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## HOSPITALLERS AND WOMEN IN SCANDINAVIA – MUTUAL SUPPORT

### KEYWORDS

*history; the Middle Ages; military orders; Scandinavian Studies; Kalmar Union; Hospitaller donate; donations; confraternitas*

### ABSTRACT

The Order of the Hospitallers had a privileged role in Scandinavia. In spite of this, only relatively few scholars have worked with the Order's Scandinavian history, and none specifically with its relationships to women. The aim of the present article is to discuss women's important role as donators and benefactors, what kind of agreements they could make of the Order, and the importance for the Order's planning and expansion of estate.

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The Order of the Hospitallers had a privileged role in Scandinavia. It was the only one of the international military orders to be established and have convents in the province of Dacia, encompassing the three kingdoms of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The Order generally enjoyed great royal favour throughout the Middle Ages and received large donations, making it one of the wealthiest ecclesiastical institutions at the time of the Lutheran Reformation in the 1520s, which itself led to the dissolution of the Hospitallers in the north.

In spite of this, only relatively few scholars have worked with the Order's Scandinavian history, and none specifically with its relationships to women.<sup>1</sup> It is the aim of this short article to give an impression of the relevant source material and discuss how much we can say about women and Hospitallers.

The Order's province of Dacia comprised all of Scandinavia, which was united in the Kalmar Union for most of the period between 1397 and 1520. However, severe internal problems and wars, especially between Swedish aristocrats and the Union kings, also led to conflicts within the Order, and in the late fifteenth century it was in practise split between a Danish/Norwegian branch and a Swedish one.

The first Hospitallers had come to Scandinavia in the latter half of the twelfth century. One convent was founded in Varne in southern Norway before 1194; four were founded in Sweden, with Eskilstuna as the oldest, stemming from the period 1162–1185. Denmark ultimately had ten Hospitaller houses, of which Antvorskov, probably founded in the mid-1160s, was the house of the prior for the entire province of Dacia. No other military orders had property or houses in Scandinavia, with the exception of one single house in Sweden belonging to the Teutonic Knights.<sup>2</sup>

The source material for the Scandinavian Hospitallers is not enormous. In recent years, some archaeological investigations have been conducted at their medieval houses and churches, of which some are relatively well preserved, while of others nothing is left above ground. As many as 2000 charters pertaining to the

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<sup>1</sup> Erik Reitzel-Nielsen, *Johanniterordenens historie med særligt henblik på de nordiske lande*, vols. I–III (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels forlag, 1984–1991); Janus Møller Jensen, "Fighting for the Faith. The Hospitallers and their Monasteries after the Reformation in Denmark," in *The dissolution of Monasteries*, ed. Per Seesko, Louise Nyholm Kallestrup, and Lars Bisgaard (Odense: University Press, 2019), 221–241, with ample references to literature.

<sup>2</sup> In Årsta south of Stockholm, cf. Christer Carlsson, "The Religious Orders of Knighthood in medieval Scandinavia: Historical and Archaeological Approaches," *Crusades* 5 (2006): 131–142; id., "Varne Hospitaller Commandery: An Archaeological Field Project," in *Archaeology and architecture of the Military Orders: New Studies*, ed. Mathias Piana and Christer Carlsson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 19–28.

Order are known, with c. 500 original documents and the rest known from entries in library catalogues or from other kind of documentation. Some are known from copy books, of which the one from Dueholm in Denmark has been edited, while the one from the main Swedish priory of Eskilstuna is still waiting for a scholarly edition and more detailed study.

## DONATIONS

Several charters confirm donations of land to the Order, and they were often issued by a couple together who owned the land, whereby the man and woman are mentioned together. It appears that women are mentioned, together with their husbands, more often in the original charters than in the registers in copy books or library catalogues. These sources often mention only the name of the man; however, no systematic investigation has been done on this topic yet. It is an example of what historian Anu Lahtinen has called, “the vagueness of information, which introduces possibilities for both over- and underestimating the role of women.”<sup>3</sup>

It is thus possible that the number of women involved in donations of land to the Hospitallers should perhaps be larger than those mentioned specifically in charters; nevertheless, women are indeed well represented. In all the copies of original charters in the diplomatarium from Dueholm convent between 1371 and 1539, approximately 50% of all donations are from single men, ca. 30% from single women and ca. 20% from couples, so women were involved in half of all cases involving the transfer of property to the Hospitallers.<sup>4</sup>

The provincial laws of the three Scandinavian kingdoms originally regulated women’s access to inherit and to own land in different ways, but since the mid-fourteenth century it became the common principle in all countries that daughters inherited half the share of brothers, but that they could be given a larger portion of the parents’ possessions either as part of the arrangements when they married, or as a voluntary decision done by their brothers. In principle, land that had been inherited should stay within the family and could only be sold or donated after

<sup>3</sup> Anu Lahtinen, “By love and by law. Choices of female donors in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Sweden,” in *Donations, Inheritance and Property in the Nordic and Western World from Late Antiquity until Today*, ed. Ole-Albert Rønning, Helle Møller Sigh, and Helle Vogt (London: Routledge, 2017), 148.

<sup>4</sup> The total number of donations to Dueholm is ca. 120–140, depending upon whether one looks solely at transference of property or also includes confirmations of former donations, pawns etc.

the legal heirs had been offered to buy it and declined. The legislation also put limits to the donations to religious institutions that either could not exceed 10% of the property, or in other cases maximum one brother's share of the inheritance. In both cases, the consent of the heirs was required.<sup>5</sup>

When married couples donated land or income to the Hospitallers together, it has thus been their common property. The husband, at least, could not dispose of it without the consent of his wife, and some donations are even given specifically "with the advice and consent of my dear wife."<sup>6</sup> In 1435, the knight Lyder Kabel and his wife Mette Jensdaughter donated land to Dueholm convent to raise an altar where masses should be read for St John the Baptist, Our Lady, and St Anna. After Lyder's death, his widow donated some more farms to have a mass sung in front of Corpus Christi altar every Thursday for his soul, the souls of her parents, and, when she had passed away, also for her own soul.<sup>7</sup>

Women could also make dispositions of land by themselves, without a husband. They were typically widows or close relatives. In 1472, for example, the two sisters Lady Cecilia and Lady Begga donated land in two places to Varne convent for masses on Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday every week for the soul of their father, the politically important member of the royal council Kolbjørn Gerst (d. 1466) and his children.<sup>8</sup> Many widows confirmed the donations their deceased husbands had made by themselves or together with their wives, and many added more property to what had already been donated, as in the case of the aforementioned Mette Jensdaughter. In such cases, however, the consent of possible heirs must have been secured beforehand, also in cases where it is not specifically mentioned in the sources.

Most of the donations are standard decisions, transferring property against a stipulated number of masses for named individuals. Sometimes, however, donors had special wishes. In 1407, Helene, the widow of the knight Ebbe Strangesen,

<sup>5</sup> Helle Vogt, *The Function of Kinship in Medieval Nordic Legislation* (Leiden: Brill 2010), 144–207; Lahtinen "By love and by law," 146–164; Mia Korpiola and Trolle Önnerfors, "Inheritance Law, Wills, and Strategies of Heirship in Medieval Sweden," in *Planning for Death. Wills and Death-Related Property Arrangements in Europe, 1200–1600*, ed. Mia Korpiola and Anu Lahtinen (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 40–44.

<sup>6</sup> *Dueholm Diplomatarium, Samling af Breve 1371–1539, der i sin tid ere opbevarede i St. Johannesklostret Dueholm paa Morsø*, ed. Oluf Nielsen (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1872), 6 of 1442: *met myn kiære husfrue Cristina Boszdatter raad och samthycke.*

<sup>7</sup> Undated, see: *Dueholm Diplomatarium*, ed. Nielsen, 182 of 1435.

<sup>8</sup> *Diplomatarium Norvegicum, Oldbreve til kundskab om Norges indre og ydre forhold, sprog, slægter, sæder, lovgivning og rettergang i middelalderen*, vol. 2, ed. Christian C. A. Lange and Carl R. Unger (Oslo: P.T. Mallings, 1851), 883, 1472.

gave her manor to Dueholm in exchange for two weekly masses for her husband and their children, but also stipulated that her anniversary should be commemorated “with devotion” each year by twelve priests singing masses and on the same day, “invite twelve poor to the table and serve them honourable and as lords with food and drink.”<sup>9</sup>

Donors obviously belonged to the upper strata of society: they were wealthy, and had possessions to transfer to the Hospitallers. Normally only their names are given; sometimes it is specified that they belonged to the knightly class and were a *miles* or *dominus*, or the corresponding Nordic *herra*, or in the case of women that they were married to a knight or the widow of a knight. Their high status is also obvious from the sheer amount of wealth transferred.

In 1312, the Hospitaller collector Franciscus Nicolai de Tibertis and two local Swedish Hospitallers made accounts to the curia of what they had collected in Sweden. Most sums were lumped together according to diocese, but the donation from one woman was treated separately. In an open letter, they stated that they had sold to the cathedral of Uppsala the land worth two öre that Ingrid had donated to support the crusades to the Holy Land (*in subsidium terre sancta*). Ingrid was the widow of Jacob of Asky, of whom we know nothing besides his name, but the donation was clearly made by Ingrid personally for the benefit of her soul. That the donation was mentioned separately by the collectors was partly because of the large sum it represented, and partly because of the sale. Land had to be exchanged for money, which was to be transported to the curia to help the crusades, but that had to be done at the local assembly and “according to law and the customs of the land,” as specified in the document.<sup>10</sup>

A puzzling exception to the high status of the benefactors is a donation from 1427 made by Abraham Skrædare – meaning ‘the tailor’ – and his wife Margit.<sup>11</sup> It consisted of land to the value of two örtug, not overwhelmingly impressive compared to Ingrid’s donation from 1312 of two öre, corresponding to 48 örtug. With inflation, it represented an even smaller sum in the first half of the fifteenth century than it would have in the early fourteenth.<sup>12</sup> The donation was given to Eskil-

<sup>9</sup> *Dueholm Diplomatarium*, ed. Nielsen, 171 of 1407: *eodem die xij pauperes ad mensam tanquam dominos in epulis et potibus ministrando decenter honorificent et pertractent.*

<sup>10</sup> Document dated 10 June 1312, *Svenska diplomatariets huvudkartotek* (henceforth as: SDHK), accessed 12 November 2023, <https://sok.riksarkivet.se/sdhk>, 2505.

<sup>11</sup> Document dated 14 September 1427, SDHK, 20901.

<sup>12</sup> Alf Ericsson, “Terra mediaevalis. Jordvärderingssystem i medeltidens Sverige” (PhD Diss., Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, 2012), 21–34 on value of land in Medieval Sweden.

stuna as a compensation because Abraham, while in prison, had promised to make a pilgrimage to St Olaf in Trondheim if he survived and was set free, but because of sickness and old age he was no longer able to fulfil the vow. The land was given with the provision that the heirs of Abraham and Margit later could claim it back against a payment of four mark, in local Swedish money. The social status of the couple does not appear to have been particularly elevated, as indicated by the value of the donation and perhaps by the name of ‘Tailor.’ On the other hand, however, this name was not totally unknown among the lower Swedish gentry and the rich town burghers of the fifteenth century. The background for their donation is unusual, and unfortunately we do not know why Abraham had been imprisoned. The donation letter is also interesting because of the use of pronouns.<sup>13</sup> It begins in plural so the donation is clearly on behalf of both man and woman, but it continues in first person singular with Abraham Skrædare describing what had happened and what he wanted to do. Margit was important for the economic transaction because of her right to the land, but the spiritual benefices of the transaction seem solely to have been to the advantages of Abraham.



Charter of Abraham the Tailor and his wife, Margit, 1427, donating a relatively modest plot of land to Eskilstuna. The seals of Abraham and his son both show the family's house-mark. They are of high quality and have probably been made by a goldsmith in a larger town and indicate an ambition to show status on a level with upper-class burghers. Photo: Riksarkivet, Stockholm.

<sup>13</sup> As pointed out by Charlotte Cederbom, *Married Women in Legal Practises. Agency and Norms in the Swedish Realm, 1350–1450* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 132.

## CONFRATERNITY LETTERS

The largest single source group mentioning women are the confraternity letters. They were privileges accepting couples or, more infrequently, individual women as members of the confraternity of a Hospitaller convent. They are relatively standardised and promise the couple that they, because of need and because of the benefices and donations they have given to the Order, shall enjoy the indulgences which the Order has collected and is collecting in all churches and convents in the entire world. The couple can participate in masses celebrated by the Order even during interdict, and they can be buried in the church, except if they at the time of death are excommunicated. Some charters add some more indulgence by special papal provision (see appendix). These privileges must have been quite common, because the charters were often written beforehand and with open space for the names of the beneficiaries, which were only added when the couple had accepted the agreement with the Order. Very early after the introduction of the printing press, these charters were printed and ready to be filled in.<sup>14</sup>

Some charters have been preserved from those entering the confraternity, specifying conditions and donations from their perspective – less detailed on the spiritual side, more on the material. Knight Ulf Asbjörnsson and his wife Christine Sigmundsdaughter donated in 1327 to “our beloved confratres the prior and brethren in Eskilstuna, for of God and because of our fraternity and consoritas” (*causa fraternitatis et consoritatis nostre*) annually two barrels of flour from their mills in Torshälla as long as they or their heirs had the mills, provided that their heirs could enjoy the same confraternity from the prior as they themselves did.<sup>15</sup> In 1366, their son, Marshall Karl Ulfsson and his wife, Helena Israelsdaughter, confirmed the donation with the same formulations and stipulations; that is, that they and their heirs should enjoy the same confraternity and privileges as Karl’s parents.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For example document from 1500, SDHK, 33959; and from 21 March 1519, SDHK, 3826; both from Eskilstuna.

<sup>15</sup> Document dated 17 February 1327, SDHK, 39801: *dilectis confratribus nostris priori et fratribus in eskelstunum pure propter deum et causa fraternitatis et consoritatis nostre, duas thyniones farine de redditibus de molendinis nostris in thorserghe prouenientibus siue molendine sint in nostra possessione siue heredum nostrorum, ... adiecto quod heredes nostri eadem confraternitale qua nos utimur, ab ipsis priori et fratribus et preuilegiis(!) eorundem nobis concessis utantur libere post nos et quiete.*

<sup>16</sup> Document dated 14 September 1366, SDHK, 8953.

In some cases, the scribe of the convent had apparently forgotten the name of the wife and only mentioned the husband “cum uxore.”<sup>17</sup> In a few cases, a couple was accepted into the confraternity together with their children, illustrating that such an arrangement was not only a kind of retirement for elderly couples.<sup>18</sup> In 1488, Orm was accepted into the confraternity of Varne together with his wife Lyff and their three children Liff, Wodhoff, and Lyff. In 1492, Helge Ulfssen and Gudrun Salmonsens were accepted together with their five children, who were not mentioned by name.<sup>19</sup> Two women, Katharina and Margaretha, along with three children, became members of the confraternity in Eskilstuna in 1512, and were listed together in the same letter, but we do not know whether they were related to each other or why they entered the convent together.<sup>20</sup>

Single women were also accepted into the confraternity without an accompanying man, sometimes as widows. In 1469, Asgerd Olafsdaughter became a member of the confraternity of Varne because of her needs and because of what she had done and would in the future do for the Order.<sup>21</sup> In other instances, women became members of the confraternity as single individuals while their husbands were still alive, and long before they died. In 1437, the rich priory of Antvorskov accepted Inger Bille (d. 1507), who was the daughter of a member of the royal council and was married to Johan Oxen (d. ca. 1491), also a member of the royal council and one of the mightiest men in Denmark at the time. Another example was Margrethe Bielke (d. 1507), who became a member of the confraternity in Antvorskov in 1466. She was the daughter of one member of the royal council and married to another, one Mourits Gyldenstjerne (d. ca. 1504).<sup>22</sup>

One letter from 1471 is unusual, and possibly a fraud: Peder in Tunby and his wife Gertrud were admitted into the confraternity of the Hospitallers in Eskilstuna, but their names have been added with another quill and clumsy letters, and below them are other names that have clearly been erased and are illegible

<sup>17</sup> E.g. for Varne in Norway 1488, *Diplomatarium Norvegicum, Oldbreve til kundskab om Norges indre og ydre forhold, sprog, slægter, sæder, lovgivning og rettergang i middelalderen*, vol. 1, ed. Christian C. A. Lange and Carl R. Unger (Oslo: P.T. Mallings, 1849), 959.

<sup>18</sup> *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, 2: 949 of 1488.

<sup>19</sup> *Diplomatarium Norvegicum, Oldbreve til kundskab om Norges indre og ydre forhold, sprog, slægter, sæder, lovgivning og rettergang i middelalderen*, vol. 10, ed. Christian C. A. Lange and Carl R. Unger (Oslo: P.T. Mallings, 1878–1880), 276 of 1492.

<sup>20</sup> Document from 1512, SDHK, 37112, without day.

<sup>21</sup> *Diplomatarium Norvegicum, Oldbreve til kundskab om Norges indre og ydre forhold, sprog, slægter, sæder, lovgivning og rettergang i middelalderen*, vol. 12, ed. Christian C. A. Lange and Carl R. Unger (Oslo: P.T. Mallings, 1886–1888), 238 of 1469.

<sup>22</sup> Reitzel-Nielsen, *Johanniterordenens*, I: 77–79.

now.<sup>23</sup> It may be a fraud because the letter stems from a collection of medieval manuscripts that belonged in the seventeenth century to a priest who is notorious for having added the names of his forefathers into original medieval documents. On the other hand, it may also simply be the result of a mistake made in the fifteenth century, by, for example, writing the names of a couple who already had received the privilege a second time. Parchment was too expensive to be thrown away, and therefore had to be re-used.

### DEFENDERS OF THE MARGINALISED?

In a few instances, the Hospitallers participated in negotiations that helped people who might otherwise have been in trouble. One concerned a woman, if only indirectly. In 1458, the Norwegian Thorleif Thorleifsson was sentenced to pay an enormous fine of eight mark of gold because he had had a sexual relationship with a certain Thora, and had made her pregnant. It appears that she had consented to the relationship: there is no indication that Thorleif was accused of rape. But Thora was the daughter of Thogils Gunnarsön who felt he had lost honour and wanted strong measures to be taken, and Thorleif was clearly not a socially suitable son-in-law. The following compromise was reached: Thorleif's payment of two gold mark was cancelled because of his poverty, and a third mark was replaced by pilgrimages to St Birgitta in Vadstena, St Olav in Trondheim, and to the Johannite convent in Varne.<sup>24</sup>

Another example concerned the heirs of the mighty Einar Olavsson Fluga, who had had a remarkable career supporting a Swedish rebel king against the ruler of the Kalmar Union, and was knighted by this Swedish king. Nevertheless, he later swung back to support the Union, and even became a member of the Norwegian council of the realm. The prior Olaf Claussen of Varne confirmed an agreement between the sister and the widow of Einar Fluga regarding the division of the inheritance, but also secured that the children Einar had had with his maid-

<sup>23</sup> Document dated 10 November 1471, SDHK, 29318 (dating uncertain, year has apparently been changed). Jan Liedgren, "Nils Rabenius' samling av medeltidsbrev och deras proveniens," in *Donum Boethianum. Arkivvetenskapliga studier tillägnade Bertil Boethius*, ed. Olof Jägerskiöld and Ake Kromnow (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1950), 244 note 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Diplomatarium Norvegicum, Oldbreve til kundskab om Norges indre og ydre forhold, sprog, slægter, sæder, lovgivning og rettergang i middelalderen*, vol. 3, ed. Christian C. A. Lange and Carl R. Unger (Oslo: P.T. Malling, 1853–1855), 613 of 1458.

servant could keep the presents he had given them and their mother, movable as well as immovable. Einar Fluga had wanted to provide for his children, including those born out of wedlock, and the Hospitallers guaranteed that his will was also respected after his death. With his high-ranking position, Einar Fluga must have known the convent in Varne well, and perhaps he had himself made the personal agreements with the prior about his children.<sup>25</sup>

Sources are so few that it prevents us from knowing whether the protection of those in exposed situations was a general principle of the Hospitallers in Scandinavia, but in the concrete cases that survive, it has certainly been of great significance for the individuals involved.

#### NUNS AND *DONATE*

Whether or not the Hospitallers in Scandinavia also had sister-convents has been discussed, but it is probably unlikely. Indications are few, and may mainly reflect a loose and imprecise terminology, which is not specific to the province of Dacia and its historians, but applies to the history of the Hospitallers in general.<sup>26</sup> There were good connections between the Hospitaller province of Dacia and the Order in Frisia, which had a remarkable large proportion of female Hospitaller convents.<sup>27</sup> It would not, therefore, have been surprising if there had also been many women among the Scandinavian Hospitallers, but the sources are simply too few to allow any definite conclusions regarding their existence and possible numbers.

Women attached to the Order in one way or another could sometimes be called sisters or consorores parallel to confratres. In 1332, a local nobleman on Funen in Denmark, Ebbe Pedersen, confirmed that he owed a sum of fifteen silver mark *sorori Cristinne de ordine sancti Iohannis*, “to sister Christine of the order of Saint John.” As collateral for the loan, Christine should have Ebbe’s farm in Brylle, “which she earlier has had in her possession.” If the loan was not repaid at the

<sup>25</sup> *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, 3: 692 of 1484.

<sup>26</sup> *Dueholm Diplomatarium*, ed. Nielsen, xvi; Reitzel-Nielsen, *Johanniterordenens*, I: 73–77. The imprecision in terminology was general, cf. Anthony Luttrell and Helen J. Nicholson, “Introduction: a Survey of Hospitaller Women in the Middle Ages,” in *Hospitaller Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anthony Luttrell and Helen J. Nicholson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Johannes A. Moll, “The Hospitaller Sisters in Frisia,” in *Hospitaller Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anthony Luttrell and Helen J. Nicholson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 179–207.

stipulated time, Christine should keep the farm as her full possession.<sup>28</sup> Christine's exact status within the Order is unclear, but the original loan document, with remnants of the witnesses' eight seals, was preserved in the archive of the Hospitaller convent in Odense. It strongly indicates that the loan was not repaid and Christine came into possession of the farm, which after her death was inherited by the Order.

One late source has puzzled historians: namely, one of the many maps of Danish towns and monuments made in the late seventeenth century by the antiquarian Peter Hansen Resen. When depicting the convent of Dueholm, he designated one of the buildings as "The grain house, former the nuns' house."<sup>29</sup> It is a separate building north of the church that opens to an enclosed garden on one side and is apparently not connected directly to the church, which could fit well with a house for nuns.<sup>30</sup> It is, however, a very late source and is not supported in this regard by any medieval ones, so it is unlikely that Dueholm had so many nuns in the Order that they had a large building for themselves.

Much better attested are the many *donate* who "gave themselves in to the Order" for the rest of their lives as a kind of retirement position. Sometimes the sources call them *donate*, or the Scandinavian equivalent, *ingivne*, sometimes sisters, and sometimes they simply "took the cross," without it being clear what that entailed. It must have given some special benefits to the donor, be they material or, more probably, spiritual. In 1447, Cecilie Pedersdaughter gave a donation to Dueholm on the condition that twelve priests should participate in her funeral and sing masses, and that she should receive the "same masses and good deeds as a sister who carries the cross." In case she should decide to take the cross, it should be given to her "for the same donation" (*for then samme fordeel*) that she gave in that charter. It indicates that taking the cross would normally have been accompanied by yet another donation.<sup>31</sup>

In at least one example, it was specified that the convent's right to inherit from the *donata* was not dependent upon whether she went through the ceremony of taking the cross or not. For example, "Ellen Michaelsdaughter donated and bequeathed to the aforementioned monastery all her movables and all her money in cash after her death, no matter whether she took the cross or not" (*Elnæ Michels-*

<sup>28</sup> *Diplomatarium Danicum*, ser. 2, vol. 10, ed. Carl A. Christensen (København: Munksgaard, 1948), 10 no. 354 of 12 March 1332.

<sup>29</sup> *Kornhusit, som forðum har været Nonnernes stue*. Drawing reproduced in Reitzel-Nielsen, *Johannerordenens*, I: 192.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. discussion in *Dueholm Diplomatarium*, ed. Nielsen, XV–XVI.

<sup>31</sup> *Dueholm Diplomatarium*, ed. Nielsen, 67 of 1447.

*datter oploth och wnta forde kloster alle hennes booskab och ander hennes rørenda panningh æffter hennes død e huat heller hwn togh kors eller ey).*<sup>32</sup>

This kind of retirement was open to couples and to single people of both sexes, but more women than men gave themselves to the Hospitallers in this way. Some donations were relatively big and included several clauses securing the spiritual and material needs of the donor. In 1422, Cecilie Esgesdaughter, widow of knight Tage Nielsen, donated three entire farms to the Hospitallers in Dueholm in exchange for the convent providing her with housing for the rest of her life and with pasture for three cows. When she had died, the donation should cover a weekly mass at the altar of St Mary Magdalen in the Hospitaller church for the soul of Cecilie and her parents “for ever.”<sup>33</sup>

The different donations could hold different specifications for what the Hospitallers should provide the *donate* with, such as grass for one or a small number of cows, wood for heating, or some specified amount of grain. Some letters are more laconic and just list the property “which she gave and paid for her food” (*som hon gaff och betaladhe för sin kost*).<sup>34</sup> Sometimes, the heirs later disputed the donation with the argument that the Hospitallers had not provided the *donata* with what had been promised. That, at least, must be the explanation for why the nephew of *donata* Inge Torkilsdaughter made an official declaration after her death that Dueholm had delivered the yearly stipend to her according to the agreement, and that he left the convent and monks *quittos et penitus excusatos*, totally free from any obligations. At the same time, he renounced any right to the mill that his aunt Inge had donated to Dueholm.<sup>35</sup>

Some convents used the possibility for long-term investments in property development. The Hospitallers in Eskilstuna owned enough land adjacent to their convent that they could allot a plot to the *donate* who could build a new house on it, which they left to the convent in exchange for being provided for for the rest of their lives. In 1470, Margrethe Olufsdughter made the agreement with Eskilstuna that she would get a plot of land to develop, and after her death “the house shall belong to the monastery and not be inherited by anyone.” When the house had been furnished with all that Margrethe needed, she should give to the brethren one barrow – the scribe has forgotten to write of what – every year, “as it is the

<sup>32</sup> *Diplomatarium Danicum*, accessed 11 November 2023, <https://diplomatarium.dk/dokument/14240904002>, 4 September 1424, concerning a donation to Dueholm.

<sup>33</sup> *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, 1: 21, 25, 26.

<sup>34</sup> Document dated 29 August 1446, SDHK, 25004, Eskilstuna and Vårfrueberg.

<sup>35</sup> *Dueholm Diplomatarium*, ed. Nielsen, 78 of 14 August 1423.

custom.” In this case it seems that the *donata* not only had to cover all expenditures for the building, but also had to pay an annual rent.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the plot had previously been donated to the convent by Margrethe’s deceased husband, Lord Niels Klose, and included a hall (‘saal’) and the living space within a house that was not yet finished. He had apparently begun the building, and his widow now promised to complete it so that a proper building could be handed over to the convent after her death.

The Hospitallers in Odense had their convent on the outskirts of the centre on the way towards the harbour, and could invest in developing the area and in the construction of townhouses. Prospects from the late sixteenth century show how the church and the big monastery were surrounded by fenced gardens with vegetables and fruit trees, and how a row of small houses had been built along these gardens and give shape to the streets that are still part of Odense’s topography, and have not changed since the Middle Ages. We lack sufficient documentary evidence to prove it, but from the location it seems most probable that these houses were built on the initiative of the Hospitallers to accommodate men and especially women in the later phases of their lives.

*Donate* were generally wealthy, and the financially less fortunate could not afford the donations necessary for the Hospitallers to provide them with accommodation and food in their old age. They were referred to general hospitals, or Hospitals of the Holy Spirit, in the cities. There are indications in the sources that there sometimes was a cooperation between the Order of St John and the Holy Spirit hospitals, whereby they supported each other and shared resources and administration, but few details are known. The convent in Ribe took over the responsibility for the Saint George Leprosy Hospital on the outskirts of the city in 1523, which involved the care for the sick and the reading of masses in the chapel of the leprosy hospital.<sup>37</sup> The convent of Dueholm claimed a right to the Holy Spirit Hospital in Nyköping Mors, which was disputed by the city council and the local bishop, but after six years the king decided in favour of Dueholm.<sup>38</sup> The convent in

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<sup>36</sup> Document dated 2 June 1470, SDHK, 29119. *I sua maatho ath hon skall for<nävn>da tompth oppbyggia och ægha i syns liiffs tyma Och æpter hænne dødth skall for<nävndi>da gardh Clostrena tilhøra. och ey till arff gaa Æn sydhan gaardhen ær vpbygdhen met hwsom hon behøffw<er>. Skall hon huarth aar brødhra thonno giffwa som sidhen ær och tidhen sigh haffuer.*

<sup>37</sup> Reitzel-Nielsen, *Johanniterordenens*, I: 180.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

Horsens had both a hospital located at the cemetery near the Order's church and the leprosy of Saint George outside the city.<sup>39</sup>

### QUEENS AD DONORS

Queens were obliged by their status to give big donations to religious institutions, including the Hospitallers, but in addition to pious intentions there may sometimes also have been some political considerations involved in their choice of whom to benefit.

Queen Margaret (d. 1412) was the mastermind behind the 1397 foundation of the Kalmar Union, which united Norway, Denmark and Sweden under one ruler.<sup>40</sup> Already in 1386–1387, large groups among the Swedish aristocracy were dissatisfied with the Swedish King Albrecht Mecklenburg, and agreed to contact Margrethe and ask for her son, Oluf, to also become king of Sweden. During these negotiations, Margrethe had asked “persistently and with pious wishes” for a relic of Saint Eskil. The shrine was opened during a long ceremony by the general visitor of the Hospitallers, the prior and brethren of Eskilstuna, and large group of lay magnates, with processions and singing, and a part of the saint was taken out and donated to Margrethe. This happened on 3 August 1387, on the same day that Oluf died in one of the Danish castles in Scania. Ten years later, on 3 August 1397, the prior and convent of Eskilstuna declared and confirmed that the relics they had taken from the shrine actually came from Saint Eskil. The declaration was made only c. two weeks after the meeting in Kalmar that had finally established the Union. Margrethe had sought the support of the Hospitallers, maybe politically but certainly spiritually.<sup>41</sup>

The relationship with the Hospitallers was reinforced in the following years with substantial donations. In some cases, these were followed by declarations from individuals denouncing any ownership to the land that Margrethe gave away. In 1403, Margrethe gave land in five different locations to Eskilstuna, and two widows of mighty noblemen declared, together with their sons, that they had no right to this land. Margrethe had continued the policy of her father, King Valdemar IV,

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>40</sup> For Queen Margaret's pious donations, see: Vivian Etting, *Queen Margrete (1353–1412) and the Founding of the Nordic Union* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 120–127.

<sup>41</sup> Reitzel-Nielsen, *Johanniterordenens*, I: 308–309.

namely that of bringing back under the authority of the crown land and castles that had been seized or bought or received in fiefs by magnates. The land given to Eskilstuna may have been property that Margrethe had forced the widows to cede to her, and which she had decided to donate to the Hospitallers to ensure that it would get out of lay control.<sup>42</sup>

Later queens continued to favour the Hospitallers, especially Queen Christine (d. 1521), who gave regularly to the convent in Odense. It is, however, difficult to find any pattern in the donations or any direct political connection.

Women did not only donate land. Most of the liturgical items from Hospitaller churches in Scandinavia have disappeared or are today without any secure provenience. In a few instances, however, we do have information about the donors, and they were most often women. Helene, widow of Frederick Wordenberg, donated a gold chalice to Antvorskov in 1467. A gilded patena and chalice were donated in 1503 by Cecilie, widow of Toben Bille.<sup>43</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Women's connections to the Scandinavian Hospitallers have never before been studied in any detail. An important reason for this is certainly the very few sources but also a – natural and understandable – perspective focusing on the Hospitallers as a military order and their connections to the crusading movement. In Scandinavia, the Hospitallers were also involved in a few spectacular disputes with ecclesiastical authorities, and were marred by a division between the Danish and the Swedish branches of the province during the fifteenth century. In these contexts, women had had little or no immediate presence.

The result of a search for women in the sources is not greatly surprising. As in other Hospitaller provinces, the Scandinavian houses also attracted women in a variety of ways: as benefactors with small or big donations, in land or in kind, as *donate*, and as retired pensioners. Some even took the cross as sisters, although we do not know exactly what that entailed. The Hospitaller sources also confirm what historians of Scandinavian medieval history have been increasingly aware of

<sup>42</sup> *Diplomatarium Danicum*, accessed 12 November 2023, [https://diplomatarium.dk/search?from\\_date=12-11-1403&to\\_date=12-11-1403&search=](https://diplomatarium.dk/search?from_date=12-11-1403&to_date=12-11-1403&search=) and [https://diplomatarium.dk/search?from\\_date=14-10-1404&to\\_date=14-10-1404&search=](https://diplomatarium.dk/search?from_date=14-10-1404&to_date=14-10-1404&search=), 12 November 1403 (three documents), 14 October 1404 (two documents).

<sup>43</sup> Reitzel-Nielsen, *Johanniterordenens*, I: 154.

during the latest generation of studies; that is, that women had an important voice in decisions concerning economic and religious transactions.

## APPENDIX

*A typical standard confraternity letter, from Varne convent 1484.*<sup>44</sup>

Wniversis Christi fidelibus ad quos presentes litere peruenerint ffrater Olaus Nicolai prior sacre domus hospitalis ordinis sancti Johannis Jerosolimitani in Varne totusque conuentus ibidem salute in domino sempiternam. Nouerint vniuersi nos exigentibus suis meritis et beneficiis nobis et ordini nostro pie impensis et in posterum per dei gratiam impendendis discretum virum Ølffwer Haralsson cum vxore Groo Bærffwlffsdoth<sup>45</sup> jn sanctam fraternitatem ordinis nostri beniuole recepisse. s(t)atuentes et facientes ipsos participes omnium benefactorum nostrorum spiritualium videlicet matutinarum horarum missarum vigiliarum vesperarum et aliorum diuinorum officiorum factorum et faciendorum jn predicti ordinis nostri domibus ecclesiis capellis et oratoriis a prima fundacione ordinis et sic ad finem eiusdem per ambitum tocius mundi vniuersum gracia diuina largiente. hac sibi gracia addente quod vbicunque interdictum fuerit generale siue speciale januis claussis missas audire valeant et diuinis interesse. Jpsis autem mortuis ecclesiastica sepultura sibi minime denegetur nisi quod deus auertat publice sint excommunicati vel nominatim interdicti. Jtem Johannes papa xxiius xxx annos et xxx kareas pro testamento et totidem pro sepultura eis in domino relaxat. jtem Gregorius papa magnus dat eis remissionem omnium peccatorum oblitorum. jtem Honorius papa 3us in fine cuiusdam priuilegii sic dicit quod secundum deuocionis affectum et subsidij quantitatem fraternitatem sancti Johannis Jerosolimitani summentibus veniam omnium peccatorum jn domino pollicemur. Datum Varne anno domini mdlxxxiiijo.

<sup>44</sup> *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, 3: 949.

<sup>45</sup> Ølffwer Haralsson cum vxore Groo Bærffwlffsdoth *added later*.

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