A HOSPITALLER DESPROPRIAMENTUM:
DUBROVNIK 1396

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Abstract
A Hospitaller, being vowed to poverty, could not make a will but might dispose of goods he held by making a despropriamentum. Written examples are rare but Fr. Barras de Barras made such bequests at Dubrovnik in 1396; his wealth was notably limited. He fell ill while King Sigismund of Hungary, returning from defeat by the Turks at Nikopolis on the Danube where the Hospitallers rescued him, had stopped at Dubrovnik.

Fully-professed members of the military-religious Order of Saint John of Jerusalem took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The vow of poverty meant that technically they owned no property which they could bequeath in a will, though in reality brethren needed to travel, to acquire armour and clothing, and generally to move in secular society. All such wealth, in some cases considerable, was supposed on a Hospitaller’s death to revert to the Order as his spolia, concerning which there was much statutory legislation and many disputes as to who should receive the deceased’s goods. A Hospitaller’s possessions might be very modest or might include large sums of money, extensive property, houses, estates and even slaves, together with a wide variety of plate and domestic items.

* No ORCID-number.

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A statute passed or confirmed in 1262 decreed that in the central Convent, then in
Acre, a critically ill frater had to reveal his possessions and assets. However, breth-
ren could, with superior licence, make a despropriamentum through which they
could list special legacies to pay their servants, settle debts and so forth. There was
seldom reason for such written texts to survive, since the case of a Hospitaller dy-
ing in a place in which there was no Hospitaller community and in consequence
a need for a written document was likely to be unusual. It did, however, occur at
Dubrovnik in 1396.

The Hospitaller Fr. Barras de Barras very probably came from the Provençal
family which provided two leading Hospitaller Priors of Saint-Gilles in the thir-
teenth century. In 1330 a Fr. Barras de Barras was a former Commander of
Saint-Pierre-Avez in Provence east of the Rhône, and in 1338 Barras, Ferran and
Guillaume de Barras were noble donats of the Hospital. A Fr. Barras de Barras
went to Rhodes with horses and armour at some point between 1365 and 1374;
then travelled to the Priory of Hungary with Fr. Raymond de Beaumont, Prior of
Hungary between 1374 about 1384; and was thereafter resident in the West, prob-
ably in Provence. From Avignon on 5 February 1392 the Master Fr. Juan Fernández
de Heredia wrote to Rhodes instructing that Fr. Barras, who was returning to Ro-
des, be granted seniority there. He was on Rhodes in 1396 but died at Dubrovnik
on or after 30 December 1396, possibly early in the following month.

1 Jochen Burgtorf, “The Order of the Hospital’s High Dignitaries and their Claims on the Inhe-
ritance of Deceased Brethren – regulations and conflicts,” in Autour de la Première Croisade, ed.
Finances of the Commander in the Hospital after 1306,” in La Commanderie: Institution des
Ordres Militaires dans l’Occident médiéval, eds. Anthony Luttrell and Léon Pressouyre (Paris:
Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, Ministère de l’Éducation nationale Ministère
de la Recherche, 2002), 277–283; Pierre Bonneau, “Les Hospitaliers de Rhodes au regard de
leur Vœu de Pauvreté au XVe siècle (1420–1480),” Imago Temporis: Medium Aevum 7 (2013):
538–559.

2 Anthony Luttrell, “Les femmes hospitalières en France méridionale,” Cahiers de Fanjeaux 41

3 Anthony Luttrell and Anne-Marie Legras, “Les hospitaliers autour de Gap: une Enquête de

4 Benoît Beaucage, Visites générales des commanderies de l’Ordre des Hospitaliers dépendantes du
Grand Prieuré de Saint-Gilles (1338) (Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 1982), 200,
382.

5 Malta, National Library of Malta, Archives of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, Cod. 325,
f. 67v–68 (61v–62); background in Zsolt Hunyadi, “The Military Activity of the Hospitallers
in the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary (Thirteenth to Fourteenth Centuries),” in The Hospitall-
ers, the Mediterranean and Europe: Festschrift for Anthony Luttrell, ed. Karl Borchardt, Nikolas
Jaspert, and Helen J. Nicholson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 201; id., The Hospitallers in the
Fr. Barras’ *despropriamentum* was entered in the town’s register of wills at Dubrovnik on 30 December 1396 under the heading *Testamentum Fratris Baraxij ordinis Templariorum de Rodo.* Before the rector of the city and various witnesses his possessions were recorded in the Venetian language used there. The sick man listed his “harness”, which may have included some armour or even a horse, and all his crossbows and his bed, all of which were on Rhodes. He had with him 190 gold ducats and four silver cups. He left 90 ducats to reconcile his soul, presumably in memorial masses. He also had with him two silver belts, one large and one small, and a gold piece worth about 17 ducats. Fr. Johan de Richtenberg owed him 20 ducats. With him were his coat of camelsot and a small robe which he left to “distribute for the love of God.” He also had a galley bed which his left to his valet, a steel body plate, and three rings. All these items he left in the hands of the treasurers at Dubrovnik to be sent to Rhodes. He added to the list a piece of silver worth 16 ducats. An entry in the margin of the same folio in the register of wills recorded that on 9 September 1397 Fr. Antonio de Rivara formally took possession of Fr. Barras’ goods and monies. His career and seniority brought Fr. Barras no office or fixed income. He was evidently a knight brother in possession of his weapons, a valet and some personal items, yet his wealth was very moderate at less than 200 ducats.

Fr. Barras, who left his belongings on Rhodes, may have been at Dubrovnik in December 1396 on his way Westwards from Rhodes on some mission, possibly to Hungary where he had had some experience. The Master of the Hospital Fr. Philibert de Naillac, elected on Rhodes on 6 May 1396, had recently been closely involved with King Sigismund of Hungary following the defeat of the Latin crusade at Nikopolis on the Danube, and Fr. Barras could have been travelling to oversee some arrangement for the Hospitallers in Hungary. It was also possible that Naillac had taken Fr. Barras, with his Hungarian background, to Nikopolis. Fr. Barras may have been travelling with Sigismund since his *despropriamentum* was drawn up at Dubrovnik on 30 December, the day or the day after Sigismund, who spent some days at Dubrovnik, left on his long journey back from Nikopolis to Hungary. The Hospitaller Master had travelled with one or more galleys from

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*Medieval Kingdom of Hungary c.1150–1387* (Budapest: Magyar Egyháztörténeti Enciklopediá Munkaközösség. Department of Medieval Studies at Central European University, 2010), 61.

6 Dubrovnik, State Archives, Testamenta VIII, f. 90v.


8 The precise date is unclear: Ciro Truhelka, „Chronikalische Notizen im Liber Reformatio-
nun des Archivs in Ragusa,” *Wissenschaftliche Mitteilungen aus Bosnien und der Herzogovina*
Rhodes to Nikopolis where, probably on 25 September 1396, he and various Hospitallers took part in the battle against the Ottoman forces of the Sultan Bayezid. Johannes Schiltberger, who was there, later described how Sigismund and a few companions escaped down the Danube on Naillac’s vessel. Jean Froissart, who was not present but knew people who were, said that Sigismund escaped on a petite barge of Naillac. Ibn al-Jazarî, who was at the battle, said that Sigismund escaped by ship with approximately fifty persons. Sigismund seems later to have transferred, perhaps in the Bosphoros, to a Venetian galley.

Sigismund had been at Constantinople for some time when on 11 November he wrote to Naillac claiming to have reached the city just in time to prevent it falling to Bayezid. Since the sultan had been compelled to lift his blockade of Constantinople to march to Nikopolis where his troops suffered considerable losses, it was arguable that the Nikopolis crusade had, despite its disastrous conclusion, actually saved Constantinople. Sigismund’s letter stated that the Hospital’s Admiral, Fr. Palamedo di Giovanni, would explain matters to Naillac; the Admiral may have been at Nikopolis and may have stayed in Constantinople in order to...
deal with developments there. Sigismund’s letter called upon the Master to provide galleys, together with those of the Venetians, Genoese and Greeks, for the defence of the Byzantine capital. Fr. Barras could have been at Nikopolis and later in Constantinople with Sigismund, and could then have travelled with him to Dubrovnik. Since the Hospital’s Priory of Hungary had at that time fallen into the hands of seculars, some of whom rebelled against Sigismund, Fr. Barras conceivably, but hypothetically, died en route while on a mission to Hungary.

Source text

Dubrovnik, 30 December 1396


Primary sources:
Dubrovnik. State Archives, Testamento VIII, f. 90v.

17 Assuming that Naillac reached or passed by Constantinople before Sigismund’s arrival there.
19 Dubrovnik, State Archives, Testamento VIII, f. 90v.
20a Rings of soffilli, possibly sapphire; stopanco, possibly topazio or topaz; and garnet.


Secondary sources:


