*, ed. K. Wieser, QuStDO, 1 (Bonn, 1967), pp. 165–74; *idem*, 'Das Rheinland und der Deutsche Orden'; *idem*, *Zur Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens* (Cologne, 1969), pp. 1–26, esp. p. 4.

⁴ *Urkundenbuch der jetzt die preußischen Regierungsbezirke Koblenz und Trier bildenden Territorien*, 1, ed. H. Beyer (Koblenz, 1860), no. 419; 3, ed. L. Eltester and A. Goetz (Koblenz, 1874), no. 53; cf. A. Diederich, *Das Stift St Florin zu Koblenz* (Göttingen, 1967), pp. 204–7; *Regesta Pontificum Romanorum: Germania Pontificia X (Erzbistum Trier)*, ed. E. Boshof (Göttingen, 1992), pp. 350–2; van Eickels, pp. 19–21.

⁵ *Urkundenbuch des Deutschen Ordens*, 2, ed. J.H. Hennes (Mainz, 1861), nos 9–11; cf. W. Peters, 'Zur Gründung des St Katharinen-Hospitals in Köln Anfang des 13. Jahrhunderts', *Jahrbuch des Kölnischen Geschichtsvereins*, 61 (1990), 59–70; van Eickels, pp. 21–4.

⁶ cf. note 12 below.

⁷ In 1221 Beatrix of Massemen endowed the Order with a hospital she had founded herself (*De oorkonden van Pitsenburg*, 1, ed. A. James (Antwerpen, 1991), nos 17 ff.) and in 1225 Arnold of Oudenaarde did the same with a hospital at Velzeke (*ibid.*, no. 54). It was probably during these years that the Order received the hospital at Vilvoorde which it resigned in 1238 (*ibid.*, appendix IV).

In fact, there are several reasons for calling this assumption into question. First of all, the rule of the Order does not give any priority to hospital service. Although the circumstances in which the Order had first emerged did not fall into oblivion, the new knightly Order established in 1198 was given the rule of the Templars, and it was only a supplementary stipulation that, as to the hospitals of the Order, the respective clauses of the rule of the Hospitallers were to be followed. Moreover, these clauses did not undergo any specific modifications. They were taken over unchanged when the Teutonic Knights finally put their statutes into writing in the mid-thirteenth century.⁸ Obviously these clauses did not play a central part in the everyday life of the Order, and thus they escaped the process of gradual adaptation.

Secondly, a medieval hospital must not be mistaken for an institution of efficient social welfare. The founders of hospitals were interested in the efficient administration of their hospital only insofar as it was necessary for the salvation of their own souls. In committing their foundation to the Teutonic Knights they made clear that in their eyes this step promoted their own blessedness. This does not necessarily mean, however, that they thereby wanted to further the functioning of their foundation as a charitable institution for the sick, the poor and wandering pilgrims.

Thirdly, all the donations of hospitals mentioned above coincide with the intense propaganda that accompanied the Fifth Crusade.⁹ The Fourth Lateran Council had promulgated indulgences for those who supported crusaders; these indulgences far exceeded the spiritual benefits a founder of a hospital could hope to gain from the prayers of the poor who were supported by his foundation. It was therefore in the interest of the founder or his successors to convert the hospital into a donation to a military order. The protection which canon law provided for charitable foundations should have made such a procedure impossible. Yet the Teutonic Knights, like the Hospitallers of St John, could argue that their Order as a whole was at least nominally a hospital. They thus escaped the reproach that they were alienating the donated goods of an incorporated hospital if they used them for their activities in the East.

When Archbishop Theoderic of Trier transferred the hospital of St Nicholas at Koblenz to the Teutonic Order in 1216, he did so to the glory of the Virgin Mary, to the support of the Holy Land and to the relief of the poor (*'ad honorem beate virginis et succursum terre sancte et pauperum alimoniam'*).¹⁰ The Teutonic Knights thus received the hospital as a donation designed to further

⁸ *SDO*, pp. 31 ff.; cf. I. Sterns, 'The Statutes of the Teutonic Knights. A Study in Religious Chivalry', PhD thesis (Pennsylvania, 1969), p. 87.

⁹ P. Pixton, 'Die Anwerbung des Heeres Christi. Prediger des Fünften Kreuzzuges in Deutschland', *Deutsches Archiv*, 34 (1978), 166-91; J. Powell, *Anatomy of a Crusade 1213-1221* (Philadelphia, 1986); C. Neuhausen, 'Köln und die Kreuzzüge', *Geschichte in Köln*, 31 (1992), 23-50.

¹⁰ Cf. note 4 above.

their general purposes, which in fact consisted of these three activities. The secular canons of St Florin, who had hitherto administered the hospital, agreed to the transfer, since they retained the main building of the hospital which they needed as a refectory. By giving the goods to the Teutonic Knights, they avoided the obligation to erect a new hospital. The Teutonic Order, meanwhile, by virtue of its status as a hospital, could reorganize these possessions as the basis for a new commandery.

In the same period the preaching of the crusade reached a peak in the Rhineland as in the rest of western Europe. As a result of this intense propaganda Henry Halverogge handed over to the Teutonic Knights the hospital of St Catherine, which he had founded at Cologne.¹¹ He did so not because he was looking for a capable administrator of his foundation, but 'in order to glorify the Virgin Mary and the Holy Cross', as the town council put it in a letter to the papal judges delegate concerned with the matter a few years later. Henry Halverogge thus converted his foundation into a donation to a crusading order, which entitled him to the spiritual benefits such a donation implied. His change of mind must have come about quite suddenly: the town council had just reached a compromise with the canons of St Severin which compensated them for the loss of income from funerals held in the hospital's cemetery.

In a similar way, the gifts of Flemish hospitals can be traced back to crusading propaganda and experience. During the siege of Damietta, Gilles Berthout and his wife made over to the Teutonic Order a chapel and a hospital in their dominion of Oudenburg.¹² In their charter they praise the great expenses the Teutonic Knights incurred in the Holy Land fighting the infidels and supporting the poor; obviously, their donation was aimed at these tasks in the East. Another Flemish noble, Gilbert of Zottegem, who had witnessed the charter of Gilles Berthout, followed his example immediately after his return from the crusade. Moreover, he induced his mother and his feudal overlord to endow the Teutonic Order with hospitals they had founded in the villages of Massemen and Velzeke.¹³

Apparently the legal position of the Teutonic Order as a hospital sufficed to legitimize the conversion of a local hospital into a donation which supported the Order's activities in the Holy Land. Whether such a conversion was considered meritorious, however, was a different question, the answer to which depended largely on the general level of enthusiasm evinced for the idea of crusading. Having reached its peak during the Fifth Crusade, this enthusiasm cooled considerably in the 1230s. As far as the Empire was

¹¹ Cf. note 5 above.

¹² *De oorkonden van Pitsenburg*, 1, nos 9-11; cf. van Eickels, pp. 26, 28 (note 50 ff.) and 229 ff.

¹³ Cf. note 7 above.

concerned, it could not be revived even when the news spread in 1244 that Jerusalem had been lost.

In 1245 Sibert of Dülken and his wife handed over to the Order a hospital they had founded at Neuss three years before.¹⁴ The charter of transfer contains an explicit clause stipulating that none of the hospital's receipts should be passed on to the Order's brethren beyond the sea.¹⁵ Sibert of Dülken and his wife had given their hospital to the Teutonic Knights because they wanted the Order to defend their foundation against the rival claims of their relatives, but they wanted it to function as a local charitable institution. Their expectations were the exact opposite of those of Duke Walram of Limburg in 1221 when he endowed the Order with a hospital at Luxembourg, expressing the hope that the brethren would be able to send a part of its income to the Holy Land.¹⁶

The changed attitude of the general public towards crusading forced the Teutonic Knights to reconsider the importance of hospital service. Clearly they were not considered first-rate hospital administrators; at least they did not receive any further donations of hospitals. Running a charitable institution was a locally visible activity, however, likely to attract the attention of benefactors who might otherwise not find the Order appealing. Even in this instance, however, other motives for endowing the Teutonic Order with donations remained more important or became so (for example parental bonds and, above all, the wish to participate in the spiritual merits that the Order enjoyed thanks to its papal privileges of indulgence). It is therefore not astonishing that the affiliation of lay men and women to the Order became the primary means by which the Teutonic Knights expanded, whereas the hospitals of the Order were maintained on a rather reduced level only.

The Order gave up or closed down its Flemish hospitals after a short time, but it maintained its hospitals at Cologne and Koblenz until the mid-fourteenth century, and even received a few donations for them.¹⁷ At Koblenz the

¹⁴ *Urkundenbuch des Deutschen Ordens*, 2, nos 64, 65, 67; cf. van Eickels, pp. 33–5.

¹⁵ *Urkundenbuch des Deutschen Ordens*, 2, no. 64: '*fratres domus Theutonice de dicte domus proventibus [...] nichil diminuant nec ad usus fratrum transmarinorum concertant*'. For a similar example from Bremen cf. *Bremisches Urkundenbuch*, 1, ed. D.R. Ehmck and W. v. Bippen (Bremen, 1873), no. 225.

¹⁶ Staatsarchiv Ludwigsburg, Germany, Bestand 352, Büschel 117, no. 2: '*[...] attendentes sollercius et considerantes decocius, quod, cum predicta domus minus sufficiens esset pauperibus et fere nichil caritatis inpenderet peregrinis et transeuntibus, quod per fratres Theutonice domus egenis et languentibus ad ipsam domum concurrentibus maiora de cetero sint habenda beneficia et caritatis amplioris gratia conferenda et terre sancte de fructibus eiusdem domus ab ipsis fratribus aliquid sit mittendum*'; photograph in: *Ritter und Priester. Acht Jahrhunderte Deutscher Orden in Nordwesteuropa*, ed. U. Arnold *et al.* (Alden-Biesen, 1992), pp. 62 ff.

¹⁷ van Eickels, pp. 195 ff. (with references): around 1280 the commandery was granted the right to close a path passing in front of the hospital, because the noise disturbed the holy service in the chapel as well as the poor and the sick in the hospital. The following year the commander and the brethren of the house of the Teutonic Order at Koblenz bought a piece of land adjacent to

commandery finally abolished its hospital when it needed space to extend its own buildings in the second half of the fourteenth century. The hospital of St Catherine at Cologne came under the jurisdiction of the town council at about the same time.¹⁸ Again, the altered rank of hospital service seems to be indicative of a more far-reaching change in the Order and its image: in the same period – more precisely after 1371 – donations to the Order ceased abruptly;¹⁹ obviously, the Teutonic Knights were no longer able and willing to compete for alms with other religious houses.

In conclusion, the Teutonic Knights received their early donations as an order of crusaders. They only attached a certain degree of importance to the administration of their hospitals once the general enthusiasm for crusading had cooled down, since local charity only became a factor of some consequence in the stiffening competition between old and new privileged orders at this point. They therefore maintained some of the hospitals received early in the thirteenth century, especially urban ones, until the bailiwicks and commanderies in the Empire finally became institutions which confined themselves to providing a living for their own members.

the hospital and received a donation '*nomine domus sue predictae et infirmorum inibi decumbentium ac nomine subsidii terre sancte*'. Another donation was given to them in 1297 '*in promotionem infirmorum hospitalis domus eiusdem*'. In 1299 the hospital received a rent of 2 marks, a quarter of which was to be used to board the sick in the hospital one day a year. In 1318 the city of Koblenz and the archbishop of Trier endowed the commandery with land needed to enlarge the hospital building. The hospital is last mentioned in 1344 in a letter of indulgence which contains a clause prohibiting that it be advertised outside the chapel and the hospital of the commandery. By the end of the fourteenth century, the Order had built a new wing of the commandery in place of the former hospital.

¹⁸ van Eickels, pp. 196 ff.: the hospital is referred to in donations of 1250 and 1297; it is last mentioned in 1349, when the commandery granted a room in the hospital to a layman affiliated to the Order: Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln, Katharinen D.O., Urk. 1/335. A list of hospitals compiled for the town council of Cologne in 1470 mentions three communal *provisors* for a hospital '*apud sanctam Katharinam*': *Akten zur Geschichte der Verwaltung und Verfassung der Stadt Köln im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert*, ed. W. Stein (Bonn, 1895), 2, p. 476.

¹⁹ van Eickels, pp. 81 ff.