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Jerusalem and the Hospital of the Poor in the Corporate and Collaborative Identity of the Hispanic Hospitallers

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Jerusalem and the Hospital of the Poor
in the Corporate and Collaborative Identity of the Hispanic Hospitallers
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The international military orders of the Hospital and the Temple, both founded in Jerusalem, were swiftly and widely embraced across the Hispanic territories. Their original Jerusalemite identity and foundational roles in defending pilgrims and the Kingdom of Jerusalem respectively, strongly appealed to the magnates and nobles of the northeastern Hispanic kingdoms and counties. The iconic imagery associated with their headquarters and missions in Jerusalem, —and, by extension, the Holy Land— served as powerful reference points in their reception and sustained promotion through the mid-13th century. These identity markers enabled their promoters to align their goals of military and territorial expansion with the crusading momentum which was unfolding on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean.¹

Many Catalan, Aragonese, and Navarrese donations from the central decades of the 12th century were directed to the “Hospital of Jerusalem” and the “Holy Hospital of Jerusalem”, evoking its caring role, sacred character, and its Jerusalemite origin and status. At the same time, a distinctive and newly emerging conception of the order as a unified and centralized organization, subject to its headquarters at the convent of Jerusalem, was actively stressed. Likewise, benefactors of the Temple directed their donations to the “Knighthood of the Temple of Jerusalem” or the “Temple of Solomon”. In a sense, the Hospital and the Temple of Jerusalem functioned as “logos”, understood as word-images: symbolic corporate images² that engaged the consciences of the men and women who identified with, promoted, supported, and joined these military orders.

The unified conception of the Hospital was fundamental to its development as a transnational organization, in which its patrimonial and administrative entities, commanderies and priories, were conceived as a military and, above all, financial rearguard in support of the central convent: first in Jerusalem (until 1187), then in Acre (until 1291), and finally

¹ BONET DONATO, Maria, *The Identity of Hospitallers in the Crown of Aragon and Economics (XII–XIII Centuries)*, in: *The Templars, The Hospitallers and the Crusades: Essays in Homage to Alan J. Forey*, ed. Helen J. NICHOLSON – Jochen BURGTORF, London – New York 2020, pp. 41–57.

² According to Klein’s explanation about the “colonization of the mind”, KLEIN, Naomi, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, Toronto 2000.

in Rhodes (1309–1522). On occasion, even members and officials in the Hispanic territories were explicitly identified by their affiliation with the Hospital of Jerusalem.

In the early stages of the order's establishment in the eastern Hispanic lands, the first Master of Jerusalem and highest authority, Raymond du Puy, visited the region in 1140 to address the matter of King Alfonso I of Aragon's will. The Master agreed to renounce the political rights acquired by the Hospitallers in exchange for other patrimonial assets. He affirmed that his intervention was carried out with the endorsement of the Patriarch of Jerusalem and the convent of the Hospital of Jerusalem.³ In other significant matters, such as the founding of the female monastery of Sigena in 1188, the involvement of the Master was explicitly stated.⁴ This prominent women's convent was also emblematically linked to the geography of the Holy Land. Its frescoes recalled the overseas mission of protecting pilgrims, the conquest of Saint John of Acre, and a naval battle.⁵

The mission of providing care and assistance to the poor and to pilgrims in Jerusalem was explicitly recalled in donations made by benefactors in the 12th and 13th centuries, whose symbolic recipients were the "poor of Jerusalem" or the "poor of the brethren of Jerusalem." From the mid-13th century onward, these came to be identified as the "poor of Outremer."⁶ Economic contributions known as *responsiones* were occasionally described as alms for the sick and poor of the Hospital of Jerusalem: *annuatium halemossinas infirmis pauperibus Hospitalis Iherosolimis*. In such instances, the evocation of the founding city was closely linked to charitable functions, especially the care of the sick and poor, carried out in the Hospital of Jerusalem.⁷

The caregiving role of the order was especially recognized in locations where it operated hospitals, notably in the mountain passes and valleys of the Pyrenean regions of Catalonia and Navarre, in this case along the Saint James way. Even the hospital work of caring for the poor at a Catalan commandery hospital was associated with "Saint John of Jerusalem and his poor [...] of Outremer and Citramar", as evidenced in Cervera in 1246.⁸ The Hospital enjoyed genuine devotion and social recognition for its care of the poor and its broader hospital mission in the Holy Land. These aspects fostered the promotion, presence, and involvement of women with the order in specific

³ Colección de documentos inéditos de la Corona de Aragón, ed. Próspero de Bofarull i Mascaro, vol. 4, Barcelona 1849, no. 32.

⁴ Documentos de Sigena, ed. A. UBIETO ARTETA, Valencia 1972, no. 6.

⁵ PAGÈS I PARETAS, M., Pintura mural sagrada i profana, del romànic al primer gòtic, Barcelona 2012, pp. 115–118.

⁶ BONET 2020, pp. 43–44. The image of the Order evolved in accordance with historical changes, NICHOLSON, Helen, Templars, Hospitallers and Teutonic Knights: Images of the Military Orders (1128–1291), Leicester 1995, p. 6 and 10–14.

⁷ Documentos de Sigena, no. 5, 16, 46, 104; Bonet Donato 2020, p. 56.

⁸ Diplomatarium d'Alguairre i del seu monestir duple de l'orde de Sant Joan de Jerusalem (1245–1300), ed. Jesús ALTURO, Barcelona 2010, no. 9.

contexts. Alms and appeals for assistance from pontiffs, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and the Master of the Hospital, Godefroy of Donjon, were directed to Hispanic bishops and kings during the last third of the 12th century, as preserved in the order's archives.⁹ In one letter, Pope Alexander III urged charity in favour of the Hospitallers, praising their care for pilgrims, the poor, and the sick in Jerusalem.¹⁰

The close connection between the Hospital and the Holy Land helps to explain why the order assisted some local pilgrims in reaching it, as was the case for Guillem Sas and his brother, who made a generous donation to the Hospitallers in 1188 in return.¹¹ Even after the loss of Jerusalem, the Hospital continued to occupy a central place in the collective imagination, despite its relocation to Saint John of Acre along with the central Convent. This enduring symbolic presence is reflected in a 14th-century legend recorded by the Castilian nobleman Juan Manuel, Prince of Villena, which recounts how Sancha, daughter of King James I of Aragon, undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land dressed in humble clothing and spent her final days caring for the poor at the Hospital in Acre.¹² Nonetheless, in the last quarter of the 13th century, the idealization of these orders in relation to their central role in the Crusading movement entered a crisis. In several declarations, the Kings of Aragon voiced their opposition to the fact that the Hospitallers of the Crown of Aragon were sending aid and supplies to their fellow brethren in the Latin East.¹³

After the fall of Acre, the loss of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, and the abolition of the Templars, the Hospital emerged as the preeminent crusading order in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁴ This refoundation of the order was accompanied by an institutional memory aimed at preserving and transmitting the Hospitallers' iconic associations with the Crusades and their presence in the Holy Land. The compilations of the order's statutes from the 12th and 13th centuries, translated into vernacular languages throughout the 14th century and formally intended for governance,¹⁵ played

⁹ GARCÍA LARRAGUETA, Santos, *El gran priorado de Navarra de la orden de San Juan de Jerusalén. Siglos XII-XIII. II Colección diplomática*, Pamplona 1957, no. 73, 85, 86, 87.

¹⁰ Archivo Histórico Nacional, Órdenes Militares, Orden de San Juan, código 649B, ff. 18–19, no. 27; ff. 28–29, no. 39 and ff. 29–30, no. 40.

¹¹ Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Gran Priorato de Cataluña, folder 4, no. 12.

¹² RIQUER, Martín de, *La leyenda de la infanta Doña Sancha, hija de Don Jaime el Conquistador*, in: *Homenaje a Millás-Vallicrosa*, vol. 2, Barcelona 1956, pp. 229–241, here at pp. 229–230.

¹³ BONET DONATO, María – PAVÓN BENITO, Julia, *Thinking about the Holy Land and Crusading in the Crowns of Aragon and Navarre (Thirteenth Century)*, in: *Settlement and Crusade in the 13th Century: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Latin East*, ed. Gil FISHHOF – Judith BRONSTEIN – Vardit R. SHOTTEN-HALLEL, London – New York 2021, pp. 254–269, here at p. 256.

¹⁴ LUTTRELL, Anthony, *Gli ospitalieri e l'eredità dei templari: 1305–1378*, in: *The Hospitallers of Rhodes and Their Mediterranean World*, vol. III, Aldershot 1992, pp. 67–86. SARNOWSKY, Jürgen, *Der Johanniterorden und die Kreuzzüge*, in: *On the Military Orders in Medieval Europe. Structures and Perceptions*, vol. IV, Farnham 2011, pp. 345–367.

¹⁵ CIERBIDE MARTINERA, Ricardo, *Estatutos antiguos de la orden de San Juan de Jerusalén. Versión original occitana y su traducción al español según el Códice Navarro del AHN de Madrid (1314)*, Pamplona 1999; CIERBIDE MARTINERA, Ricardo, *Edició crítica dels Manuscrits Catalans inèdits de l'orde de Sant Joan de Jerusalem (Segles XIV–XV)*, Barcelona 2002; CIERBIDE MARTINERA, Ricardo – BONNET, Marie Rose,

a key role in disseminating a body of emblematic references concerning the Hospitallers. In these legislative compendia of the Eastern Hispanic priories, the order's military actions in the Holy Land were recalled alongside its charitable and religious missions. Institutional memory preserved the order's history in the Latin East as a central means of legitimizing the organization and, more specifically, of maintaining ties between the Western priories and the Eastern headquarters, by then located in Rhodes. Tradition sustained the transmission of the body of norms originally issued in Jerusalem and Acre, even though most of these provisions were no longer applicable at the time they were translated, copied, and even read aloud during priory chapters.¹⁶

In this 14th century normative tradition, Jerusalem was a principal point of reference and identification for, and among, the Eastern Hispanic Hospitallers. In this context, the rule of Raymond du Puy (1120–1160) emphasized the order's caring role with explicit reference to the Hospital of Jerusalem. It is particularly significant that the first of the statutes is about the privilege of white bread for the sick of *Santa Mayzo del Hospital de Iherusalem*. The religious charism of the site is further underscored by a statement that Master Jobert of Syria (c. 1172–1177) acted *in testimoni et en presentia de la passio de Ihesu Christ*, that is, as a witness to the legacy of Christ in the very place of the Passion.¹⁷ Most of Jobert's statutes allude to Jerusalemite memory and even references to Western regions are framed in connection to the Holy City. Notably, the statutes of Roger des Molins (1181) likewise centre on the Hospital of Jerusalem and its mission of service to the poor, including provisions regarding the financial contributions, *responsiones*, from Western priories. Also, in the narratives embedded in these statutes, the Masters of the Order were portrayed as embodying the crusading mission. Although these rules and references no longer had practical application in the 14th century, they functioned as a powerful appeal to tradition, reinforcing the enduring duty to support the convent, its care for the sick and the poor, and to uphold the crusading commitment.¹⁸

In this sense, the Hospitallers preserved the memory of its Jerusalemite origins,¹⁹ repurposing it to serve the needs of the reconstituted Order after the fall of the Latin states.

Estatutos de la Orden de San Juan de Jerusalén – Les statuts de l'Ordre de Saint-Jean de Jérusalem. Edición crítica de los manuscritos occitanos (s. XIV) – Édition critique des manuscrits en langue d'Oc (XIVe siècle), Bilbao 2007.

¹⁶ BONET, Maria, The Crusades and the Latin East in the Memories of the Hispanic Hospitallers (14th Century), in: Religions 14, 2023, URL: [https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070892] (5. September 2025)

¹⁷ CIERBIDE 1999, p. 89.

¹⁸ BONET 2023.

¹⁹ NICHOLSON, Helen, Memory and the Military Orders: An Overview, in: Entre Deus e o Rei. O mundo das Ordens Militares, ed. Isabel Cristina FERREIRA FERNANDES, Palmela 2018, pp. 17–28; CARRAZ, Damien, Echoes of the Latin East among the Hospitallers of the West. The priory of Saint Gilles, c. 1260–c. 1300, in: Settlement and Crusade in the Thirteenth Century. Multidisciplinary Studies of the Latin East, ed. Gil FISHHOF – Judith BRONSTEIN – Vardit R. SHOTTEN-HALLEL, London – New York 2021, pp. 241–253; BONET – PAVÓN 2021, pp. 255–256.

These memories also recreated legends and spread stories of their mythical origins. In some versions produced in Hispanic priories, miraculous narratives were traced back to ancient, biblical Jerusalem, predating and coinciding with the coming of Christ, implying that the institution partook in the sacred origins of Christianity itself.²⁰ According to one Catalan account, this early foundation was destroyed by Vespasian like the Holy Sepulchre.²¹ It was claimed that “the Religion”, meaning the Order, had already begun with the foundation of a community of regulars by Italian merchants at Jerusalem.²² Afterward, the miracles of the mythical founder, Saint Gerard, were said to have occurred during the First Crusade. Thus, the sacred and legendary history of the Hospital of Jerusalem placed the institution at the very heart of the Crusading movement’s origins. A donation made to the Hospitallers by Godfrey of Bouillon in 1100 was also preserved in some versions of the statutory tradition. Through such references, the Order was directly linked to the First Crusade and one of its most iconic figures.²³

These documentary and historiographical memorial traditions shared a vision of the Hospitallers’ crusading role, one that gained particular significance after the order’s establishment in Rhodes,²⁴ serving to justify its continued support from the Western priories and to define its *raison d’être*.

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²⁰ CIERBIDE 1999, p. 79; CIERBIDE 2002, p. 157.

²¹ CIERBIDE 2002, p. 160.

²² This comes close to the “oficial” story from Guglielmo de Santo Stefano’s *Exordium Hospitalis*, CALVET, Antoine, Les Légendes de l’Hôpital de Saint-Jean de Jérusalem, Paris 2000, p. 34.

²³ CIERBIDE 1999, p. 80; CIERBIDE 2002, p. 127 and 161; CIERBIDE – BONNET 2007, p. 32; BONET 2023.

²⁴ LUTTRELL, Anthony, The Hospitallers of Rhodes: Perspectives, Problems, Possibilities, in: Die geistlichen Ritterorden Europas, ed. Joseph FLECKENSTEIN – Manfred HELLMANN, Sigmaringen 1980, pp. 243–266.

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