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# The Teutonic Order

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## Abstract

*The German Order, also known as the Teutonic Knights or Deutschritter,<sup>1</sup> was renowned for their vigor, efficiency and idealism, but above all for their "Germanness". After its foundation in the Holy Land at Acre in 1189/90, developments often ran parallel to their colleagues brothers-in-arm and competitors, the Hospitaller Knights of St John and the Knights Templar. In the thirteenth century the Germans formed their own monastic state in an area comprising of Prussia and the old Baltic states. Their "Ordensstaat" was first established during the "Northern Crusades" of 1224. Its peak occurred during the fourteenth century, followed by a massive crisis in 1410. During the Reformation this monastic state was secularized in 1525. The German Order still exists today as a charitable institution in the Netherlands, Italy and Austria.<sup>2</sup>*

*This article is concerned with the development of the German Order, through a review of their history and comparison with other chivalric orders on particular issues.*

## Introduction

In the Holy Land, ever since the First Crusade (1096-1099) had occurred, the presence of hospitaller and military brotherhoods was essential, providing medical care and armed protection for pilgrims. Crusaders would

come and go but these Orders proved to be the standing armies and permanent hospitaller forces of Christendom in the Holy Land.<sup>3</sup> It is in this context remarked that without these Orders the Holy Land would have reverted to the Muslims much sooner.<sup>4</sup>

The German Order was founded towards the end of the twelfth century, much later than the two other larger Orders, the Hospitaller Order of St John and the Knights Templar and could therefore make use of the already existing traditions, life style, organisation and rules. To follow the older examples was especially important to win papal acceptance and privileges.<sup>5</sup>

## HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

### Foundation period at Acre

The East had for a long time regarded the crusades as a mere series of border incidents and it was only under the leadership of Saladin that the East could unite, although briefly, and recapture lost territories.<sup>6</sup> Saladin and his troops had wrested most of the Holy Land but Tyros from the Christian forces in 1187. Especially the disastrous battle at the Horns of Hattin (near Tiberias) resulted on this occasion in the near annihilation of the Hospitallers and the Templars.<sup>7</sup> The West took nearly two years to react to

<sup>1</sup> *Teutonic* relates to Germanic people and languages.

<sup>2</sup> Especially in the still German speaking province of Südtirol (Alto Adige), which belonged until 1918 to Austria, after which it was given as a protectorate of the Völkerbund to Italy. Since 31<sup>st</sup> August 1972 it is part of Italy *de iure*. The special status for the region Trentino-Südtirol since 31<sup>st</sup> August 1972, is published in the Italian state gazette of 20<sup>th</sup> November 1972, no. 301. Cf. Fabio Bortolotti, *Lo stato giuridico dei dipendenti comunali nella regione Trentino-Alto Adige*. Trento, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of the Hospitaller's contribution to the Christian standing army in the Holy Land, see: Buttigieg, G.G., "The Hospitaller component of the standing army of the Latin Kingdom 1099-1292", in Cassar, G. (ed.) *The Order of St John from Jerusalem to Malta, some aspects and considerations*. Malta: Sacra Militia Foundation, 2007. Pp.1-10.

<sup>4</sup> De Vertot, R., *The history of the Knights of Malta*. Malta, Midsea Books, 1989 facsimile of the 1728 edition. Vol.1, Ch.1, p.82. De Vertot here quotes William of Tyre. The Hospitallers and the Templars are mentioned as the surest resource the state could depend on with regard the defence of Acre. Modern researchers like Klaus Militzer, p.9, confirm this view.

<sup>5</sup> Militzer, K., *Die Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens*. Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 2005. P.10.

<sup>6</sup> Saladin (Salah al-Din Yusuf Ibn Ayyub), b. 1138 in Tikrit (present Iraq), d. 1193 in Damascus (present Syria). One of the most renowned Muslim military heroes and founder of the Ayyubid dynasty.

<sup>7</sup> Sire, H.J.A., *The Knights of Malta*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996. Pp.11; Jones, T. and Ereira, A., *Crusades*. London: Penguin 1996. Pp.122-123.

this and organise itself. The kings of England and France, Richard Coeur-de-Lion and Philippe Auguste, willing to settle their differences for the time being, initiated a movement which would eventually result in the Third Crusade (1189-1192). Simultaneously, Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa of Germany also rallied support in his dominions for the same cause. On a large European scale troops were gathered and funds raised for the support of the Christians in the Holy Land.<sup>8</sup> During the year 1189 troops arrived both on board ships via Sicily, Genoa and Pisa and via land from Germany, the latter arrival mainly containing men from Denmark, France, Germany and a party of Frisians.

In August of year 1189 these crusaders, joined under the command of King Guido of Jerusalem, had taken to the road. Their first aim was the important city of Acre, heavily guarded by Saladin's men. King Guido had grossly overestimated the number of soldiers to arrive and he started off the siege with far too few men.<sup>9</sup> He did however succeed in raising a blockade of the city, with ensuing disastrous results within and outside the city. While the city lacked supply of all necessities, the besiegers had lost a large number of their leading members through accidents, disputes, lack of hygiene, water and food. But above all, the heat, wounds and diseases caused many fatalities on both sides. Although sources are silent on the existence of a field hospital in the vicinity of Acre, it may be presumed that the care of the sick and wounded from the side of the besiegers was catered for by the Hospitaller Order of St John.

A romantic and heroic version of the origins of the German Order is found in the writings of René de Vertot, historian of the Order of St John, who describes the siege at Acre in 1189:<sup>10</sup>

*“To make the misfortune still greater, the wounded soldiers of the Germans, whose language was not understood, laboured under great difficulties, not being able in so melancholy a situation, to make either their ails or their wants known. Some German gentlemen of the towns of Bremen and Lübeck that had arrived by sea, moved with the misery of their countrymen, took the sails of their ship and made a large tent in which they put immediately the wounded of their acquaintance and attended them with great charity. Forty persons of quality of the same nation joined themselves to them and formed a sort of hospital in the camp. This noble and charitable society, like the knights of St. John and the Templars became insensibly a new hospital and military order.”*

That those crusaders from Bremen and Lübeck, having arrived either in the winter of 1189 or in spring of 1190, indeed took almost spontaneously the initiative at the seashore near the St Nicholas gate at Acre, is confirmed by modern research.<sup>11</sup>

## Origins of the other Orders

The Hospitallers fitted into the tradition of medical assistance and humanitarian care for Christian pilgrims. A pilgrimage to the Holy Land required a long travel and much endurance, in order to satisfy the penitential requirements. From ancient times onwards, pilgrimages had taken people to places where gods, heroes or saints were born or had died, were martyred or had created miracles, healed people or otherwise wrought great deeds.<sup>12</sup> Given the basic nature of medical science in the Western medieval world, it is no wonder that the metaphysical aspect played a crucial element in health care. Along the routes to and in popular pilgrimages sites, such as Santiago de Compostela, pious laymen and

<sup>8</sup> De Vertot, Vol.I, Ch.I, p.90. In order to raise funds a “Saladin Tythe” was introduced.

<sup>9</sup> Jones and Ereira. Pp.132.ff, state that Barbarossa's army was probably the largest crusading army ever to leave Europe, disciplined, organized and well-equipped. The mere news of its size multiplied Saladin's diplomatic efforts to form an Islamic alliance to withstand such an invincible force. Although successfully defeating Turks in Armenia, thirst, hunger, heat and diseases decimated the army from the West. One of their most important leaders, Emperor Barbarossa himself, drowned in the valley of Göksu, in marshes of the river Seleucia. In October 1189 his son Frederick of Swabia arrived at Acre with what was left of the army.

<sup>10</sup> De Vertot, Vol. I, p.96. The work of many chroniclers needs to be treated with care regarding truth and accuracy.

<sup>11</sup> Seward, D., *The monks of war; the military religious orders*. London: Penguin, 1995. p.95 and Miltzer, pp.12.f.

<sup>12</sup> See Aldhouse Green, M., for an account on pilgrimage. *British Archaeology*, Issue no 52, April 2000, (Simon Denison, ed.) <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/BA/ba52/ba52feat.html>: Christian martyrs had the power while dying their martyr's death of absolving from ecclesiastical penalties. After their deaths, their very graves and the places where their martyrdom occurred were also thought to have this great power. Consequently, once a *theophany* is located, it attracts pilgrims. Visiting the tombs of saints and martyrs, and above all those places which Christ himself had visited, became an act of purification of sin and to express devotion. To arrive at the far away destination involved hardship, and both the journey and destination emphasised on mortification of the flesh and spiritual healing.

monks had established pilgrims' hospices. Such a system of hospices existed also in the Holy Land and Jerusalem since the early seventh century, welcoming and sheltering pilgrims.<sup>13</sup> Other periodic foundations of hospices in Jerusalem occurred in the following centuries, but none of these hospices were in continuous existence until the foundation of a pilgrim's hospice in the Benedictine abbey *Sancta Maria ad Latinos* in the second half of the eleventh century. The abbey was built in the proximity of the Holy Sepulchre and although the hospice's origins remain obscure, possibly as early as the 1180s a certain Gerard was around, the man who in the later papal bulls is mentioned as the *institutor* of the later Hospitaller Order of St John.<sup>14</sup>

Not very far away from the Holy Sepulchre stood the Temple of Solomon, the site where a company of knights had received lodging from King Baldwin II, a company that later would be known as the Knights Templar.<sup>15</sup> Although the general disposition of Muslim rulers toward Christian pilgrims was one of tolerance and consent, the consequence of shifted political and military power was that the roads leading to the Holy Land became notorious for gangs of Saracens and Seljuk Turks.<sup>16</sup> In 1119 the leader of that company of knights, Hugues de Payens, related to the counts of Champagne, was in the Holy Land purportedly for the remission of his sins.<sup>17</sup> Since these men were of the fighting class, their training in arms suggests that their understanding of protecting pilgrims was preferably exercised by the power of their swords rather than hospitaller care, as this niche was already catered for by the hospice movement of Gerard.

### Recognition

The organization of the Hospitaller movement and its leading figure, the Blessed Gerard, achieved papal

privileges and protection after at least 30 years of service and networking, demonstrating a large support from the



Shield of a knight of the German Order, c.1350

<sup>13</sup> Hiestand, R, "Die Anfänge der Johanniter" in *Die Geistlichen Ritterorden Europas*, Fleckenstein, J. and Helleman, M., (eds.). Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1980. Pp.31-80. The first mention of a Latin hospice in Jerusalem is found in a letter by Pope Gregory the Great of 603. Wiestand quotes as source *Gregorii I Papae Registrum XIII 28, MGH Epp.II 393* and *Johannes Diaconus, Vitae Gregorii I III 2, ii, ed. AA SS 12 May, II 150*. Independently, the pilgrim Bernardus Monachus mentions the same hospital when he visited Jerusalem in 870.

<sup>14</sup> Archives.O(f).M(alta) 6, no.1; Nicholson, H., *The Knights Hospitaller*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007. Pp.3-4.

<sup>15</sup> William of Tyre, *Historia Rerum In Partibus Transmarinis Gestarum*, book 12, chapter 7.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholson, pp.1-2. The areas over which the land route ran from Europe to the Holy Land were formerly controlled by the Byzantines. In 638 Jerusalem became a Muslim area. The Seljuk Turks continued to march to the west, wresting lands from Byzantium. Anatolia became Turkish territory after the Battle of Manzikert in 1071.

<sup>17</sup> Barber, M., *The New Knighthood: A History of the Order of the Temple*. Cambridge University Press: 2007. Pp.4-5.

side of the Holy See for Gerard's hospice movement.<sup>18</sup> For the Knights Templar it would take about ten years of patrolling and fighting on the road to gain some form of recognition. Hugues de Payens made a tour through Europe, successfully rallying support and receiving donations. In January 1129, at the occasion of the Council of Troyes, papal recognition for the Templars was secured.<sup>19</sup> A number of papal bulls followed, conferring privileges onto the Templars identical to those of the Hospitallers.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, the Germans established a hospital and achieved recognition almost overnight. The Germans from Bremen and Lübeck acted instantly, driven by compassion for their compatriots and the realisation of the language barrier. The latter fact has undoubtedly played a role in the decision that in later times the German Order remained almost exclusively German, while the Hospitallers and the Templars were international organisations. In those days of Acre, the Germans kept to themselves and did not adopt the style and organisation of the Hospitallers, since they organised the field hospital according to German practices at home.<sup>21</sup>

When the Germans spontaneously decided to save and take care of their fellow countrymen, they had not in

mind to form a new company of knights in the Outremer. They also did not continue the tradition of the Hospital of St Mary of the Germans (*Hospitale Sancte Marie Theutonicorum Jerosolimitanum*), founded in Jerusalem in 1127.<sup>22</sup> But once they had realised their potential, they went forth in good old German fashion. King Guido promised the German hospital a permanent site in Acre, the former hospital of the Armenians, even before Acre had reverted to his power.<sup>23</sup> By the summer of 1190 the new institution had a master, named Sibrand, of which we know little or nothing. As early as 1190 Frederick of Swabia had recognised the German hospital and pledged his support. The principal patron-saint of the German hospital became the Virgin Mary and also the city of Acre found a place in their name: *fratres hospitalis S. Mariae Theutonicorum in Accon* (*the hospitaller brothers of Saint Mary of the Teutons in Acre*).<sup>24</sup>

Just within a year of the founding date of the German Order, Pope Clement III produced a bull *Quotiens postulatur* of 6<sup>th</sup> February 1191 and bestowed privileges and protection on the new institution, now named as the *fratrum Theutonicorum ecclesiae S. Mariae Hierosolymitanae*. Within the span of a few years the German hospital developed as a religio-military institution, at par with the Hospitallers and Templars. But the Hospitallers also received privileges, which went

<sup>18</sup> Hiestand p.40. Gerard had sent a number of petitions to Pope Paschal II for protection, patronage and financial freedom, in reaction to Paschal II's confirmation of the possessions of *Sancta Maria ad Latinos* of July 1112. On 15<sup>th</sup> February 1113 Pope Paschal II issued a papal bull *Pie postulatio voluntatis* in which he confirmed that his *xenodocheum*, the hospital for pilgrims, would enjoy the support and guardianship of the Holy See and the protection of the Blessed Peter. (cf. A.O.M. 6, no.1) This bull did not create an order, it merely recognised the hospital and offered it papal privileges. Religio-military orders were not exactly defined before the thirteenth century.

<sup>19</sup> Ralls, K., *Knights Templar Encyclopedia*. Franklin Lakes: Career Press, 2007. P.55. St Bernard of Clairvaux was instrumental in this. In 1136 he would compose the rule of the Templars, *Regula Pauperum Commilitonum Christi et Templi Salomonis*. He would also defend the brotherhood against its critics and contribute to its growth, especially through his thesis *Liber ad milites Templi: De laude novae militiae* (In Praise of the New Knighthood) in which he justifies the importance of this new monastic form of military brotherhood.

<sup>20</sup> In his bull *Omne Datum Optimum* on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1139 Pope Innocent II released the Templars from all temporal and ecclesiastical authority, as in the fashion of previous bulls pertaining to the Hospitallers, and made the Templars officially a monastic order under the protection of Church. The papal bull of 15<sup>th</sup> June 1163, *Magnus Ordo in Ecclesia*, conferred more privileges upon the Templars.

<sup>21</sup> Militzer, p.13.

<sup>22</sup> Seward, p.95.

<sup>23</sup> Militzer, pp.13ff.

<sup>24</sup> These German Hospitallers later added a second patron, St Elizabeth of Hungary, after her canonization in 1235. Akin to other chivalric Orders, they also venerated St George, the patron-saint of chivalry and knighthood. See also the article on Papal Orders by Guy Stair Sainty at: <http://www.chivalricorders.org/vatican/teutonic.htm>



*St Elizabeth of Hungary, the second patron-saint of the German Order. Ceiling fresco at the church of the former commandery of Beuggen, Germany.*

against the interest of the German hospital. After the capture of Acre on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1191 the German hospital had to yield its autonomy over the Armenian hospital, because the Hospitallers had been given that privilege. Nonetheless, this temporary setback could not deter the Germans and their organisation continued its growth by acquiring properties in and around Acre. The language barrier and their distinct cultural differences were also instrumental in acquiring independence. Protection from the Emperor and German rulers was also greatly contributing towards the realisation of this goal. Imperial grants came from Otto IV and Frederick II, not only

offering protection, but also assuming that the German Order did not depend on the Hospitallers.<sup>25</sup> It would take however another century and a half before the Vatican acknowledged the independence of the German Order from the Hospitallers.

Remains the question why the German hospital was recognized so quickly. Answer probably lies in the fact the Hospitallers and the Templars had gone through various development phases prior to the arrival of the Germans in the Holy Land. People had been slowly accustomed to the new life styles which religio-military brotherhoods

<sup>25</sup> On 10<sup>th</sup> May 1213 and 5<sup>th</sup> September 1214 respectively (Cf. Guy Sainty *supra*). In 1258 the Hospitallers still maintained their claim of superiority of the German Order.

represented. By the end of the twelfth century the Hospitallers and Templars were recognized as true independent Orders and broadly accepted as a new life style within the Church and society. When the Germans came to the scene, the life-style in such an independent order was already accepted as a merit on its own; both their foundation and royal and papal recognition could not have been established so swift without the previous developments. By 1198 the Germans had established a religio-military order in the true sense of the word. The opportunity of justified war as a religious service was introduced by the Templars, whose ultimate justification for fighting and dying for the Lord was mostly inspired by St Bernard of Clairvaux. The saint himself says, when referring to the Templars, that “the order is a new kind of knighthood, unknown in the past.”<sup>26</sup> In this respect, the Hospitallers added fighting to their package, while the German crusaders added nursing.

### The monastic rules

No monastic order could in the medieval period survive without a rule or statutes. These rules normally regulated rights, duties, responsibilities and sanctions. In

most orders, the members would vow to live according to the Evangelical Counsels,<sup>27</sup> and included the well known vows of chastity, obedience and poverty. Within the given context of religious orders there is often a distinction possible between what was practiced *de facto* and what was required *de jure*.<sup>28</sup>

The German Rule, named “Die Regel”, was based on rules from existing orders in the Holy Land, but it is quite impossible to reconstruct the first rule in place in 1198, since there are no written copies available.<sup>29</sup> As with the other two Orders, the German Rule was adapted and changed frequently to keep up with reality. The oldest reliable source for an own German Rule is datable to 1244, in which year the Master, Gerhard von Malberg, requests Pope Innocent IV to approve some changes to the Rule. The oldest available manuscript stems from 1264 and this rule shows that there is a great resemblance with the Dominican rule of those days, but also has traces of Benedictine, Augustinian and Franciscan rules, as well as from the *Carta Caritatis* of the Cistercians.<sup>30</sup> There is a possibility that the Germans did not go through all those rules themselves to figure out what was

<sup>26</sup> St Bernard of Clairvaux, pioneer in gaining recognition for new knighthood and orders: “This is, I say, a new kind of knighthood and one unknown to the ages gone by. It ceaselessly wages a twofold war both against flesh and blood and against a spiritual army of evil in the heavens. When someone strongly resists a foe in the flesh, relying solely on the strength of the flesh, I would hardly remark it, since this is common enough. And when war is waged by spiritual strength against vices or demons, this, too, is nothing remarkable, praiseworthy as it is, for the world is full of monks. But when the one sees a man powerfully girding himself with both swords and nobly marking his belt, who would not consider it worthy of all wonder, the more so since it has been hitherto unknown? He is truly a fearless knight and secure on every side, for his soul is protected by the armor of faith just as his body is protected by armor of steel. He is thus doubly armed and need fear neither demons nor men. Not that he fears death—no, he desires it. Why should he fear to live or fear to die when for him to live is Christ, and to die is gain? Gladly and faithfully he stands for Christ, but he would prefer to be dissolved and to be with Christ, by far the better thing”. Translation by Conrad Greenia, at <http://www.the-orb.net/encyclop/religion/monastic/bernard.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Also known as the Counsels of Perfection. In the Catholic faith, as opposed to the Protestant faith, besides the *Decalogue*, or the Ten Commandments, there were other counsels for those who wanted to do more than the minimum. These counsels were meant for those aiming for Christian Perfection. Cf. *Mt.*, xix, 16 sq., *Luc*, xvii, 10, *I Cor.*, vii.

<sup>28</sup> Chastity here means that contact with women should be avoided. If it is unavoidable, the members should ensure their modesty. Should they nonetheless fall into fornication, they should confess, be discreet and do penance. Should it become public knowledge, severe punishment shall follow. Chastity, seen in the Augustinian light, is a virtue of the mind which can be lost by the intention of the sin, and not necessarily by its performance. In this view, sin comes from the soul, not from the flesh. Obedience here means to do everything their Master ordered them to do, as an instrument for sanctification. Poverty here means that the members should live without any personal properties. Poverty is not a requirement for the organisation itself. Only by accumulating wealth and using it well it can achieve what it set out to do. Of the three vows, obedience was strictly adhered to, although all three orders have known times were moral and discipline were low.

<sup>29</sup> Hochmeister Heinrich von Walpot (d. 1200) drew up the Order’s statutes of 1199, approved by Pope Innocent III in his bull *Sacrosancta romana* of 19<sup>th</sup> February of the same year.

<sup>30</sup> Vess, D. The *Carta Caritatis* dictated that Cistercian monks should establish their monasteries in “places far from where men associate” and lead a simple life without luxuries. <http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~dvess/ids/medieval/cist.html#intro>

best for them, but that there was already a pool of rules available from the other Orders. The official German Rule was composed in Latin, but because of the language issue, soon versions in German (*i.e.* Middle German and *Niederdeutsch*), Dutch and French appeared.<sup>31</sup> The three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are also here a *sine qua non*. Since the brothers lived in celibacy, they had no wife or legitimate offspring for whom they had to take care of. Celibacy gave the brothers the opportunity to dedicate their whole life to the work of the Order and it protected the Order against any claims of inheritance. Vows of Poverty and Obedience strengthened this structure and the Rule described exactly how much money a brother could possess and how much he could spend on particular occasions.

From their choice of clothing, the German Order landed into direct conflict with the Templars, since the Templars claimed that the German attire was not much different than their own. Over a white robe with a black cross, the Germans would wear a blue mantle charged with a black cross pattée (instead of a red cross for the Templars). The new German "Hochmeister" (Grand Master) in 1211, Hermann von Salza, had complained about the Templars because the latter wanted to prevent the Germans from wearing that particular outfit. The Hochmeister had to give in to the demands of the Templars until Emperor Frederick II forced the issue with the Papacy in 1218, after which the German knights could return to their original design of clothing.<sup>32</sup> The serving brothers (sergeants or *Graumäntler*) wore a grey mantle, charged with only three branches of the black cross pattée, indicating their lesser status within the Teutonic Order. As was the case with the Templars, also the German Order had no real unity in the design or size of the cross pattée; a plain straight black cross on white background could also be found on their white robes.

The German or Teutonic cross, either pattée or straight, was kept in use, even long after the military role of the German Order had ceased. The German "Iron Cross", *das Eiserne Kreuz* is a German war decoration, first established by the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm III on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1813, in the context of the liberation

wars against Napoleon Bonaparte. From this time onwards various shapes have been designed, even during WWII. Shape and size were intentionally based on the black cross pattée of the Teutonic Order. The metal iron, used for this war decoration, is typically for the Prussian mentality of the time, iron men get iron medals. But iron was not a symbol for strong men alone, it was also a symbol of weak state finance. In order to finance the war against Napoleon Bonaparte the Prussian state demanded from the civilian population to exchange their gold for iron, under the motto "gold for the war, iron for honour", a popular saying in March 1813 being "*Gold gab ich für Eisen!*" (I gave gold for iron). In WWII the Iron Cross was "embellished" with the Swastika. The straight Iron Cross is presently the symbol of the German air force. The Prussian state has inspired also modern leaders to exchange gold for iron. Legendary are the black and white film footage in Mussolini's Italy, were people are walking along a large pot, throwing in their golden wedding rings in order to receive iron wedding rings with compliments of the Italian state, under the motto "*Oro alla Patria*" (gold for the fatherland).



*The Iron Cross*

<sup>31</sup> Miltzer, pp.15ff.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.



## Growth and development in the Holy Land

The German Order increased its wealth in a similar way to the Hospitallers and Templars, organising its income through landed properties, tithes and produce, while continually searching for grants, monetary donations and land. Income was complimented with corsairing, trade, financing and money-lending activities. Nobles in gratitude of protection, treatment or cure, enriched the fraternities with landed possessions in Europe and had their younger sons enlisted.

In the wake of the Third Crusade, many German Knights and pilgrims took the road to the Holy Land, adding to the wealth of the German Order. New recruits, driven by the chivalric ideals of the time, flocked in large numbers to the new Germans “only” hospital.

Especially through the politics of Emperor Frederick II, the *stupor mundi*, the German Order gained much power and wealth and the Hochmeister of the German Order also obtained important titles. The Emperor granted the Hochmeister the rank of Prince and membership of the Imperial Court.<sup>33</sup> Later Emperors, notably in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, bestowed a number of German Knights of the Order of St John also with the title of Prince of the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>34</sup>

The choice for power and wealth was a political one, since Emperor Frederick II offered to be a father figure for the German Order. He simply pointed out that up till now the Order was just a regionally limited organization, while the other two Orders had a much broader European basis. If they wanted to acquire truly great power, wealth and land, they had to be part of his empire.

The fourth Hochmeister, Hermann von Salza, (1209-1239), was instrumental in enlarging the Order and plotting its course both in the Holy Land and in eastern Europe, by taking up the offer of Frederick II. He also was instrumental in maintaining his Order as a nearly exclusive German affair. His imperial ties also put him in an uncomfortable position, necessitating careful manoeuvring between Emperor and Pope, still bound to the latter on behalf of his vows and granted privileges.

Von Salza's relative success in Latin Christendom was marked by a number of events, being able to advance his Order when Emperor Frederick II, through a diplomatic effort, reached a compromise for the duration of ten years with the Egyptian Sultan al-Kamil regarding Jerusalem and the Holy Land in 1229. Jerusalem at that time was a largely indefensible city without walls and decreased importance for the Arab world.<sup>35</sup> Frederick brought Jerusalem back to Christendom and a strip of land giving access to Jaffa on the coast, Nazareth, western Galilee, Montfort, Toron and the lands in and around Sidon. The German Order was rewarded with the barony of Toron and the seigneurie of Joscelin. The stronghold of Montfort became a second headquarter of the German Order and protected the small strip of land leading from Jerusalem to the Mediterranean.<sup>36</sup> Once Jerusalem was secured, Frederick II granted the German Order the possession of the old German Marian hospital and the old residence of King Baldwin in Jerusalem. This gave the Order the fulfillment of an ideal, at last to have possessions in the Holy City, the destination of so many pilgrims and crusaders, and be part of its defence and destiny. Moreover, von Salza felt that he was finally at par with his two great rivals, the Hospitallers and the Templars. His political manoeuvring in the end

<sup>33</sup> Imperial act of 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1214.

<sup>34</sup> Munro, D., *Memento Mori, a companion to the most beautiful floor in the world*. Malta: MJ Publications, 2005. Vols I & II. Vol I, p.55: The inscribed text of the tombstones of Franz Christoph Sebastian von Remchingen reads that he was a *SACRI ROMANI IMPERII PRINCEPS*; the tombstone of Philipp Wilhelm von Nesselrode, p.160, reveals the same title.

<sup>35</sup> Norwich, J.J., *The Middle Sea, a history of the Mediterranean*. London: Vintage books, 2007. P.166f. Jerusalem was used as leverage because al-Kamil knew that this city was so extremely important for the Christians; for the Muslims it had little value at all. Montgomery Watt, W., *The influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*. Edinburgh: University Press, 1972, states that the importance of the crusades was enormous for the West and insignificant to the Arab world. The vast Muslim world regarded the crusades as mere border incidents, hardly worthy of mention, since it concerned only a few cities along a very narrow strip of Mediterranean coast. The only importance the Muslims gave to the crusades was that it opened up their markets with the merchants from Pisa, Genoa and Venice. The great Arab scholar and historian Ibn Khaldūn, who finished his “Introduction to History” in 1377/78, does not even mention the crusades, or any Christian religio-military order for that matter.

<sup>36</sup> Militzer, p.25.

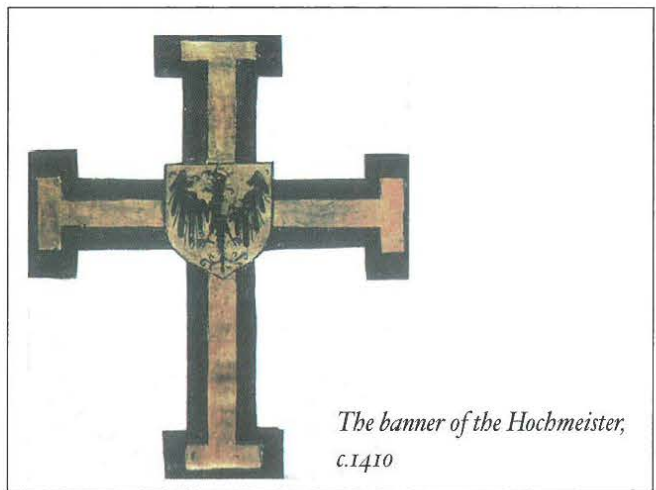
compromised the Order's position with the Pope. Von Salza had supported the German Emperor against the express wishes of His Holiness, since Gregory IX had forbidden Frederick II to go on with his plans to free Jerusalem. The Hospitallers did not recognize Frederick's treaty with al-Kamil because it was achieved without the permission of the Pope and the deal did not offer any protection should the Muslims turn hostile again after the ten year truce of the treaty expired.<sup>37</sup> The Templars especially felt grieved because their official possession of the Temple Mount was not confirmed, even worse, it had been reverted to the Muslims. Von Salza's loyalty to the Emperor also clouded the relationships with the two other Orders, as at a certain point in time Frederick II was triple ex-communicate.<sup>38</sup> The general opinion of the Vatican and the other Orders was that the German Order had become a "house order" of the Emperor.

At the death of Hermann von Salza on 20<sup>th</sup> March 1239, the German Order had properties in Bavaria, France, Franconia, Greece, Hesse, the Netherlands, Prague, Prussia, Romania, Saxony, Sicily, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland and Vienna. With imperial support Hermann von Salza had enlarged the territories for his German Order in the Holy Land, the Baltic region and eastern Europe, but on the other hand he had seriously narrowed his options for internal growth of his order. The previous advantage of "for Germans only" now also turned into a disadvantage. They lost the ability to tap funds and recruits from the much larger pool of European aristocracy and Christendom, essentially the strongest points of the Hospitallers and the Templars.<sup>39</sup>

### **Drang nach Osten: The German *Ordensstaat* in eastern Europe**

Successors to Hermann von Salza remained on friendly terms with the Empire, possibly causing the issue of the bull *Dilecti filii* of 12<sup>th</sup> January 1240 by Pope Gregory IX in which

the subordination of the German Order to the Hospitallers of St John was further confirmed. Nevertheless, Gerhard von Malberg, Hochmeister between 1240 and 1244, was more in favour of reconciliation with the Papacy and this somehow improved the relationship, although the German Order had become divided on the matter of either Imperial or Papal loyalty. This situation solved itself after the death of Frederick II in 1250, returning the German Order to the papal fold for the foreseeable future. The division in the German Order was not just about choosing sides, it was also about survival and growth. Expansion in the Holy Land remained a primary goal, but there was a lot of competition within the crusader world and religious-military orders and certainly not the only place in the world where pagans lived.<sup>40</sup> The German Order had to look to eastern Europe for expansion, having already acquired estates in Livonia, Prussia and the Baltic area. Gradually the idea was developing of crusading and colonizing eastern Europe, its vast wilderness inhabited by heathens, pagans and savages. This idea was not an original idea as St Bernard had already suggested something likewise. In 1147 he had already called for all Germans to crusade against the Wends, a tribe of Slavs which had invaded in the 6<sup>th</sup> century lands between the Baltic Sea and the Elbe river.<sup>41</sup>



*The banner of the Hochmeister,  
c.1140*

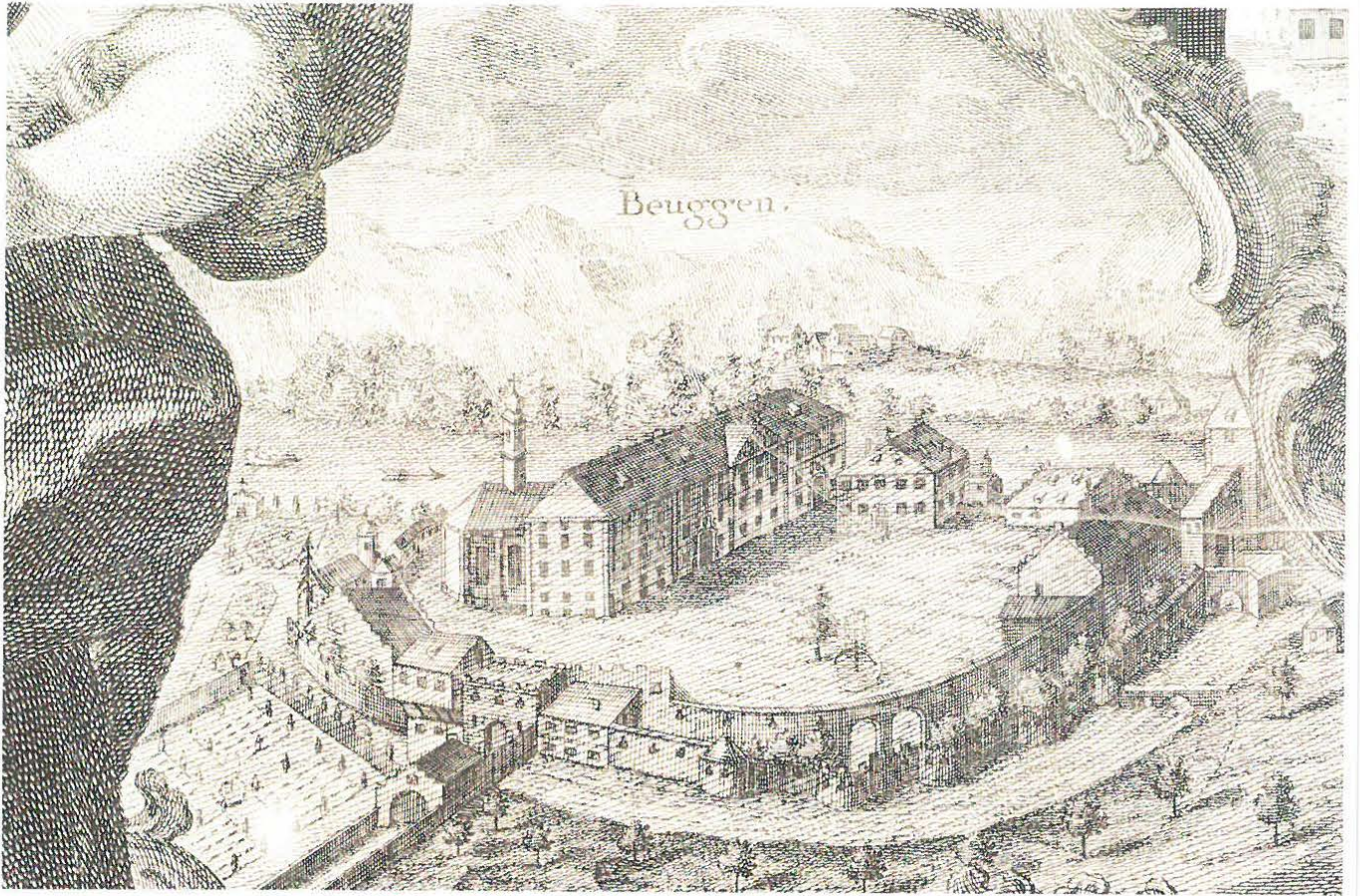
<sup>37</sup> Sire, p.14.

<sup>38</sup> Norwich, pp.160ff. Gregory IX excommunicated Frederick II on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1227, 23<sup>rd</sup> March and 30<sup>th</sup> August 1228.

<sup>39</sup> Miltzer, p.26.

<sup>40</sup> Sire, p.13. The three orders had continuous conflicts with each other over rights, duties and politics. Disputes at times ensued in violent clashes and civil wars. However, by 1258 the Hospitallers and the Templars made peace and were on friendly terms until their last days in the Holy Land.

<sup>41</sup> Seward, p.98. Albert the Bear (c.1100-1170) was instrumental in this Wendish Crusade, bringing down with violence and diplomacy the Slavic Wends and encouraging German migrants to settle in these regions formerly ruled by the Wends. Albert the Bear, the Margrave of Brandenburg, also founded in 1160 the receptory of Werben on behalf of the Hospitallers, not of the German Order.



*Engraving showing a commandery of the German Order.*

Culturally, the pagans of eastern Europe were much less advanced than the Muslims, although militarily they were impressive and up to today the military reputation of the Prussians still holds. The overall idea was to hold crusading campaigns in eastern Europe, both for the sake of conversion to Christianity and colonisation with Germans. One of the main issues would be to open the territories and make them safe for missionaries, merchants and migrants. Other important goals were to halt the pagan pirates and highway men. Finally, there had been persistent reports of infanticide, polygamy, worship of idols, human sacrifice and the honouring of the spirits of the dead. The Christian duty to protect the weak and innocent may stop that too.<sup>42</sup>

The first German foothold in eastern Europe was offered to the German Order by King Andrew of Hungary in 1211. If the Germans were willing to patrol the Transylvanian border against the Cuman tribes he could offer them some form of autonomy over the conquered areas.<sup>43</sup> An additional condition was that the Cumans had to convert to Christianity.<sup>44</sup> After the German Order had Christianized and pacified the region, they brought over many German migrants to settle down on their new pastures. King Andrew, feeling threatened by such an enormous military power and so many newcomers, decided to expel the Order from Hungary in 1225, just a few years after he and Hermann von Salza had fought together at the Battle of Damietta. This uneasy feeling of

<sup>42</sup> See William L. Urban at: <http://department.monm.edu/history/urban/articles/VictimsBalticCrusade.htm>

<sup>43</sup> Seward, p.65.

<sup>44</sup> The Turkish tribe of the Cumans (also known as Kypchaks, Kipchaks, Qipchaq, Qibchaq-i or Qipcaq), originated from a Siberian tribe of Kimak Turks, near the river Irtysh. They spoke proto-Kyptchakian. Their name means "light-skinned steppe dweller". When they started wandering they became known as the Cumans, from near the river Cuman in the Caucasus area. They supported king Rudolf I of Habsburg against the Bohemian king Ottokar II in their struggle over the German Crown. Due to their bravery they became "honorary Germans". The majority of the Cumans integrated into the Hungarian realm, although this process was only completed during the eighteenth century.

a formidable power within one's territory was probably also the reason why the Hospitallers were unable to gain a new basis within mainland Europe after the loss of Rhodes in 1522. Fear for claims of independence and consequent loss of territory to a military order caused the allies of the Hospitallers to be prudent. The same fears, now mixed with greed, were also the cause of the downfall of the Templars, organized by Philippe le Bel in view of the enormous power of the Templars within France.

The next chance in carving their European territory came in 1217 when Pope Honorius III decided to organize a crusade against the pagans living in Prussia. Duke Konrad of Masovia had asked the Pope's assistance to get rid of some barbarians which had raided his territories. In 1225 the situation had become desperate and he turned to the German Order for succor. In return the German Order wanted the landed possessions of Kulm and Dobrzyń and, moreover, any lands captured by the Order in Prussia would remain their property. They could make this condition because Emperor Frederick II had granted the German Order the "princely" rank, giving the Order sovereignty over any territory captured as a fief of the Empire.<sup>45</sup>

Since 1224, during the Northern Crusades (or Baltic Crusades), the German Knights had co-operated with the Catholic kings from Sweden and Denmark in order to subdue the pagans in the Baltic area and north-eastern Europe. During these military actions the territories of the Finns, Livonians and the Prussians were conquered, Christianized and colonized. It is in this period that the German Order first established their own polity, the *Ordensstaat* or *Ordensland*, i.e. an armed monastic order with own territory, led by a sovereign Hochmeister. The idea of crusades throughout eastern Europe would prove to be the survival of the German Order. Their *raison*



*The Battle of the Tree Fortress (Baumburg). A battle between the German Order and the Prussians. Oil on canvas, 1231 by Hermann Balk.*

d'être had become the Christianisation of the eastern European territories, *die Wiltnisse* (the wilderness). Some assistance from the Holy See came in the form of privileges, when it was confirmed that all the papal privileges they had received in the Holy Land were also valid when crusading in eastern Europe, i.e. the crusades against the heathens in eastern Europe was deemed of equal importance to the crusades in the Holy Land.<sup>46</sup> Even the indulgences for the participants were placed on the same footing. This "Northern Crusade" could however not reach everywhere, leaving Russia and Lithuania largely unconquered during this period.<sup>47</sup>

The German Order enlarged their territories also through purchasing German receptories on the Baltic

<sup>45</sup> In the "Golden Bull" of Rimini, 1226.

<sup>46</sup> Militzer, p.95.

<sup>47</sup> Koenigsberger, H.G., *Medieval Europe 400 - 1600*. New York: Longman, 1987. Pp.267-8. The German Order played a lesser role in the defense of their borders against the threats of the Mongols in eastern Europe between 1237 and 1241. A lesser role indeed, since one of their largest armies was utterly destroyed by the Mongols in 1241, near Liegnitz in Silesia. The German Order, although willing to take up the challenge against the Mongols, was frequently frustrated in its intention due to uprisings at home by Prussians, Lithuanians and Russians. The Russians were not united at all and some of the Russian princes co-operated with the Mongols to be able to fend off other invaders. Their prince of Novgorod, Alexander Nevsky in 1242 crushed another army of the German Knights on ice of the frozen Lake Peipus.

coast from the Hospitallers and also exchanged estates within them to patch blank spots in their territories.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the German Order acquired power and land by absorbing smaller orders of chivalry. In 1237 the Knights of the Sword, *Milites Christi de Livonia*, active in Livonia and Estonia, sought integration with the German Order after they had lost about a third of their men against the Lithuanians at the Battle of Siauliai (Sauler) on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1236.<sup>49</sup> The leader of the Knights of the Sword became thenceforth the provincial Master of Livonia for the German Order.<sup>50</sup> Two years before another, smaller order, the Order of Dobrzyń, had sought incorporation into the German Order too.<sup>51</sup>

The rule under the Hochmeisters Popon von Osterna (1253-1262) and Hartmann von Heldrungen (1262-1283), securely established the German Order in Prussia and the Baltic area of Livonia (modern Latvia and Estonia), making it truly Teutonic, converting the larger part of the pagan population to Christianity over time. The natives initially resisted the German newcomers ferociously, even those tribes which would later become their allies. However, the Livs, the Letts, the Semgallians and the Kurs soon realized that working closely with the Order would be beneficial, especially in defense against their natural enemies, the Russians and the Lithuanians. The German Order set out on a policy of divide and rule until the whole territory was under their control. When certain Livonians did not comply, the Order resettled these tribal people in an easier to control area and the vacant land was filled up by German, Polish and Pomeranian immigrants.

One of the reasons for revolt was that the German Order was incredibly harsh and its system of slavery cruel.<sup>52</sup> The usual need for manpower to built strongholds, fortified cities, roads, transform marshes into arable land etc, could no longer be supported by the local farmers without disrupting the food supply and the conscription of young men for construction and army purposes led to revolts as well. Alternatively, enslaving pagans to supplement the labour force hindered the Christianization of the population, one of the Order's main goals. Pagans did not have equal rights to Christians and while enslaving them as labourers it was better if they did not convert.<sup>53</sup> Should they convert, then their status would change and they had to be paid or granted land for the labour. Christianization remained however an extremely important issue and local populations indeed converted when the church followed in the footsteps of the German Order. Of course, after Christianization the protection of converts is equally important. When then the Lithuanians converted, even their prisoners of war could no longer be enslaved as labourers.

### **THE GOLDEN YEARS: 1309-1410 From Venice to Marienburg**

Although the German Order had lost their position in the Holy Land, the fourteenth century can be seen as the apex of their power. When Acre, the last Christian stronghold in the Holy Land, fell in 1291, the German Order transferred their headquarters to Venice while the Hospitallers and Templars moved to Cyprus. Venice was close enough to the Holy Land and their stay there was justified as long as they had a prospect of recapturing

<sup>48</sup> Sire, p.75. P. 195: Hospitaller estates in Pomerania and Pomerelia were sold to the German Order in 1366. P.197: Some estates in Germany of the Hospitallers and some properties in Spain of the German Order were exchanged in 1423. Another exchange took place in the 1450s when German properties in Italy and Greece were exchanged for Hospitaller properties in Germany.

<sup>49</sup> Seward, p.98f. In 1201 German crusaders and colonists, led by Albrecht von Buxhövdén, sailed from Lübeck and captured the Livonian city of Riga. Albrecht successfully attempted to convert most of the population and became the Bishop of Riga, and later Archbishop. He instituted the Knights of the Sword as a standing army in 1202, since he could not depend on crusaders, a lesson learnt in the Holy Land. The Knights of the Sword were the first *Ordensstaat*. Land was given to nobles for their military service. The Knights of the Sword were very successful in obtaining land from neighboring pagans. They also confiscated land first conquered by Albrecht. This led to uprisings.

<sup>50</sup> Militzer, pp.37ff.

<sup>51</sup> The Order of Dobrzyń was founded by Duke Konrad I of Masovia in the 1220s. It had only 15 members and was soon annihilated by the Prussians. The remaining members obtained integration with the German Order.

<sup>52</sup> The German word for slave, *Sklave* originates from the word for Slav, *Slawe*, since the Slavs were enslaved.

<sup>53</sup> Ekdahl, S., "The Treatment of Prisoners of War during the Fighting between the Teutonic Order and Lithuania," in Barber, M. (ed.) *The Military Orders. Fighting for the Faith and Caring for the Sick*. Cambridge: Variorum, 1994, 263-269.

the Holy Land. When those prospects became unfeasible, great uncertainty ensued about their future. As a consequence, it was in Venice that the decision was taken to concentrate mostly on the consolidation and expansion of their *Ordensstaat* rather than a return to the Holy Land. However, there were some pressing reasons for leaving Venice. The German Order did not quite feel safe so close to the Papacy. The antagonism between the Holy See and the Venetians regarding their always shifting loyalties and trade interests with the Muslims was one reason of worry. Another reason was that the Hospitallers and the Papacy had contemplated to fuse the German Order with the Hospitallers, which fusion would sincerely threaten the “Germanness” and force further submission of the Germans.<sup>54</sup> This fusion never materialized. Most worrying of all was the pressure King Philippe le Bel of France was putting on the Papacy due to the failure of all the orders at the Holy Land. Obviously, Philippe le Bel was not pleased with the fact that the Templars had created their own kind of *Ordensstaat* within France.<sup>55</sup> In 1307 the Inquisition had started proceedings against the Templars and when a year later the Archbishop of Riga, seeking absolute control of that city, tried to imitate Philippe le Bel in requesting the Pope to suppress the German Order too, it all made the Germans feel very uneasy.<sup>56</sup> Even the Hospitallers did not feel totally secure in this environment where unfounded accusations could lead to the repressing of an established and respected order. Philippe le Bel indeed addressed identical threats to the Hospitallers. Foulques de Villaret, the new Grand Master since 1305, had found a way to keep out of harm’s way.<sup>57</sup> Between 1306 and 1310 the Hospitallers secured the island of Rhodes, to be independent and to create their own *Ordensstaat*. In Malta the Hospitallers would create between 1530 and

1798 their Catholic Republic with a Prince, the Grand Master, as the absolute Head of State. In the end of the ordeal between Philippe le Bel and the Templars, the Hospitallers became one of the largest benefactors of the Knights Templar’s possessions.<sup>58</sup>

The German Hochmeisters had already started working to find a way out of the hotbed of European power play. Since 1291 they had worked on the idea of taking up headquarters in the castle of Marienburg on the river Vistula in Prussia.<sup>59</sup> It was under the rule of Siegfried von Feuchtwangen (1303-1311) that the changeover actually occurred and with this decision the German Order disappeared from the Mediterranean theatre in 1308, leaving the Hospitallers in charge there. The splendour and pomp of Marienburg eventually outshone many royal courts in Europe and created great jealousy. With the proverbial German thoroughness and efficiency the administration was kept to perfection, even going as far as keeping a personal file on each and every member. It is observed by modern researchers that the administrative system resembled that of Norman Sicily, which is not strange seeing the intimate relationship between Frederick II and the former Hochmeister Herman von Salza 70 years previously.<sup>60</sup>

### The hierarchy in the German Order

All three Orders had an internal structure quite similar to each other, with at the head a Grand Master, chosen for life, and a number of dignitaries and high offices. The hierarchy in the highest offices of the German Order was built up in the following manner: The *Hochmeister* (Grand Master or *Magister Generalis*) was elected for life, as in the other two great Orders. Similarly, this office and of all other top positions were only available for

<sup>54</sup> Militzer, pp.95ff.

<sup>55</sup> Norwich, p.199.

<sup>56</sup> Militzer, p.98. The Archbishop of Riga had accused the German Order of abusing its sovereignty in defending the Church against the pagans, disregarding excommunications and insulting the Archbishop and seizing the latter’s properties. This was followed by the usual accusations sodomy, witchcraft, cruelty, injustice and luxury. It was only in 1319 that the Pope, now residing at Avignon, decided that the case should be dismissed.

<sup>57</sup> Sire, p.27.

<sup>58</sup> Norwich, p.201: Pope Clement’s bull *Ad Providam* of 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1312 states that all the Templar’s wealth and properties, except those in the Spanish realm, should go to the Hospitallers.

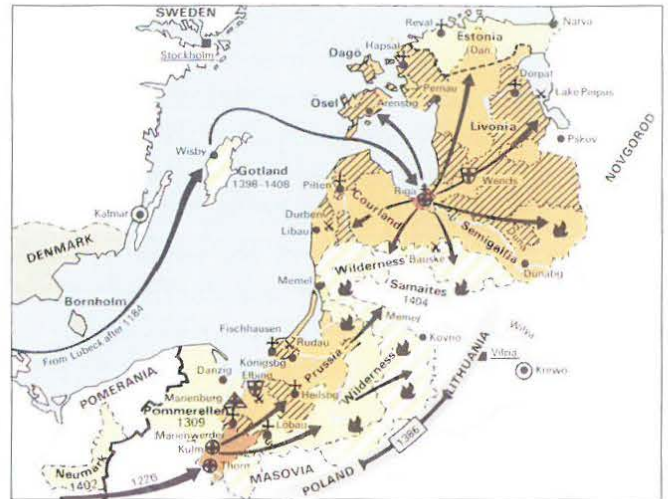
<sup>59</sup> The Marienburg was first a small fort which expanded into a large town later on.

<sup>60</sup> Seward, p.111.

professed knights. His deputy, the *Grosskomtur* (Grand Commendator), was also the superior of all the Order's priests, knights, craftsmen and slaves in times of peace. He had also under his care the transport, maintenance and storage of victuals, transport, the armoury, the infirmary for the sick and wounded brothers of the Order and the hospital for aliens. The *Ordensmarschall*, later the *Grossmarschall* (Grand Marshal), commanded all knights, sergeants and brothers-at-arms and troops (both horse and foot) in times of war and during the caravans. He also supervised the manufacturing, purchasing, maintenance and transport of fighting materials (smiths and saddlers) and equipment. The *Tresler* (Treasurer) oversaw the income, expenditure of the order and the landed properties, while the *Spittler* (Grand Hospitaller) was responsible for the hospital of Acre. He had no competence over later hospitals in other locations. The *Trapier* (Drapier or Quartermaster) was in charge of clothing within the convent. These offices were for limited time only, but people could be re-elected. When the Order became influential in north-eastern Europe, Provincial Masters (ministers) for Germany, Prussia and Livonia were instated. The commanderies were called *Landkomtürei* or *Ballei*, while a commendator was a *Pfleger* or *Hauskomtur*. The Prior was called the *Landmeister*.

Already in 1216 Pope Honorius III, the one who had confirmed the German hospital organization as a true religio-military order, had established that only professed knights could become Hochmeister. Up to 1198 new members were chosen from German crusaders by a council of German crusaders. When the Germans had acquired the privilege of an order, naturally, entry was decided upon by the Hochmeister and the Order's council. There was also afterwards the possibility that new members were chosen from within the priories and bailiwicks without intercession of the Hochmeister. According to their Rule, a new member was treated as a novice and had to undergo probation of one year. However, it had been the norm that crusaders were exempt from probation and also later the rule of probation was more honoured in the breach than in its observance.<sup>61</sup> The probation period of the Hospitallers was always observed and its character was much more stringent: at least three or four *caravans*, a period at sea

on a galley, had to be carried out in person. The Templars had their own probation period for secular knights, based on the sole discretion of the master. These knights *ad terminum*, in actual fact no more than an armed pilgrim, would only serve for a certain period in the standing army of the Templars, after which they would return to secular life.<sup>62</sup>



Overview of the Ordensstaat territories in the thirteenth century.  
Source: *Atlas of World History*, 1964.

Generally, only German speaking candidates were accepted in the German Order, although that was never an acquirement listed in the statutes, but a practice stemming from the first days when the language barrier was one of the pillars of foundation. There were people from Palestine, Poland and Prussia who entered the German Order, but they remained always a minority. The German Order's main task was to enlist as many young, healthy men as possible who could handle a sword and ride against Saracens and heathens. Nobles, since they would have been trained in arms since childhood, were most welcome. The requirement of nobility only really applied since the rule of Hochmeister Dietrich von Altenburg (1335-1341), but the absence of one's nobility was never a reason not to be admitted. Nevertheless, the ideal knight, fit for the highest offices, had to be of noble birth. The probation period was abolished in 1221 for practical reasons and the German Order had to admit even people who were actually not very eligible

<sup>61</sup> Militzer, p.87.

<sup>62</sup> Barber, M. and Bate, K. *The Templars, selected sources translated and annotated*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002. P.49.

for service within a religious order. It seemed that the frontline storm troopers consisted of criminal elements. These people never made any sort of further career and often died on the battlefield. An obvious, positive result was that there were less unsavoury characters running amok in society. However, the German Order was not a bunch of *légionnaires* but a company of men who had entered on idealistic and religious motives, who were able to set their world to their hand.<sup>63</sup>

Those members who were not of noble birth entered the German Order as *halbbruder* (lit.: half-brother), the serving brothers (sergeants, or Graumäntler, mentioned *supra*), decorated with a half cross, equal to a serving brother of sergeant at arms of the Hospitallers. The Templars also had their serving brothers, named *sergens* or *clients*. Among the German *halbbruder* were also many *Pfründner*, people who had donated land or money to the Order and in turn received protection, nursing or other care. Another group of members were the *familiares*, selected people from other classes than nobility who lived a worldly life and were married. When they entered the Order they could remain living with their wives, albeit in a respectable manner. It would then be agreed that after their death the Order would receive their fortunes or at least parts thereof. The idea of these serving brothers finds its origins in the realities of the society of the “Franks” in Outremer. Here, western Christian nobility had preserved its sanguine purity and had its reservations towards members of the general population who had intermarried with locals from Palestine to serve in the highest offices.<sup>64</sup> For the Hospitallers and the Templars who had been in Outremer for at least 80 years before the arrival of the Germans, nobility had found its way into the leading positions of these two Orders, possibly with the idea that “nobles only” would be a form of security against influence of “mixed” sanguinity. The

German Order, as they were a very tight community of “Germans only”, did not feel the urge to take over this requirement at first, as they had already, possibly unknowingly, a similar safety valve in place.

Women were admitted to the German Order as *halbschwester* (lit.: half-sister) or *sorores*, mostly for service in the hospital. They could also either be the wives of the *familiares* or *Pfründnerinnen*, women who promised their inheritance to the Order in exchange for admittance into the Order. Many of these women therefore had followed their husbands, sons or daughters into the Order. Besides these women living with their families or alone within a priory or commandery, the Order also had its own convents which would follow the Rule of the Order. However, there were no independent orders of German women comparable e.g. to the Order of Sta Ursula, the female branch of the Hospitallers. The Templars stopped admitting women in an early stage, paragraph 53 of their 1129 Latin Rule states that there will be no further acceptance of sisters. St Bernard, directly addressing the reader, says: “Therefore, dearest brothers, in order that the flower of chastity should always be evident among you, it shall not be permissible henceforth to continue this custom.” It appears that Templar sisters were only allowed in the first ten years of that Order.<sup>65</sup>

The prevalence of nobility in Outremer might give the impression that these three Orders were managed by the highest nobility only. Research into the German Order has proven that, although important offices were held by people from the highest echelon of aristocracy, the majority of offices were held by lesser nobles, *i.e.* gentry, not aristocracy.<sup>66</sup> Most knights, including Hermann von Salza himself, the great promoter of the German Order, came from the *Ministeriales* class. By the thirteenth century the *Ministeriales* were able to escape their un-

<sup>63</sup> Miltzer, p.80.

<sup>64</sup> Sire, p.12.

<sup>65</sup> Barber, M. and Bate, K. p.53

<sup>66</sup> Miltzer, p.92.



free status and ascended into gentry and aristocracy.<sup>67</sup> This once insignificant class could now obtain offices and status which were formerly only reachable for descendents of dynasties.

### Organisation of the *Ordensstaat*

In Prussia alone the German Order established over one hundred towns and more than one thousand villages and brought enormous amounts of land under the plough. They cut woods, drained marshes, converted sandy lands into fertile fields, built dykes and seawalls. In Prussia and other estates the long stretches of nature gave rise to the favourite pastime of the hunt. For German Knights hunting was not for personal pleasure, unlike for the Hospitallers in Rhodes and Malta. The German Knights systematically brought primeval fauna, such as wolves, bears, bison and elk, close to extinction, as they were seen as a threat to farmers or agriculture.<sup>68</sup>

Immigration of Germans and the Dutch was organized, regulated and steady. A reformed feudal structure was set up, whereby the peasants were no longer bound to the

land and there were no labour dues to the Order. Land in freehold was given in return for payment in kind and many market places were instituted. Even nobles were invited to take part in the migration and to form the new gentry, being offered land for military service. Although the Prussians paid the price for all this, their reduction to serfdom was soon enough negated when they allowed themselves to be Germanised and Christianised.<sup>69</sup>

The German *Ordensstaat* was a complicated affair, stretching along the Baltic Sea from the north-eastern part of Germany to Estonia. One of the weakest points for the *Ordensstaat* remained that it was not one whole territory, but two main territories, Prussia and Livonia, the gap only bridged by the fortress-town of Memel on the Baltic coast. In the past the Order had made an effort to widen that narrow strip, roughly between Memel and Libau respectively. The rest was scattered with pockets of power under other jurisdictions. In Prussia they ruled more than two million inhabitants alone. Although the German Order had moved their headquarters to the north, they retained a large number of estates in the Mediterranean area.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Up to the tenth century the *ministeriales* were bondsmen or serfs, bound to an estate to perform services for their overlords as a manorial agent (responsible for estate management, administration and finance). In the eleventh century they became officials and members of the ruling class. They acquired either their own lordship or had one delegated to them by a higher lord. At times they had some political influence too. The *ministeriales* developed during the eleventh and twelfth centuries from un-free servants (un-free compared to the members of the aristocracy and peerage, the free) into a distinct new class, receiving tithes and fiefs for their (knightly) services. They were employed as servitors, agents, manorial agents, chamberlains, royal court officials, state officials, city officials, beadles, stewards, castellans and judges in the administration of the imperial territories. Gradually, during the thirteenth century their status reached the level of free nobility, but still vassals to the king or emperor. By the end of the thirteenth century the *ministeriales* were an essential part of the lower nobility and by the fifteenth century they had risen to the very heart of the knightly class. In English peerage system the *ministeriales* would be comparable to the gentry, located between the Yeomanry and Peerage, therefore considered to belong to the lesser aristocracy. Unlike yeomen, the gentry did not work the land themselves; instead, like the *ministeriales*, they obtained tenant farmers.

<sup>68</sup> Seward, p.III.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.II2.

<sup>70</sup> In the fourteenth century the bailiwicks in Apulia and Sicily were the most important. In Apulia there were five commanderies in Bari, Barletta, Brindisi, Corneta and San Leonardi di Siponto, headed by brothers of German gentry stock and assisted by local *familiars*. Income was generated mainly through husbandry, wine, olives and salt. In Venice the Order still possessed their former headquarters, while the actual regional seat of power was in nearby Stigliano. There were also some properties in Precenico, Lombardia, Tuscany and in and around Rome. Moreover, the Order still possessed a number of houses in Bologna and Padua, where priests of the Order resided who studied at the universities there. In Sicily the estates were in Mangione (Palermo), Agrigento, Margana, Messina and Noto, managed solely by Germans brothers. In the Morea the Order had its headquarters in Mostenitsa and estates in Coron and Methone. There is little known about the Order's possessions in Rumania, while the estates in Cyprus and Armenia were lost in the thirteenth century. About the possessions in Spain also little is known outside the main estates near Carmona, Cordoba, La Motta, Sevilla and Toledo. The Order lost all these properties to Spain when the Order did not recognize the authority of the (Spanish) Pope Benedict XII, elected in Avignon in 1394. Only La Motta was restored to the Order afterwards. The move of the Papacy from Rome to Avignon initially boosted the Order's property in France. In Champagne the Order had two estates, in Beauvoir and Orbec. They sold their property in Montpellier for a small fortune in order to pay debts. When the Order did not recognize Benedict XII, the Pope confiscated their property in Arles.

Trade and banking were also strong pillars of the Order's economy. A fleet of merchandise ships of the Hanze towns was at their disposal and their banking and credit systems were copied from the Templars. The Hochmeister himself was not a member of the Hanseatic League, but had a certain amount of involvement, while his *Grossschaffer* (Grand Sheppard) was his factual minister of trade and industry. In 1263 the Holy See permitted the German Order to trade grain. However, the economy expanded and included the monopolized trade in yellow amber for rosaries, cloth, copper, falcons, furs, horses, iron, timber, salt, silver, wax and wines, both for import and export.

Due to the uniformity and centralization of law and administration, in other words a well organized and prospering society, there is some truth in the claim that Prussia was the first modern state.<sup>71</sup>

The rule of Hochmeister Winrich von Kniprode (1352-1382) is regarded as the actual apex of the German Order. He managed to expand the Order's territory to the north and east notwithstanding that the efforts of the German Order were strained by the kingdom of Poland. The latter had made an alliance with the Lithuanians, fearing the ever growing power of the Order. The border area remained a source of worry for the Order, with plenty of pagan Lithuanians remaining and plenty of *Wiltnisse* to be exploited.<sup>72</sup> This war in Lithuania had been a permanent war for over a century, divided in summer and winter campaigns, called *Litauerreise* (lit.: a trip to Lithuania), in which the possibility of rich booty attracted many knights who would fight on their own expenses. Von Kniprode undertook the task of actually visiting most of the Order's properties in the *Ordensstaat*. His visitations also re-enforced discipline where a long absence of a master's hand had created a certain amount of liberty among the estate managers. One of his tactics was to instate trustworthy people from his own region, Rheinland, creating during his reign a mini-dynasty of Rheinlander in high offices. It was short-lived, as his successor, Hochmeister Konrad Zöllner von Rotenstein,

swiftly removed these political nominees out of office or demoted them.

### The beginning of the end

Hochmeister Konrad Zöllner von Rotenstein (1382-1390) highest achievement was the marriage between the Lithuanian king Jagiełło with the only daughter of the Polish king, Jadwiga in 1386. Zöllner von Rotenstein had made the condition that Jagiełło had to convert to Christianity and to do his utmost to admonish his subjects to do likewise. He was baptized, took the name Władisław and opened Lithuania for Christianisation.<sup>73</sup> The crowns of Lithuania and Poland were united in 1385, bringing to a new high the power of Poland and to a new low position of the Order. Now that eastern Europe was largely Christianised, there was little else to do according to their original objectives, since maintaining the Christian religion was not their business, but that of the church. The latter sided with united Lithuania and Poland, rewarding the conversions and opening up of Lithuania for the mission. It also supported the neighbouring nations along the Teutonic realm. The same *raison d'être* which made the German Order so successful was now questionable since its objectives where more or less reached and seriously threatened the legitimacy of their existence.

To make the situation worse, the Papal Curia was flooded with complaints and court cases against the German Order. The Archbishop of Riga kept putting in large numbers of complaints. Poland opened a court case in 1309, accusing the German Order of having unlawfully annexed Pomerelia, demanding compensating for the sack of Danzig. Due to Lithuania's conversion and alliance with Poland, the case won Papal support and the German Order was forced to reach a settlement with Poland about the matter.

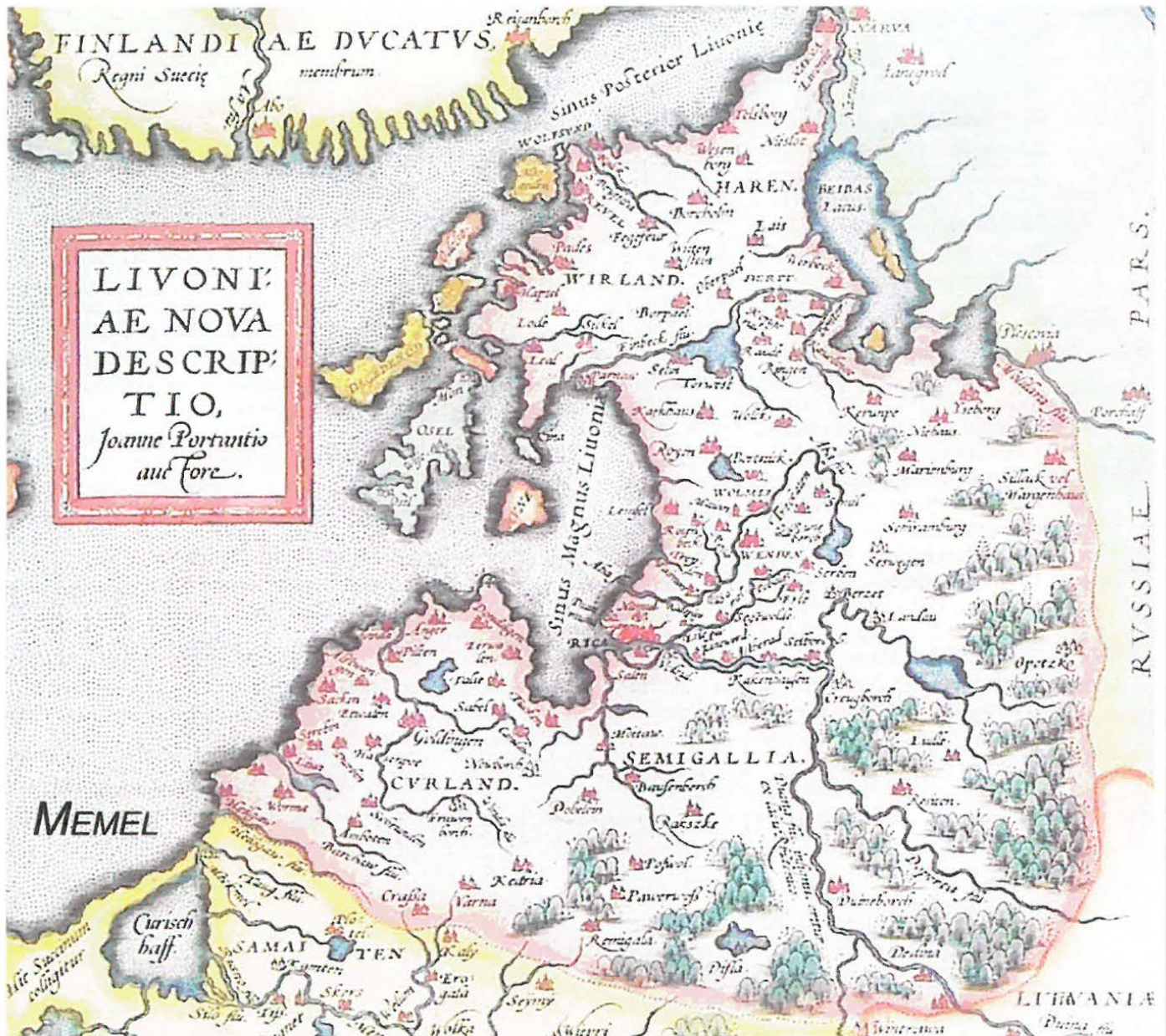
A conflict with the Scandinavian alliance, the Kalmar Union, crippled the finance of the Order.<sup>74</sup> It was of the greatest importance that the trade routes from the Baltic Sea to the North Sea, via Sweden and Denmark,

<sup>71</sup> Seward, p.113.

<sup>72</sup> Miltzer, p.103.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104.

<sup>74</sup> The Scandinavian rulers made an alliance in 1397, known as the Kalmar Union, at the initiative of Margrete Valdemarsdotter (1353-1412), Queen of Norway, Regent of Denmark and Sweden.



Origin of conflict: Location of Memel and Samogitian area. This small strip of land was the only connection between Prussia and Livonia.

remained open for the Hanseatic League which shipped the Order's produce. When the Hanseatic League had conflicts with a Scandinavian country, the German Order gave a free hand to the Hanseatic cities, as long as the interests of the Order did not suffer. Quite often the Order was asked to moderate in conflicts, applying a live and let live policy, since they could not start a war against other Christian nations. Matters took a different turning when Prussian ships started to bring up vessels of the Kalmar Union, stirring an anti-propaganda campaign from the Scandinavians directed against the Order. As a reaction, the Order had ships fitted out and captured

Gotland, justifying its action as self-defense against the pirates of Gotland, in order to keep the sea lanes open and secure for trade. A peace treaty in 1407 was made with the Scandinavian alliance, whereby the Order had to pay them considerable amounts for damage regarding Gotland.<sup>75</sup> Although the Order was at its peak of its financial wealth, this payment of damages and the events following the Battle of Tannenberg in 1410 led not only to the bankruptcy of the German Order but also to its redundancy since reasons for their existence ceased to exist.

<sup>75</sup> Militzer, pp.144ff.

The only pagan enemies left roamed in the northern and north-eastern borders, where still a large amount of pagan Lithuanians not only stood their grounds but on a regular bases invaded Prussia, sacking and pillaging villages. This gave the Order a last shred of justification and purpose, regarding themselves as the shield of Christian Europe, a predicate which the Hospitallers would inherit after the Great Siege of Malta in 1565. It was no secret that Poland was seeking a better and more secure access to the Baltic Sea, while the Order sought to widen the land passage along the Baltic coast between Prussia and Livonia, effectively blocking access to the Baltic for Poland. The stretch of contested coastal area was inhabited by the Samogitians, also known as the Žemaiten, and Poland claimed jurisdiction over that area. These Samogitians had captured and ravaged the town of Memel in 1379, the fortified entity of the German Order, as small strip of land linking Prussia to Livonia.

In 1404 a temporary truce was signed with Poland and the Order returned the territories of Dobrzin and Ziotor to Poland, in change for recognition of Poland that Samotogia was a legitimate property of the Order.<sup>76</sup> No matter what the other parties had decided over their head, the Samogitians were not in agreement. Notwithstanding a number of military campaigns against the Samogitians, the Order realised that they could not win without a massive attack. The Hochmeister also realized that a large scale attack on the Samogitians would draw Lithuania and Poland into the conflict. In 1409 the Samogitians again revolted, seeking advantage from a seemingly unavoidable war, supported by the Lithuania and Poland. The Lithuanians and Polish armies were now mighty military powers, modeled to Western armies. Their total of more than 160,000 troops outnumbered the Order's approximately 85,000 troops, including troops of allies. On 15<sup>th</sup> July 1410 the Battle of Tannenberg (Žalgiris) occurred, situated near the Mazurian marshes in Prussia, which had serious consequences for the Order. They not only lost their Hochmeister and the majority of the Order's professed brothers, but more seriously, they lost that day their "nimbus of invincibility", as Klaus Militzer

describes it.<sup>77</sup> In pursuit of the remaining knights of the Order, king Władisław of Poland made an attempt to besiege the Marienburg, the Order's headquarters and treasury. Jagiełło desperately needed to pay his troops and all the mercenaries he had invited for the battle, but the Order's treasury remained out of his reach. In 1411 a peace treaty at Thorn (Toruń) was made, whereby the Order had to return a number of territories, among these the lands of the Samogitians, over which the war had started in the first place. Although their *Ordensstaat* remained mainly intact, the Baltic crusades had come to an end.

What was left in the treasury of the German Order was used to pay damages to the victors. Money was not coming in, as the effects of the black plague throughout Europe strongly diminished the demand for their Prussian grain.<sup>78</sup> Besides, the siege had thoroughly ruined their headquarters and adjoining estates, highly unlikely to yield income for a long period. To gain income, the Hochmeister had to beg the German Empire, the aristocracy and the rich merchants for help, which they were quite willing to give in exchange for influence in the Order and its policies. The Hochmeister had written to the German Empire that it was obliged to assist the Order, the Shield of Christendom. The aristocracy was also willing to help financially, but in return demanded offices for their sons. It was not the trade-off to accommodate supporters or the extensive privileges itself that bothered the Order, but the immediate, tangible effect of mediocrity. Formerly people gained offices on their personal merits and virtues, now the vacancies were filled with people who were lacking qualifications and spirit, relying on the influence of their fathers. Of course, offices were granted to family members of Hochmeisters and very influential aristocrats, as used to happen under the rule of Winrich von Kniprode but never on this scale.<sup>79</sup> In effect, the Order was being transformed from a religio-military order into an aristocratic corporation.

All the Order wanted was a new war against Poland, but new developments ruled this out. The new financiers on

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.116.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.144.

<sup>78</sup> Seward, p.126.

<sup>79</sup> Militzer, p.146.

the Order insisted on having a say in matters and with the peace treaty of 1411 its last argument for justification had evaporated, as Christianisation of the remaining pagans was taking place by means of the Poles and Lithuanians, having become the region's largest Christian powers. War against them was no longer envisaged as the right thing to do. On account of these events the Order diminished and became just one of many regional powers.

Internal conflict within Prussia led to the formation of the "Prussian League", in which the coastal towns of Danzig and Elbing, together with the Prussian nobility, rebelled against the Order, and caused Pomerania to fall under Polish control. The Prussian League offered all these areas to the Polish king in exchange for something the German Order would never agree to, namely a charter of liberty. The Polish king granted the request and incorporated the territories of the Prussian League within Poland.<sup>80</sup> This obviously led to another conflict between the Order and Poland in 1454 and after an initial victory of the Order's paid troops at Konitz the Order was confronted with an empty purse. Their own troops revolted and Bohemian soldiers occupied the headquarters at Marienburg, evicting the Order from its own property, forcing it to re-locate at Königsberg.

The indirect Polish victory resulted in the 2<sup>nd</sup> treaty of Thorn in 1466. The Order not only lost a large amount of its best territories to Poland, remaining with about 60 towns and strongholds, but also its independence. The Order had to recognise the Polish king as its feudal overlord, while the Hochmeister in return became a member of the Council of the Polish Crown. Although the Hochmeister still relied on the Holy See for the Order's spiritual matters, he could no longer keep his vows of obedience. The Hochmeister was after all still the Superior of a Religious Order who had signed a treaty which could not be dissolved by Rome, finding himself in breach of canon law and being marked as a traitor.

The following period was one of further descending into

conflicts, external but also internal. In many bailiwicks it increasingly occurred that brothers of the Order, who had to manage estates and commanderies on behalf of the Order, did so in the role of *Pfründner* (Cf. *supra*), and started regarding the Order's properties as their own, whereby the profits no longer came to the benefit of the Order but to themselves and their families. In this changing world the influence of Martin Luther led to the actual downfall of the Order. Luther's influence on the ecclesiastical establishment invaded also the *Ordensstaat*. Luther sent a letter to the Order in 1523, encouraging them into the Lutheran camp, where their vows could be rescinded and they could marry. Luther saw no purpose in cloisters and convents, since he had questioned the spiritual validity of monastic life.<sup>81</sup> Obedience was now civil obedience and chastity was no longer a virtue for a Religious. The former ideal of poverty had long since lost its appeal as the Order had become an aristocratic affair. The idea of marrying and keeping the wealth from a commandery within one's own family was also extremely attractive. Although Hochmeister Albrecht von Brandenburg first tried to fight this new trend, it seemed unstoppable. The Bishop of Sambia, also the Order's Chancellor of Prussia, walked over to the other side, renouncing his vows on Christmasday 1523, promoting the new rite and calling on all his brothers to do the same. In 1525 Protestantism triumphed and Luther abandoned his vows and married an escaped nun. Following these shocking events, Von Brandenburg did the unthinkable: he abandoned his habit and laid down his white mantle and became a disciple of Luther, marrying later on as well.<sup>82</sup> He rescinded his vows of obedience to the Pope and made an oath of obedience to the Polish king instead, dissolving the Order and secularising its territories.<sup>83</sup> Becoming a Polish vassal, he received the remainder of the *Ordensstaat* in Prussia as a dukedom of the Polish Crown. The remainders of the *Ordensstaat* in Livonia had broken up into a number of smaller territories under different Catholic and Lutheran overlords and lost much of its significance. In this respect the convent of the Hospitallers had been shielded from the direct

<sup>80</sup> Hay, D., *Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: a general history of Europe*. Harlow: Longman, 1989. P.257.

<sup>81</sup> Nicholson, p.117.

<sup>82</sup> Elton, G.R., *Reformation Europe, 1517-1559*. London : Fontana Press, 1985. P.55.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.62ff.

<sup>84</sup> Nicholson, p.117.



Portrait of Hochmeister Maximilian III, c.1590.

### Epilogue: The German Order in the 16<sup>th</sup> -21<sup>st</sup> century

After 1525, the German Order was recognized by the Emperor and drawn into the Austrian sphere of influence. Its Master, a Prince of the Empire, established its headquarters, the Grand Magistry, at Mergentheim in Württemberg, its residence until the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1834. During the sixteenth century a number of attempts were made to merge the German Order with the Hospitallers, in order to be deployed in Hungary to fight the Ottomans. These attempts never came to fruition, as both parties were vehemently against it. During time, the German Order concentrated less on its military aim and concentrated more on hospitaller activities, recruiting priests, nuns and laymen for this purpose. It became a tri-confessional organisation, whereby Catholic nobles held the Grand Magistry and the highest offices. Knights of the Lutheran and Calvinist denominations acquired equal rights under the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648, including representation in the Chapter-General. Although the Order was militarily dysfunctional, the status and social respect coming with the highest offices increased enormously, finally making the German Order acceptable by a majority of the populations in the former *Ordensstaat* territories. The German Order survived the collapse of the Habsburg Empire and the consequent loss of many of their properties by Bonaparte, by abandoning its “chivalric” character all together, retaining only its religious and hospitaller identity.<sup>85</sup>

influences from the Reformation in Rhodes and later in Malta due to the geographical isolation. However, in Germany there were cases known of Hospitallers who got married but still maintained the Hospitaller Order as a monastic institute under the patronage of the royal house of Hohenzollern.<sup>84</sup> The positive aspect for the Hospitallers was, since the German Order had become Protestant, that now Catholic Germans could be invited to become a Hospitaller member.

<sup>85</sup> Henceforth the only members of the Order have been professed religious brothers or sisters. The last Habsburg Grand Master resigned shortly after the First World War and the admission of knights to membership ceased immediately; today there are no survivors from the Habsburg era and the Order functions as a religious Order of the Church, operating principally in Austria, Germany, north Italy and parts of former Yugoslavia.