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# CONTENTS

## I. STUDIES AND ARTICLES FROM THE 16<sup>TH</sup> ORDINES MILITARES CONFERENCE

<i>Philippe Josserand</i> (Nantes) Grenze(n) und geistliche Ritterorden in der lateinischen Welt des Mittelalters .....	7
<i>Damien Carraz</i> (Clermont-Ferrand) <i>Sub eiusdem pacis et treugue Dei defensione</i> . Die Ritterorden und der Frieden in Südfrankreich im 12. Jahrhundert .....	17
<i>Alan Forey</i> (Kirtlington) The Participation of the Military Orders in Truces with Muslims in the Holy Land and Spain during the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries .....	41
<i>Shlomo Lotan</i> (Ramat-Gan) The Battle of La Forbie (1244) and its Aftermath – Re-examination of the Military Orders’ Involvement in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem in the mid-Thirteenth Century .....	53
<i>Jürgen Sarnowsky</i> (Hamburg) Die Ritterorden und der Krieg von St. Sabas .....	69
<i>Pierre Bonneaud</i> (Uzès) Negotiation and warfare: The Hospitallers of Rhodes around and after the Fall of Constantinople (1426–1480) .....	81
<i>Helen J. Nicholson</i> (Cardiff) The Hospitallers’ and Templars’ involvement in warfare on the frontiers of the British Isles in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries .....	105

## II. OTHER STUDIES

- László Pószán* (Debrecen)  
Der Deutsche Orden im mittelalterlichen Ungarn ..... 123
- Christian Vogel* (Saarbrücken)  
Meisterwahlen in den mittelalterlichen Ritterorden – Johanniter, Templer  
und Deutscher Orden im Vergleich ..... 137

## III. MISCELLANEOUS AND OTHER MATERIALS

- Paweł A. Jeziorski* (Toruń)  
Das Verzeichnis der von Hochmeister Ludwig von Erlichshausen  
Begnadigten. Eine Quelle zur Geschichte der hochmeisterlichen  
Landrundreise in den Jahren 1450–1451 ..... 157

## IV. BOOK REVIEWS AND BOOK NOTICES

- Documents Concerning Cyprus from the Hospital's Rhodian Archives: 1409–1459*,  
ed. Karl Borchardt, Anthony Luttrell, Ekhard Schöffler (*Jürgen Sarnowsky*) ..... 203
- Zsolt Hunyadi, *The Hospitallers in the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary c. 1150–  
–1387* (*Gábor Bradács*) ..... 204
- Bernhart Jähmig, Verfassung und Verwaltung des Deutschen Ordens und seiner  
Herrschaft in Livland (*Piotr Oliński*) ..... 206
- Máté Molnár, *A templomos lovagrend alkonya* (*Ádám Debreczeni*) ..... 208
- Nicholas Edward Morton, *The Teutonic Knights in the Holy Land 1190–1291*  
(*Krzysztof Kwiatkowski*) ..... 211
- Anat Peled, *Sugar in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. A Crusader Technology between  
East and West* (*Shlomo Lotan*) ..... 213
- Jürgen Sarnowsky, *Die Templer* (*Maria Starnawska*) ..... 215
- Jürgen Sarnowsky, *Die Johanniter. Ein geistlicher Ritterorden in Mittelalter und  
Neuzeit* (*Krzysztof Kwiatkowski*) ..... 217
- Magdalena Satora, *Sprawa templariuszy w dyplomacji zachodnioeuropejskiej 1307–  
–1312* (*Piotr Oliński*) ..... 221
- Tannenberg – Grunwald – Žalgiris 1410. Krieg und Frieden im späten Mittelalter*,  
hrsg. v. Werner Paravicini, Rimvydas Petrauskas, Grischa Vercamer (*Krzysztof  
Kwiatkowski*) ..... 222



PIERRE BONNEAUD (Uzès, France)

NEGOTIATION AND WARFARE:  
THE HOSPITALLERS OF RHODES AROUND  
AND AFTER THE FALL OF CONSTANTINOPLE  
(1426–1480)

At the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Order of the Hospital, unlike the Temple, had managed to safeguard its image as a religious military order still able to pursue its mission to fight against the enemies of the Christian faith.<sup>1</sup> After its departure from Acre in 1291 and its conquest of Rhodes and several Dodecanese islands in 1310, it had received the full backing of Pope Clement V and been given the patrimony of the abolished Temple. The Pope had been convinced by Master Foulques de Vilaret that Rhodes would provide the Christian faith with a military base able to face the Turks of Anatolia and the Mamluks of Egypt and to ultimately recover Jerusalem. As both Templars and Hospitallers had been severely and rather unfairly criticised for their failure to defeat the Moslems in Palestine the Order was bound to prove that it had still the will and the capacity to do the job.

During the fourteenth century, the Hospitaller fleet, which generally amounted to fewer than ten vessels (including ships hired by the Order or privately owned by Hospitaller brethren), took part in several attacks against the Turkish emirates of Anatolia, and in various leagues and campaigns with the Papacy and Venice in 1334 and 1344. In 1365 four Hospitaller galleys joined the crusading fleet of King Pierre I of Cyprus who sailed from Rhodes, raided the Delta coasts of Egypt and sacked Alexandria. On land, they had been entrusted by the Pope with garrisoning the harbour castle of Smyrna which was captured in 1344, but lost in 1402 when Timur invaded Anatolia and Syria. Seven years later, around 1402, the Hospital

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<sup>1</sup> Our archives sources are the following: Archives of the Order of Malta, Valleta (henceforth: AOM) and Archivio Secreto Vaticano, Reg.Vat., Rome (henceforth: ASV, Reg.Vat.)

built the castle of St Peter, an impressive fortress on the former site of Halicarnassus on Turkish soil, facing the Hospitallers' island of Cos. The Order also tried rather unsuccessfully to settle in continental Greece, that is in Achaëa and in the Peloponnese where they fought to defend Corinth against the Ottomans.<sup>2</sup> Overall, while the Hospital conducted its military and mostly naval activities against the Moslems it was not seriously threatened in return by its enemies.

This situation changed radically during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, because of the belligerence of the Sultan of Mamluk Egypt and, more importantly, because of the powerful expansion of the Ottoman Turks, as a result of which Rhodes was constantly exposed to the threat of invasion. All this started in 1426 with the invasion of nearby Cyprus by the Mamluks. The Sultan of Egypt, who also reigned over the territories that the Christians had lost, wanted to protect and develop the vital spice trade but he was angered by the frequent attacks on his ships by the King of Cyprus and by pirates who operated or sheltered in Rhodes. After Cyprus Rhodes became his target and, after being first raided in 1440, in 1444 the island suffered a landing and a forty days siege by the Mamluks, who were driven off.<sup>3</sup>

With the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottoman Turks became the major threat to the Order when Mehmed II, after having expanded in the Balkan and Danubian regions, undertook to dominate Aegean and continental Greece. After Master Jean de Lastic refused to pay Mehmed a yearly tribute of 2,000 ducats, a state of war developed with repeated raids and incursions of Ottoman vessels against the Rhodian archipelago.<sup>4</sup> The Hospitallers joined in the crusade proclaimed by Pope Calixtus III and the port of Rhodes became the logistic centre of operations for the fleet which had been dispatched by the Pope between 1456 and 1458.<sup>5</sup> During the sixteen-year war between Venice and Mehmed II the Order contributed, although in a limited way with only two galleys, to the league set up

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<sup>2</sup> For a complete synthesis of the military and naval activities of the Hospitallers from 1310 to 1426, see A. Luttrell, *The Hospitallers of Rhodes and their Mediterranean World*, Aldershot 1992, cap. II (The Hospitallers of Rhodes Confront the Turks, 1306–1421) and XIX (The Military and Naval Organization of the Hospitallers of Rhodes, 1310–1444) and idem, *Sources for Turkish History in the Hospitallers' Rhodian Archive, 1389–1422*, Athens 2008, pp. 35–90.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to J. Bosio, *Dell'Istoria della sacra religione e illustrissima militia di S. Giovanni Gierosolomitani*, 3 vols., Rome 1629, here vol. 2, still a most valuable published source of information for the whole of this period, pp. 196–221.

<sup>4</sup> R. Valentini, *L'Égeu dopo la caduta di Costantinopoli nelle relazioni dei Gran Maestri di Rodi*, Bolletino dell'Istituto storico italiano per il medio evo e Archivio Muratoriano 51 (1936), pp. 137–168.

<sup>5</sup> P. Paschini, *La flotta di Callisto III (1455–1458)*, Archivio della società romana di storia patria 103–105 (1930–1832), pp. 177–254.

by Pope Sixtus IV, Venice and the King of Naples.<sup>6</sup> A major attack against Rhodes was expected at any time until the 1480 siege, when the Ottomans, who had landed with an overwhelming force, failed to take the town after three months of hard fighting. The death of Mehmet II shortly after and the subsequent internal strife over the succession among his sons gave several years relief to the Order.

During a fifty-five year period, the Hospitallers of Rhodes had to face the danger of massive attacks from enemies superior to them in number and resources. They had to develop a new strategy to take account of their difficult situation. The Hospital never was a strong naval power and it could not conduct any major naval campaign of its own, but acted as a partner in leagues involving such major allies as Venice, Rome or Naples. In peace time it operated only 2 armed galleys, one of them patrolling around the islands with forty brother knights on board. The number of galleys could be doubled in time of war and augmented by armed vessels privately owned by Hospitaller knights or hired at great expense from merchants or corsairs.

Defence of the islands could be efficiently organised by making use of forts and castles but around 1420, most of the defences still dated from Byzantine times. It soon became clear to the masters and the convent that they should give absolute priority to building up strong fortifications in Rhodes as well as castles along the coasts of the islands. They also had to provide enough armamenta, ammunition and food to face long sieges by their enemies.

The combined costs of vessels, mercenaries, weapons, food and construction of fortifications, as well as the cost of the increased number of brothers summoned to the convent for its defence, provoked a huge and unending financial crisis. The situation of the convent and Treasury of Rhodes meant they could not face a permanent state of war. From 1426 to 1480, there was an endless series of wars and peace negotiations and truces which we shall now proceed to analyse more thoroughly.

### I. WARFARE AGAINST THE MAMLUKS: 1426–1444

After the fall of the kingdom of Jerusalem, with the expulsion of the last Western Christians from Acre and the other coastal ports of Palestine and Syria, the Mamluk empire had become the “greatest power in the eastern Mediterranean”.<sup>7</sup> During

<sup>6</sup> Bosio, *Dell’Istoria* (as n. 3), vol. 2, pp. 333–335.

<sup>7</sup> See R. Irwin, *Islam and the Crusades, 1096–1699*, in: *The Oxford History of the Crusades*, ed. J. Riley-Smith, Oxford 1999, pp. 246–250.



the 14<sup>th</sup> century the Mamluk authorities, who were often divided over the succession of their sultans and were faced with the difficulties and costs of recruiting new Mamluks did not conduct any aggressive military policy but were primarily concerned with the profits they could obtain from the spice trade with Venice and Genoa.

*Warfare with the Mamluks under Antoni de Fluvià, Master of the Hospital (1420–1437)*

This situation changed under Sultan Al-Asraf Barsbay (1422–1438) who developed a successful war-fleet and threatened Cyprus and Rhodes. This change of attitude was due to the need for the Mamluk authorities to increase their income from the spice trade, mostly because the products of their land revenues were decreasing and because of the increase in the salaries and other benefits the sultan had to provide for his royal Mamluks.<sup>8</sup> However, the spice trade was greatly disturbed by the pirates, mostly Catalans and Genoese, who were operating in the Eastern Mediterranean and found shelter as well as markets for the sale of their booty on Rhodes and in Cyprus.

King Janus of Cyprus, a descendant of Pierre I who was known by the Mamluks for having attacked their coasts and sacked Alexandria with the help of the Hospitallers, angered the sultan by protecting and openly encouraging piracy. Moreover King Alfonso the Magnanimous of Aragon, who had pledged to protect Cyprus and Rhodes, had broken with his predecessors' traditionally peaceful policy towards the sultan and the Alexandrian merchants. He had favoured pirate raids against the principal Egyptian harbour and Barsbay had responded by putting Catalan merchants in jail in Alexandria.<sup>9</sup> The fact that Master Antoni de Fluvià was a Catalan and that many merchants of the same origin used Rhodes as their base in the Levant led the sultan to consider the Hospitallers there as strong allies of King Alfonso.

In 1423 and 1424 Barsbay's fleet repeatedly raided the coasts of Cyprus and Janus retaliated in the same manner along the Egyptian coasts. In 1426, the Mamluks invaded Cyprus and defeated the king's army in Khirokitia (Choirokoitia), and captured the king who was taken as a prisoner to Cairo.<sup>10</sup> Janus was ransomed for

<sup>8</sup> See F. J. Apellaniz Ruiz de Galarreta, *Pouvoir et finance en Méditerranée pré-moderne: le deuxième état mamelouk et le commerce des épices (1382–1517)*, Barcelone 2009, p. 116; A. Darrag, *L'Égypte sous le règne de Barsbay (825–841/1422–1438)*, Damas 1961.

<sup>9</sup> D. Coulon, *Un tournant dans les relations catalano-aragonaises avec la Méditerranée orientale: la nouvelle politique d'Alphonse le Magnanime (1416–1442 environ)*, in: *XVI Congresso Internazionale di Storia della Corona d'Aragona (Napoli 1997)*, Napoli 2000, pp. 1055–1079.

<sup>10</sup> L. de Mas Latrie, *Histoire de l'île de Chypre sous le règne de la maison de Lusignan*, 3 vols., Paris 1852–1861, vol. 2, p. 506, passim.



200,000 ducats after he agreed to become a vassal of the sultan and to pay a yearly tribute of 5,000. Rhodes was traditionally a faithful ally of the Lusignan dynasty and possessed important interests in Cyprus, notably with the sugar cane producing commandery of Colossi. Fluvià arranged the payment of the ransom with a Venetian loan guaranteed by the Order and he paid 15,000 ducats from his own funds. Rhodes was then expected to be the next target of the sultan as, according to Constantin Marinescu, 'Egypt declared war on the Order of the Hospital who had sent armed help to King Janus during the invasion'.<sup>11</sup> However, information is scant about the help given by the Hospital while Cyprus was attacked. Mas Latrie mentions an intervention on land by the Italian Hospitaller Angelo Muscetola and the sailing of four galleys, two from Rhodes and two from Catalonia.<sup>12</sup> It may be that the Catalan ones were the galleys which sailed from Barcelona under the command of the Catalan commander Joan Descarrigues.<sup>13</sup>

Although King Alfonso the Magnanimous offered to provide an armada to protect Rhodes and Cyprus for four months, Fluvià was reluctant to expose the convent to warfare for which it was not prepared and he opted for peace negotiations with the sultan. Galceran Suarez, a Castilian knight close to King Janus who had been taken to Cairo as a prisoner, was probably instrumental in obtaining a truce<sup>14</sup>. Fluvià also sent as a personal envoy the Catalan merchant Pere de Casasaja who also helped King Alfonso's ambassadors to conclude a trade treaty between the king and the sultan. This treaty was signed in Rhodes in 1430 and it seemed that the preference for peaceful trade relations between Barcelona, Alexandria and Rhodes would be stronger than any desire for war.<sup>15</sup> However, the Mamluks threatened Rhodes again a few years later when, in 1433, Fluvià summoned Hospitallers from the Western priories to sail to the convent 'because of the war with the sultan'.<sup>16</sup> The situation had probably deteriorated because of a fresh surge of piracy but also because the Catalan merchants were hostile to an increase in the sultan's

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<sup>11</sup> C. Marinescu, *La politique orientale d'Alphonse V d'Aragon, roi de Naples (1416–1458)*, Barcelone, 1994 p. 58; P. Bonneaud, *Els Hospitalers catalans a la fi de l'Edat Mitjana. L'orde de l'Hospital a Catalunya i a la Mediterrània, 1396–1472*, Lleida 2008, p. 155.

<sup>12</sup> Mas Latrie, *Histoire de l'île de Chypre* (as n. 10), vol. 2, pp. 539, 542.

<sup>13</sup> Bonneaud, *Els Hospitalers catalans* (as n. 11), p. 155.

<sup>14</sup> Idem, *Le prieuré de Catalogne, le couvent de Rhodes et la couronne d'Aragon, 1415–1447*, Millau 2004, p. 280.

<sup>15</sup> D. Coulon, *Négociar avec les Sultans de Méditerranée orientale à la fin du Moyen Âge. Un domaine privilégié pour les hommes d'affaires*, in: *Négociar en la Edad Media / Négociar au Moyen Âge*, ed. M. T. Ferrer i Mallol, J. M. Moreglín, S. Péquignot, M. Sanchez Martinez, Barcelone 2005, pp. 520–523.

<sup>16</sup> Bonneaud, *Le prieuré de Catalogne* (as n. 14), p. 139.

monopoly of the spice trade.<sup>17</sup> Although there is no indication of any actual fighting, Rhodes was under a tense alert when Fluvià died in 1437 and was succeeded by the prior of Auvergne, Jean de Lastic, as master of the Hospital.

*Warfare with the Mamluks under Master Jean de Lastic*

In 1438, Lastic sought confirmation of a former truce agreement negotiated by the Hospital and the Ottomans by sending the prior of the church of St John at Rhodes as an envoy to the Ottoman ruler Murad, because he had heard of an alliance between the Turks and the Mamluks. Let us emphasize at this stage that it was a major and obvious strategy for the Hospital to maintain peaceful relations with the Moslem power which would be, at this time, the lesser threat to Rhodes. But the master's envoy was turned down because, unlike his predecessor Barsbay, the new Sultan of Egypt, Jakmak, had favoured an alliance with the second major Moslem power in the Levant.<sup>18</sup>

The conflictive situation with the Mamluks had become very tense. In order to collect information on the sultan's intentions Lastic sent two missions captained by the Hospitallers Pere Torelles, a Catalan, and Bertrand Jameron, from the priory of Aquitaine, to spy along the coasts of Egypt; they came back with a news that several galleys were being armed in Alexandria.<sup>19</sup> In September 1440 eighteen Mamluk galleys sacked the Hospitaller island of Castellorizo and came into view of Rhodes harbour. They were forced to retreat by a smaller Hospitaller flotilla consisting of eight galleys, four *naves* and a few other vessels. A naval skirmish then occurred on the nearby Turkish coast where the Mamluks suffered heavy losses and sailed back to Alexandria after sacking Hospitaller villages near the commandery of Colossi on Cyprus. The master sent letters to the Pope and Western princes to publicize his success and issued calls for help because it was expected that the sultan would attack Rhodes again with a more important fleet.<sup>20</sup> Lastic was declaring that Sultan Jakmak considered himself as a new "Alexander of Macedon" and that, with the help of Ottoman gold, he had become a great threat for the whole of humanity.

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<sup>17</sup> Apellaniz Ruiz de Galarreta, *Pouvoir et finance* (as n. 8), p. 114; et D. Coulon, *Barcelone et le grand commerce d'Orient au Moyen Age. Un siècle de relations avec l'Égypte et la Syrie-Palestine (ca 1330–ca 1430)*, Madrid–Barcelone 2004, pp. 51–52.

<sup>18</sup> Bosio, *Dell'Istoria* (as n. 3), vol. 2, p. 212; et Darrag, *L'Égypte* (as n. 8), p. 401.

<sup>19</sup> Marinescu, *La politique orientale* (as n. 11), p. 67.

<sup>20</sup> AOM 354, fol. 103r–v.

Although Lastic tried to negotiate a truce with the sultan with the backing of the King of Aragon, the prospect of war materialized around 1443.<sup>21</sup> The Mamluks had again raided Castellorizo and the Senate of Venice had warned the Republic's galleys against sailing from Crete to Beirut because Egyptian galleys were cruising south of Rhodes.<sup>22</sup> The master had taken several measures in order to be ready to face a new attack. The 1440 chapter general had met right after the first Mamluk attack and reorganized several defence offices reassessing the missions of the Marshall and the Admiral. These two high officials were conventual bailiffs with a seat at the master's council: the Marshall, issued from the Auvergne Langue, had an overall authority over the Order's military activities while the Admiral who belonged to the Italian Langue, was in charge of the navy and of the Rhodian *marinarii* who gave service on the Order's ships. The chapter also prescribed reinforced inspections of the arsenal and of the crossbowmen in charge of defending the master's palace. More knights from the Western priories had been ordered to sail from Barcelona to Rhodes, notably the *Castellan de Amposta* Joan de Vilagut, who was summoned to the convent with nine commanders or brother knights of his priory, all of them with arms, horses and servants. Vilagut was also asked to look for the support of Aragonese or Catalan knights willing to come and fight in the Levant.<sup>23</sup> Galleys had been hired from a corsair from Valence, Jaume de Vilaragut and from the Sicilian Angelo Sorni, while the Grand Commander Jean de Cavaillon had decided to arm a galley in Provence at his own expense.<sup>24</sup> Lastic had also undertaken to have the ramparts of Rhodes repaired or completed and ordered the commander of Cos and Nissyros, the admiral Fantino Quirini, to strengthen the forts of these islands and to buy artillery and ammunition.<sup>25</sup> Among other measures, Lastic authorized all those who had fled Rhodes for criminal behaviour to come back to the island for a five-year period provided they had committed bloodshed, arson or treachery.<sup>26</sup> The master probably thought that these men could serve as soldiers or mercenaries.

In face of the increasing war manoeuvres of the sultan it seems that in June 1444 Lastic took the decision to attack Alexandria when Joan de Vilagut in com-

<sup>21</sup> Marinescu, *La politique orientale* (as n. 11), pp. 10–11.

<sup>22</sup> F. Thiriet, *Regestas des délibérations du Sénat de Venise concernant la Roumanie*, 3 vols., Paris–La Haye, 1958–1961, here vol. 3, docs 2617, 2640.

<sup>23</sup> AOM 354, fols. 103v–104r; Bonneaud, *Els Hospitalers catalans* (as n. 11), pp. 250–251.

<sup>24</sup> Bosio, *Dell'Istoria* (as n. 3), vol. 2, p. 217.

<sup>25</sup> Z. Tsirpanlis, *Anecdota Eggrapha gia te Rodo kai ti Noties Sporades apo to archeio JoanitonIppoton, 1421–1453*, Rhodes 1995, doc. 128, pp. 404–407; Jean-Bernard de Vaivre, *Les Hospitaliers au Lango. Le château de Narangia*, Société de l'Histoire et du patrimoine de l'Ordre de Malte, Bulletin 25 (2011), pp. 4–48.

<sup>26</sup> Tsirpanlis, *Anecdota Eggrapha* (as n. 25), p. 72.

mand of a galley of the order and the corsair Jaume de Vilaragut with his own ship captured of a Genoese galley loaded with ammunition and provisions for the Mamluks.<sup>27</sup> The Genoese ship was then taken to Rhodes. The timing of this act of piracy was enough to initiate the conflict because the sultan could not count upon help from the Ottomans who were faced with the armed rebellion of the Emir of Karaman in Anatolia as well as with the crusade which the King of Poland and Hungary was preparing north of the Straits with the support of a papal and Burgundian fleet.

As expected, the Mamluks retaliated in August 1444 by sending an 85 galley armada with 18,000 soldiers and artillery to Rhodes. After attacking Castellorizo where the castle was destroyed, the Mamluks landed in Rhodes and besieged the town for forty days. At sea the Hospitallers had available eight galleys, five of which had been hired from Catalans merchants and corsairs operating in Rhodes as well as the galleys dispatched by the Duke of Burgundy and captained by the knight Geoffroy de Thoisy and the Hospitaller, Reignault de Confida.<sup>28</sup> The attackers were unable to enter the town and lost one of their two bombards in a sortie conducted by Vilagut and Thoisy. The Mamluks finally departed after failing to conquer the Hospitallers' island and repeat their success against Cyprus of 1426. This was a great success for Lastic and a bitter failure for the sultan who did not attempt to repeat his assaults against Rhodes as the master and the Pope had first dreaded. As we shall see, Lastic soon negotiated peace arrangements with the sultan and also renewed in 1444 the truce which had been signed previously with the Ottoman Sultan Murad in 1444.

### *Consequences and lessons drawn from warfare against the Mamluks*

The 20 years of alarm and warfare with the Mamluks under Fluvià and Lastic may appear to be a somewhat short period compared to the 70 years of enmity with the Ottomans which started, for the Hospitallers, with the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and ended with their expulsion from Rhodes in 1523 by Suleyman the Magnificent. However, the experience of the wars with the Mamluks determined the strategy which was to be followed against the Ottomans.

<sup>27</sup> Bosio, *Dell'Istoria* (as n. 3), vol. 2, p. 218; Marinescu, *La politique orientale* (as n. 11), p. 94; and AOM 356, fol. 171v.

<sup>28</sup> Marinescu, *La politique orientale* (as n. 11), pp. 93–95; et J. Paviot, *Les Ducs de Bourgogne, la Croisade et l'Orient (fin XIV<sup>e</sup> et XV<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Paris 2003, pp. 100–102.

From a strict military point of view, the fortifications of the town had withstood well the assaults during the siege; they would be repaired and extended all around the coasts of the main island and on the minor ones. The small Hospitaller fleet which had not exceeded at most ten to fifteen vessels, half of which had had to be hired, could patrol, spy and harass the enemy but could not win a sea battle against an eighty-ship fleet nor impede its landing on the island. The Hospitallers were obliged to concentrate on defence rather than on attack

Lastic had done as much as possible to face the Mamluk assaults at a very high cost, which started a lasting financial crisis and a colossal spiral of debt for the Order. At the time of the 1444 siege, 68,000 ducats of Rhodes had been spent on mercenaries during four months and 17,000 écus a month had been spent on the galleys.<sup>29</sup> The cost of additional Hospitaller knights brought to Rhodes, with their salaries and provisions, was exceptionally heavy. In spite of the efforts of Lastic to reduce costs and raise new subsidies from the Western priories, the financial crisis could not be mastered and a year after the siege the Order's debt amounted to nearly 150,000 ducats.<sup>30</sup> Disputes over possible solutions revived quarrels, among the convent officials, between the three French Langues and the so called other four minor Langues, all of which weakened Lastic's authority.<sup>31</sup>

Overall, the need to give priority to improving the defences of Rhodes and its Archipelago and the obsession for making the finances healthier led the master and his officials to be very cautious and restrain from provoking any fighting with the infidels. The preferred approach was to reach peace arrangements through negotiation. However, the expansion of the Ottoman and the attempts of the papacy to contain it obliged the Hospitallers to take up arms against this a major enemy of the Christian faith.

## II. WARFARE WITH THE OTTOMANS

So far, Rhodes had not been overly concerned with the Ottoman threats as long as their expansion was focused on the Danubian and Balkan areas. When Sultan

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<sup>29</sup> J. Sarnowsky, *Macht und Herrschaft im Johanniterorden des 15. Jahrhunderts. Verfassung und Verwaltung der Johanniter auf Rhodos (1421–1522)*, Münster 2001, p. 566; and Bosio, *Dell'Istoria* (as n. 3), vol. 2, p. 220.

<sup>30</sup> See P. Bonneaud, *La crise financière des Hospitaliers de Rhodes au XVe siècle (1426–1480)* to be published in: *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 42 (2012), 2.

<sup>31</sup> P. Bonneaud, *Le difficile exercice du pouvoir par le maître Jean de Lastic, 1437–1454*, Société de l'Histoire et du Patrimoine de l'Ordre de Malte, *Bulletin* 26 (2012), pp. 27–32.



Murad died the peace treaty signed with the Order in 1444 was ratified by his successor Mehmed II in 1452.<sup>32</sup>

In 1453 the Order was faced with the likely consequences of the fall of Constantinople and with Mehmed II's aim to dominate all of Greece and the Aegean islands. Two months after the loss of the city, Lastic sent missives to the Order's Western priories in which he stressed with great foresight the dangers to come and the isolated situation of the convent which needed a massive influx of knights for its defence.<sup>33</sup> The Ottoman ruler sent an ambassador to Rhodes to demand payment of a yearly tribute of 2,000 ducats, similar to those he had imposed on the Genoese outposts and the Aegean princes, and as a result of the master's refusal the peace treaty had been broken. Lastic summoned commanders and knights to the convent with their arms, horses and servants to defend Rhodes against any Ottoman attack. He also convoked a chapter general in Rhodes to take place in June 1454 but his death shortly before this date postponed the meeting, which was held under his successor Jacques de Milly in September.

Under Lastic's four successors Jacques de Milly, Pere Ramon Sacosta, Battista Orsini and Pierre d'Aubusson warfare and negotiations intermingled. Before 1453 the papacy had backed or organized campaigns in order to stop the Ottoman expansion, the last such being the support given to the King of Hungary's expedition along the Danube in 1444. Eugenius IV had armed a fleet in Venice with contributions from the Republic and the Duke of Burgundy, but this costly operation did not prevent the crossing of the Straits by the Ottoman forces, which defeated King Władysław III (ung. Ulászló I) at Varna.<sup>34</sup> Master Philibert de Naillac and some Hospitaller knights had been on the previous Hungarian expedition in 1396 which had also ended in disaster. In 1444 Lastic could not consider sending any knights to Varna because the Mamluks were attacking Rhodes at the same time. However, a Hospitaller knight from Provence, Honoré de Curcuron, sailed on one of the Burgundian galleys.<sup>35</sup>

After the fall of Constantinople the popes tried to rally kings and princes and revive the Crusade ideal in order to take back the territories which had been lost to the Moslems in the Levant and to stop the expansion of the Ottomans along the Danube and the Balkans which endangered Italy. The Papacy naturally requested the Hospitallers to join any crusading force. The Order had always provided the

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<sup>32</sup> Bosio, *Dell'Istoria* (as n. 3), vol. 2, p. 240.

<sup>33</sup> Tsirpanlis, *Anecdota Eggrapha* (as n. 25), doc. 308; et Valentini, *L'Egeo* (as n. 4), pp. 159–164.

<sup>34</sup> Marinescu, *La politique orientale* (wie Anm. 11), pp. 95–99.

<sup>35</sup> AOM 14, Parchment 12.



Church with a small but prestigious and capable fighting force and its Rhodian military base was very valuable.<sup>36</sup>

As early as September 1453, Pope Nicholas V issued a call for a crusade, promising six months' indulgence to all those who would participate, and ordered five galleys to be armed in Venice but he died before he could organize any expedition. At the 1454 Rhodes chapter general, the Hospital had agreed that if a crusade was initiated by the Pope or any Christian prince against the Ottomans, the Order would participate by spending up to 20,000 florins which would be levied on its Western priories.<sup>37</sup>

In 1455, Nicholas' successor, Calixtus III, faced with the lack of support from most of the kings and princes, decided to act on his own. As a first stage he appointed the Archbishop of Tarragona, Pedro Urrea, as his legate as well as captain of a small fleet which, by the spring of 1456, totalled sixteen vessels.<sup>38</sup> Among the first contributors to this fleet was the Hospitaller Prior of Pisa, Antonio de Frescobaldi, with his own galley. Calixtus furthermore decided that he should not only rely upon hired vessels and that the papacy itself should build and arm galleys on the River Tiber. The creation of an arsenal by the Pope had never occurred before. In view of the importance of his projects, Calixtus appointed Cardinal Luigi Trevisano as his legate in the Levant with military power over the fleet and spiritual power, in the name of the Pope, over all territories in the Mediterranean and Balkan areas from Sicily to Asia Minor, including the Rhodian Archipelago. In June 1456 Trevisano sailed from the Tiber docks to Naples in charge of new galleys and proceeded eastwards via Naples and Sicily before reaching Rhodes by the end of December. In the meantime the vessels captained by Urrea, including the Prior of Pisa's galley, had been losing time around Maltese waters where they had captured and looted a Venetian galley which was carrying on trade from Barbaria to Venice. Calixtus, pressed by the Venetian ambassador, had to condemn and dismiss Urrea and Frescobaldi.<sup>39</sup> The Ottomans meanwhile had been attacking several Aegean islands including Hospitaller Cos and had taken possession of the Northern Aegean

<sup>36</sup> About the late Crusades the major works we have consulted are L. Pastor, *Histoire des papes depuis la fin du Moyen âge*, transl. F. Raynaud, vol. 2, Paris 1925; K. M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant, 1204–1571*, vol. 2, Philadelphia 1976–1984; and N. Housley, *The Later Crusades. From Lyons to Alcazar (1274–1580)*, Oxford 1992. About the part played by the Hospitalers, see Valentini, *L'Egeo* (as n. 4); and to P. Bonneaud, *La Papauté et les Hospitaliers de Rhodes aux lendemains de la chute de Constantinople (1453–1467)*, in: *La Papauté et les croisades / The Papacy and the Crusades*, ed. M. Balard, Farnham 2011, pp. 201–216.

<sup>37</sup> AOM 282, fol. 19v–20r.

<sup>38</sup> Refer to Paschini, *La flotta* (as n. 5), pp. 177–234.

<sup>39</sup> M. Navarro Sorni, *Alfonso de Borja, papa Calixto III, en la perspectiva de sus relaciones con Alfonso el Magnánimo*, Valencia 2005, pp. 458–467.

islands of Thassos, Lemnos and Samotracia as well as Phocea on Anatolian soil. Until Calixtus' death at the end of 1458, Trevisano's fleet was successful in regaining control of the three lost islands and in opposing an Ottoman attack and siege on the island of Lesbos which was governed by the Genoese Gattilusio family. However, the cost of the campaign was too high and few results were obtained, so that after the death of Calixtus in 1458 the fleet was disbanded and recalled to Italy.

Apart from Frescobaldi, several Hospitaller knights, all of them Catalans or Valencians, volunteered or received commands in the Trevisano fleet at one time or another.<sup>40</sup> Four of them were close to King Alfonso of Aragon and spent most of their time at the Naples court rather than at the Rhodes convent: such was the case with Pere de Biure who had usurped the commandery of Tortosa with the approval of the king, Joan Barutell who had been a prominent captain of Alfonso's army at the time of the conquest of Naples, Carlos de Torelles, commander of Castellote, and Ramon de Siscar, commander of Valencia. Joan Rotllan was a relative of the Pope.<sup>41</sup> Two important Hospitaller knights, however, were first rank officers of the convent: Juan de Alcañiz was an Aragonese brother priest, also commander of Barbastro, who had had a long experience in Rome as a proxy of the master at the *curia romana*. He was appointed in 1456 by Calixtus as general treasurer of the fleet which he joined shortly after in Sicily.<sup>42</sup> Jaume de la Geltrú, then bailiff of Majorca, who had spent most of his life in Rhodes and had been a captain of the castle of St Peter, was chosen in 1457 as captain of a papal galley which, after the end of the expedition, remained in Rhodes.<sup>43</sup> The case of Joan Claver is interesting. This brother knight who lived at King Alfonso's court in Naples was the brother of the king's vice-chancellor Valentin Claver and, due to the royal influence, he had received from the master the Aragonese commanderies of Chalamera and Uldecona and been made a capitular bailiff of San Stefano de Monopoli in Apulia, an important office which allowed him to be a member of the master's council. Although he was seen as a king's man, he was well regarded at the convent where Lastic had granted him exceptionally the *ancianitas* career rights reserved to those who resided on Rhodes. When Calixtus' legate Cardinal Trevisano and his fleet

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<sup>40</sup> Refer to J. Rius Serra, *Catalanes y Aragoneses en la Corte de Calixto III* (Biblioteca Balmes), Barcelona 1927, Apendix, pp. 124 nn.

<sup>41</sup> On these Catalan Hospitallers, refer to P. Bonneaud, *Un débouché fréquent pour les cadets des différentes aristocraties catalanes: étude sur 283 chevaliers catalans de l'ordre de l'Hôpital au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle (1396–1472)*, Société de l'Histoire et du Patrimoine de l'Ordre de Malte, Bulletin 29 (2009), pp. 13–35.

<sup>42</sup> Paschini, *La flotta* (as n. 5), p. 210.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

stopped at Naples on their way to Sicily and Rhodes, it was expected that fifteen vessels which Alfonso had promised to equip would join the expedition but the king had only been able to finance the armament of one galley. Juan Claver who owned his own ship, the *Ballena*, also joined the fleet, possibly with three other vessels equipped at the Hospitallers' own expense.<sup>44</sup> On its way to Rhodes, the fleet attacked and regained the island of Thassos from the Ottomans and Commander Juan Claver was killed, presumably during the battle on 15 December 1448.<sup>45</sup>

On Rhodes, Master Jacques de Milly had been trying to improve the fighting capacity of the Hospitallers at sea. Gonzalvo Quiroga, Prior of Castile, had been appointed as Captain general of the sea and was equipped with a *galera nova*. Sartorius Canapi, a man of Rhodes, was in charge of arming galleys for the convent.<sup>46</sup> The Order also made use of armed vessels owned by several brother knights such as Andrea de la Croce whose *galiota* cruised along the coasts of Anatolia in order to spy on the movements and military preparations of the Ottomans. The Prior of England, John Langstrother, the Commander of La Rochelle, Bertrand Jameron, and several Catalan knights were among the numerous Hospitallers mentioned as patrolling with their own ships in the area.<sup>47</sup>

From the time Trevisano arrived at Rhodes in the last days of December 1456 after recapturing the Northern Aegean islands, Rhodes became the logistic base of operations for the fleet. In a letter to Charles VII, King of France, Pope Calixtus claimed that no effort had been spared to help the convent of Rhodes who received from the papacy 'soldiers, provisions, money and a splendid armed *galeazza*'.<sup>48</sup> Although information is scarce, undoubtedly several knights of Rhodes fought along with the papal fleet, as is related by an Italian knight from Padua who visited Rhodes in 1458.<sup>49</sup> Bosio also reports that Hospitaller knights and soldiers had been sent to the island of Lesbos when it was attacked by an Ottoman fleet which was fought off by Trevisano's force.<sup>50</sup> While the Hospitallers were involved in the crusade, the Ottomans attacked the Rhodian archipelago several times. Between 1455 and 1457, the castle of Landimachio on the island of Cos was besieged for 20 days, Turkish troops disembarked in Rhodes at Arkangelos, devastating the area

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<sup>44</sup> Navarro Sorni, *Alfonso de Borja* (as n. 39), p. 491.

<sup>45</sup> AOM 367, fol. 61r-v.

<sup>46</sup> AOM 365, fol. 258v.

<sup>47</sup> AOM 73, fol. 69v; AOM 365, fol. 182v; AOM 369, fol. 270r-v.

<sup>48</sup> Pastor, *Histoire* (as n. 36), pp. 320-321.

<sup>49</sup> F. Cardini, *L'Europe en 1492, portrait d'un continent* (Solar Club, France loisirs), Paris 1989, p. 178.

<sup>50</sup> Bosio, *Dell'Istoria* (as n. 3), vol. 2, p. 256.

and taking away Rhodian peasants for slavery, while the islands of Simi, Leros, Calamos and Nyssiros were repeatedly raided.<sup>51</sup>

When in 1463 Calixtus's successor, Pius II, decided to launch a new crusade which he would lead personally, Master Pere Ramon Sacosta and his council decided to arm five galleys, one of which would be captained by Sacosta himself. But Pius died in Ancona when the fleet he had assembled was going to sail to the Aegean, and the crusade was cancelled. By the time, Venice had started a sixteen-year war against the Ottomans who had attacked several of the Republic's settlements in the Peloponnesus. The relations between the Order and Venice had always been difficult and furthermore the port of Rhodes was not necessary to the Venetian fleet which had its own bases in Modon, Negroponte and Crete. However, when in 1470 Negroponte was besieged by the Turkish fleet and lost, the Hospital sent two galleys as reinforcements.<sup>52</sup> In 1472 the Hospital joined the League organized by Pope Sixtus IV in support of Venice. The fleet comprised 85 galleys, including the Venetian ones plus 20 which were supplied by the Pope, 17 by the King of Naples and only 2 by the Order. This armada attacked the Turkish coasts and even briefly captured over Smyrna but did not achieve anything beyond raids and looting. Lack of finance had compelled the Order to limit its participation to an almost symbolic presence but its mission of fighting against the Ottomans was in theory being fulfilled.

Between 1453 and 1480, Rhodes was continuously in a state of alert and under the permanent threat of a massive Turkish attack. The masters collected information from their spies in Turkey and from the small armed ships which were dispatched along the coast in order to trace the movements of the Ottoman fleet. Other Ottoman raids and incursions against the smaller islands of the Archipelago, similar to those experienced at the time of Calixtus's crusade, occurred in 1460, 1464, 1469, 1471 and 1477, leading to subsequent plundering and destruction.<sup>53</sup> In 1460, the small island of Simi was attacked by a Turkish fleet of 40 vessels with 7,000 men on board who were driven off by the local population. The inhabitants of Simi were rewarded with a reduction of 200 florins in the 600 florins tribute they used to pay to the Order.<sup>54</sup> At the approach of Turkish vessels, the inhabitants of the coastal areas were ordered to shelter in the Hospitaller forts and castles.<sup>55</sup> The smaller islands were more difficult to defend than Rhodes or the castle of St Peter at Bodrum on the Turkish coast. Many of the inhabitants of these

<sup>51</sup> Valentini, *L'Egeo* (as n. 4), p. 150–151.

<sup>52</sup> Bosio, *Dell'Istoria* (as n. 3), vol. 2, p. 318.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 272, 290, 315, 326, 367.

<sup>54</sup> AOM 370, fol. 217v–218r.

<sup>55</sup> Bosio, *Dell'Istoria* (as n. 3), vol. 2, p. 349.

minor islands deserted their lands and moved to Rhodes.<sup>56</sup> After the end of Pope Calixtus's crusade and until the great siege of 1480, the actual fighting of the Hospitallers against the Ottoman consisted only of occasional skirmishes, especially when enemy ships were cruising near the Archipelago or raiding its islands. In such cases the Order temporarily hired a galley or a *bergantine* or requested the help of armed vessels owned by Hospitallers.<sup>57</sup> However, during a twenty-year period the Hospitallers endeavoured above all to negotiate truces and peace arrangements.

### III. THE QUEST FOR PEACE

The traditional mission of the Hospitallers was to fight against the Infidels and ultimately to recover Jerusalem, which had been lost by Christendom. The image of the Order as a community of devoted fighters always prepared to attack the enemy was constantly put forward and they were sometimes characterised as *Athletas Christi*.<sup>58</sup> However, by the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, circumstances prioritised defence over offensive activities and reasons for establishing peace were overwhelming. In the situation of warfare in which the Order was involved on sea and on land, it was usual that truces and temporary peace arrangements would separate periods of combat. First of all it wanted to avoid having galleys sailing during the winter months; the summer was most appropriate for raids against the enemy's lands in order to destroy the crops just before they would be ready to be collected. The vessels were generally armed for four-month periods and when a campaign was over, time and money were needed to prepare the next one. Truces were current and often easy to negotiate. However, the Hospital needed longer peace arrangements and would prefer to conclude treaties rather than mere truces.

#### *The reasons for peace arrangements*

The limited military means of the Order and the shortage of funds combined to impede an ambitious attacking policy. We have already pointed out how the adequate measures taken by Lastic to stop the Mamluk attacks had led to a grave financial crisis. Under Milly and Sacosta this crisis became abysmal. The debt in-

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 326.

<sup>57</sup> AOM 73, fol. 37v, 67r, 69v.

<sup>58</sup> S. Pauli, *Codice diplomatico del sacro ordine militare Gerosolomitano oggi di Malta*, Lucca 1737, doc. CXIV, pp. 134–135.



creased from around 150,000 Rhodian ducats in 1446 to 287,929 écus (roughly 360,000 ducats) in 1466. Such a quantity amounted to ten years of the estimated normal spending of the convent, the reasons for such a situation being the costs of warfare, the increase in the number of knights at the convent, the works of improving the defences of Rhodes and its islands, the reluctance of the western commanderies to pay the *annates* the convent kept imposing on them, and an insufficient reduction of the other expenses of the convent. To this had to be added the cost of the debt, that is the interest paid to the western merchants who were advancing the funds. The crisis reached such an unbearable point that Pope Paul II had to convoke a chapter general which he presided over in Rome. He decreed a five-year moratorium on all debts of the Order and imposed drastic austerity measures at the convent.<sup>59</sup>

The lack of funds impeded any costly spending on arming vessels and hiring mercenaries, but improving the defence of Rhodes, especially by repairing and completing its fortifications, was a priority for all masters. After Fluvià, who had started building ramparts all around the *burgus* of Rhodes, Lastic continued this military work. According to A. Gabriel, he erected towers on the south-west flanks of the master's palace, built the gate of St Anthony and the tower of St Mary.<sup>60</sup> Lastic was also anxious to improve the defences of Rhodes harbour by constructing a tower on the wharf of the mills.<sup>61</sup> Sacosta built the tower of St Nicholas at the entrance of Mandraki creek which was financed thanks to a grant of 10,000 grant by the duke of Burgundy, he also completed the Tower of the Mills and started the construction of Archangelos castle a few miles south of Rhodes along the coast.<sup>62</sup> Both the solution of the financial problems and the improvement of the defences of Rhodes required a long pause in military operations.

The trade activities in Rhodes needed also a peaceful environment. As the agricultural production of the islands was insufficient for the needs, the convent needed supplies of fresh food from the nearby Anatolian shores. It also imported great quantities of cereals from Sicily, Southern Italy or Cyprus in order to store them in case of long sieges. Most of all the Western trade with the Levant was an important source of profit for the Hospital. This international trade does not appear to have suffered much from warfare in the Aegean as the West was still in need of spices, sugar, cotton and other Oriental goods.<sup>63</sup> Under the Hospitallers' rule since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Rhodes had become an active and safe trade centre

<sup>59</sup> See Bonneaud, *La crise financière* (as n. 30).

<sup>60</sup> A. Gabriel, *La Cité de Rhodes, MCCX–MDXXII*, Paris 1923, 2 vols., here vol. 1, pp. 106, 109.

<sup>61</sup> Tsirpanlis, *Anecdota Eggrapha* (as n. 25), doc. 251.

<sup>62</sup> Bosio, *Dell'Istoria* (as n. 3), vol. 2, pp. 293, 312.

<sup>63</sup> E. Ashtor, *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, Princeton 1983, pp. 445–447.



in the Eastern Mediterranean area. After the fall of Constantinople, Rhodes may even have taken advantage of the trade restrictions in the northern Aegean, now under Ottoman control. Its port was the final destination of many ships as well as a busy storage and exchange centre for many kinds of goods from East and West. For those who were sailing further south to Alexandria, Rhodes was a stopover where they could take on board a pilot familiar with the route, but where they would also buy and sell some of their cargo.<sup>64</sup> This business explains the presence, permanent or temporary, of an important group of merchants from the West which Lastic and his successors favoured. Between 1426 and 1480 we can identify about 200 merchants who carried on trade in Rhodes and benefited from the activity of the port.<sup>65</sup> The majority of these traders were Catalans and Genoese; others were Venetians, Florentines or French. Documentation about safe-conducts also informs us how the Order welcomed supplies of oriental goods by allowing the Western merchants sailing to Alexandria to bring back Moorish merchants on their return to Rhodes.<sup>66</sup> These Moslems were given protection, allowed to disembark their merchandise and to buy and sell according to their needs. Safe conducts were also given to several Moors from Egypt or even to Turks from Anatolia to bring supplies to Rhodes with their own ships or even to establish their *factors* in the town.<sup>67</sup>

On all imports and exports the Order's treasury collected the 2% *commercium* tax. Other levies were the *gabella vini et biscotti*, the *gabella ponderis farinae* and the tax *catene et porto Rodi*, established in 1462 for all ships entering the harbour. The income from such taxes was essential as it was fully dedicated to financing the defensive constructions.<sup>68</sup>

The Hospital relied on Western merchants to operate several of the Order's activities. The production of soap in the *saponeria* of Rhodes as well as the collection of taxes were farmed to influential Venetian, Genoese and Catalan merchants. Others were entrusted with diplomatic or financial missions abroad. But most of all this wealthy community acted as the Hospital's bankers by advancing funds to

<sup>64</sup> C. Carrère, *Barcelone, centre économique à l'époque des difficultés (1380–1462)*, Paris–La Haye, 1967, 2 vols., here vol. 2, pp. 640–641.

<sup>65</sup> See P. Bonneaud, *The Influential Trade Community of Western Merchants in Hospitaller Rhodes during the Fifteenth Century, 1421–1480*, in: *Heidelberg International Conference, Union in Separation-Trading Diasporas in the Eastern Mediterranean (1200–1700)* [to be published].

<sup>66</sup> Among other references, AOM 363, fol. 264v (1452); AOM 364, fol. 211r–v (1453); AOM 368, fol. 230v (1458); AOM 371, fol. 222v (1461); AOM 384, fol. 4r (1468).

<sup>67</sup> AOM 362, fol. 208r–v (1450); AOM 364, fol. 211v–212r (1453); AOM 384, fol. 81r–v (1473).

<sup>68</sup> On the various taxes levied at Rhodes, see: Sarnowsky, *Macht und Herrschaft* (as n. 29), pp. 447–454.

be paid back in Rhodes or as bills of exchange in Avignon. There were also military reasons to favour an important colony of western merchants in town and to gather many ships in the harbour. Jean de Lastic had been able to defeat the 1444 siege of Rhodes because of the funds lent by several merchants, and because of the hiring of armed galleys from others. The habitual presence of armed vessels in the port of Rhodes could act as a deterrent to Ottoman attacks. The merchants had become indispensable to the convent's survival. In 1454, shortly after the fall of Constantinople, Master Jacques de Milly declared in an Edict that *the Island because of its sterility could not survive without a constant flow of supplies from foreign vessels, which in the past had stopped coming, due to lack of protection. The master's predecessor, Jean de Lastic, had afterwards fortified the harbour at great expense with towers and a chain so that the merchants and their ships would feel safe. The Order was committed to receiving them heartily and to protecting them. It was added that armed vessels of corsairs and foreigners would not be allowed unless assurances were given that they would not attack the other ships anchored in the harbour.*<sup>69</sup>

Obviously the merchants needed a peaceful environment and pressed the Order to negotiate truces and treaties.

#### *Negotiations with the Moslems other than the Ottomans*

Between 1426 and 1444 the Mamluks, after Cyprus, had put Rhodes in great danger. Yet unlike the Ottomans, the Sultan of Egypt was not trying to build an empire and he did not intend to maintain troops permanently in Cyprus after invading the island. The hostilities had originated in the insecurity of the spice trade in the Eastern Mediterranean partly because of the favourable attitude of the Hospitallers towards piracy. The failure of the Mamluk fleet to capture Rhodes in 1444 was a great setback for the sultan who was now ready to abandon his former belligerent policy. The main concern of the master also became to negotiate a peace treaty with the Mamluks only one year after the siege. Lastic received the backing of the King of Aragon in order to reach a long term agreement with the sultan who had to concede his defeat. The participation of Western merchants in the negotiations was essential: the ambassadors of the master travelled to Alexandria on a galley hired by the the French "argentier" Jacques Coeur and the Florentine merchant Bernardo Salviati played a major part in the settlement, as well as in the repatriation to Rhodes of the Order's vassals who had been enslaved by the Mam-

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<sup>69</sup> Text from Bosio, *Dell'Istoria* (as n. 3), vol. 2, p. 249.

luks.<sup>70</sup> Pope Eugenius IV, who had planned to send a legate and vessels to Rhodes to help the Order against the Mamluks, cancelled his projects in view of the negotiations.<sup>71</sup> The Papacy, however, was not in favour of peace treaties between the Hospitallers and the Moslem states and in 1450 Nicholas V, the successor of Eugenius, condemned Lastic's agreements with the Mamluks and the Ottomans.<sup>72</sup>

Lastic promised to curb practice of piracy as much as he could the by prohibiting unloading and selling in Rhodes the booty taken from vessels owned by the Mamluks and other allies of the Order. In 1448 he made it known to all Christian subjects of the sultan that they would be welcome to settle in Rhodes and trade.<sup>73</sup> As we have already pointed out, Lastic in fact favoured having Moslem merchants come to Rhodes to sell their goods on board Western vessels or with their own ships. In 1451 the master had appointed a new consul of Rhodes in Alexandria after many years of absence.<sup>74</sup> Shortly before, the King of Aragon had also negotiated a new trade treaty with the sultan and it seemed at last that the interests of the spice trade and the merchants had prevailed over strife south of Rhodes.

Lastic's successors followed the same policy towards the Mamluks although between 1459 and 1462 their relations had become more difficult because of the support given by the Pope and the Order to the queen of Cyprus, Charlotte de Lusignan, while the sultan had sent troops to the island in favour of pretender, Charlotte's half-brother Jacques.<sup>75</sup> But at a time when the Ottomans were invading the Aegean the Order did not obviously want to be confronted by two major Moslem opponents at the same time and a good relationship between Rhodes and the sultan was essential to the merchants and to the place of Rhodes in the vital Levant trade. In 1477, negotiations authorized by the Pope led to a formal peace and trade treaty with the great enemy of the past, the Sultan of Egypt.<sup>76</sup> The treaty included, among other provisions, a commitment of the Order to prohibit its knights to attack vessels belonging to the sultan's subjects and to oppose for six months the sale in Rhodes of anyone of those subjects who would have been captured by corsairs. The sultan was in the meantime offered the choice to buy and repatriate these prisoners. The merchants from Egypt were guaranteed the same

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<sup>70</sup> Marinescu, *La politique orientale* (as n. 11), p. 119.

<sup>71</sup> ASV, Reg.Vat 377, fol. 220r–221v.

<sup>72</sup> O. Raynaldus, *Annales Ecclesiastici. Ab anno MCXVIII, ubi desinit cardinalis Bartonius usque ad annum MDXXXIV continuat*, 37 vols, Bar-le-Duc, 1864–1883, *Ad Annum 1450*, paragraphe 15

<sup>73</sup> Tsirpanlis, *Anecdota Eggrapha* (as n. 25), doc. 177.

<sup>74</sup> AOM 363, fol. 242r.

<sup>75</sup> Bosio, *Dell'Istoria* (as n. 3), vol. 2, pp. 266–276.

<sup>76</sup> Text *ibid.*, pp. 371–373.

rights in Rhodes as those of Western countries and the Rhodian merchants could carry out trade in Alexandria and other Egyptian ports.

The Order's diplomacy also favoured the Southern Anatolian principalities of Karaman and Scandalore which were in rebellion against the Ottomans. Finally a treaty with the King of Tunis was also signed in 1478.<sup>77</sup> After Mehmed II had gained control of all of continental Greece and most of the Aegean it was important that the ships sailing from Rhodes to the West could use, more or less safely, the route along the coasts of Barbary west of Alexandria. Hospitaller vessels practising *corso* were prohibited from attacking the Order's allies and a much stricter control of their activities was established.

### *Negotiations with the Ottomans*

Making peace arrangements with the Ottomans, such as those that Fluvia and Lastic had contracted, was a far more complex matter. After the fall of Constantinople there was no doubt that Mehmed II was starting to build up an empire over Southern Europe and the Aegean. He had also regained control of all Anatolia although some of the emirates which were his vassals often opposed him, especially the Karaman emir. Rhodes, located south of the Aegean, should not have been one of his major concerns and the military power of the Hospitallers was very weak compared with the Ottomans' forces. But the brother-knights defended the cause of the Papacy which tried to stop Mehmed's conquests and the masters considered piracy against the Ottomans as legitimate.

However, the convent was paralysed by its shortage of funds and suffered from the repeated raids of the Turks against its islands which he could not fully resist. The supplies of food from the nearby Anatolia peasants were indispensable. Both factors were reasons for truces and peace. An arrangement was difficult to achieve because Mehmed II insisted in being paid a yearly tribute and because the Papacy was opposed to any peace negotiations by the Hospital. For such reasons, while Lastic had openly concluded peace treaties with both the Mameluks and the Ottomans, his successors conducted very discrete if not secret attempts at talks with Mehmed's officials through obscure or second-rank envoys. In 1459 Master Jacques de Milly sent to Constantinople a Greek priest called Demetrio Nomofilaca in order to sound out Mehmed's intentions. This first contact was thought to be positive and Hospitaller brother knights Jean Saconin and Jacques de Saint-Martin were dispatched to Constantinople in 1459 and 1460 with instructions to agree to pay a gift of 2,000 or 3,000 Rhodian ducats as a friendly gesture instead

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 375–376.

of a fixed yearly tribute. As no agreement was reached, Milly and his successor Pere Ramon Sacosta kept sending envoys from 1461 to 1465, then the Greek priest again, followed by two citizens of Rhodes, Azio Gentile and Constanzo Coluccio (who were in fact Genoese merchants), and finally a brother sergeant, Antoine Charron. It is not very clear whether an agreement was reached but when a Turkish ambassador visited Rhodes it was said that the Order's envoys had previously agreed to give 4,000 écus as a gift.<sup>78</sup>

Rome, in the meantime, had learnt about all this bargaining when Pius II was preaching his aborted crusade. His successor, Paul II, severely admonished Master Sacosta for having agreed to pay a tribute, a fact which was strongly denied by the master. The talks came to an end in 1465 when Sacosta rejected the conditions requested through another Ottoman ambassador which were a yearly gift of 4,000 écus, the surrender of Christian slaves who had found shelter at the castle of St Peter and payment for damages made to the Turks by Christian corsairs.<sup>79</sup> Henceforth the masters became more careful to follow the pope's advice in any talk with the Ottomans. When prince Djem, a son of Mehmed and a pretender to the throne, sent envoys to the new master Pierre d'Aubusson in Rhodes to discuss peace arrangements in 1478, it was considered that these envoys were spies eager to be informed about the state of the defences of Rhodes.<sup>80</sup>

### *Conclusion: The failure of the great siege of 1480*

Under Masters Milly, Sacosta and Orsini, from 1454 to 1476, the situation at the convent had been very difficult. We are well informed about the internal conflicts between the Langues, particularly so at the time of the 1459 chapter general. The masters were repeatedly and personally criticized for their handling of the financial crisis: Milly was almost constantly sick, Sacosta was accused of being financially grasping and Orsini quarrelled with the Treasury over huge sums he was allegedly entitled to receive until arbitrators had to be appointed by the Pope to find an agreement. Both Milly and Orsini, who had been given full powers to administer the convent and its treasury, died with huge debts because they had spent from their own funds more than they had been advanced.

However, we know very little about any debate concerning the strategy the Order had to adopt to confront the Ottoman threat. As we have outlined, the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp. 269, 276, 280, 286, 290, 296.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 378–380.



Hospitallers had to continue to appear as traditional defenders of the faith and they were obliged to give support as well as to participate to any crusading attempt. But what they needed above all was to gain time in order to have their defence organized and to improve their finances. Such a priority required negotiating peace arrangements with the Moslems and giving preference to trade over warfare, a stand which could not be openly approved by the Papacy. As a consequence the masters' guidance with regard to the Ottoman danger was not visibly debated and the fluctuating policies of the Hospitallers appeared as rather ambiguous.

From 1461 we have as a source of information the *Libri Consiliorum* which gives account of the decisions taken by the Masters' more or less weekly councils. These documents refer constantly to the Convent's preparation for its defence, to the negotiations for peace arrangements and to the condemnation of any piracy activity on the part of the Rhodes Hospitallers.<sup>81</sup> Such a line of conduct does not seem to have been opposed by the members of the council.

In 1476, when Orsini died, important changes had occurred. First of all, the Ottoman danger was increasing as a result of the imminent defeat of Venice which had to sign a peace treaty in 1479. Practically all of Greece and most of the Aegean were falling under the domination of Constantinople, making Rhodes the next probable target of Mehmed II in the area. On the other hand, the Hospitallers were now better prepared to defend themselves with their ramparts, their armaments and ammunition, their food provisions and a careful military organization in case of a siege. Each Langue had been assigned a sector of the ramparts to be defended if attacked.<sup>82</sup> The financial situation had also been improving after decisions taken at the 1466 Rome Chapter general. The debt had been reduced from 287,929 écus in 1466 to 120,000 in 1471 and 76,000 in 1476.<sup>83</sup>

Orsini's successor, Pierre d'Aubusson, Prior of Auvergne, was one of the most experienced officers of the Convent where he had lived for some twenty years since 1457. Among his numerous assignments he had been in charge of supervising the fortifications of Rhodes from 1472.<sup>84</sup> The 1478 Chapter general reinforced his powers, authorized the number of Hospitallers living at the Convent or in the Archipelago to be increased from 350 to 450 and decided on arming three more galleys. D'Aubusson was informed by spies that a Turkish fleet was being prepared and he warned the knights to be ready to face an imminent attack.

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<sup>81</sup> Examples of piracy by Hospitallers being penalized AOM 74, fols. 41rv and 55rv.

<sup>82</sup> AOM 73, fols 158v–160r (1465).

<sup>83</sup> Sarnowsky, *Macht und Herrschaft* (as n. 29), p. 555.

<sup>84</sup> N. Vatin, *Pierre d'Aubusson*, in: *Prier et combattre. Dictionnaire européen des ordres militaires au Moyen-Âge*, ed. N. Bériou, Ph. Josserand, Paris 2009, pp. 721–722.



In 1480, about 70,000 Ottomans arrived on 160 vessels and disembarked on Rhodes with their artillery bombards. The siege lasted three months but after several attacks at the St Nicholas Tower and around the walls of Italy, and in spite of their much superior forces the Ottoman attackers failed to enter the town and had to abandon the island after having suffered heavy losses.<sup>85</sup> A clever communication campaign launched by d'Aubusson and directed to the Papacy and the princes allowed him to claim that the Hospital was still a successful bulwark against the enemies of the faith<sup>86</sup>. The death of Mehmed II in 1481 and the long succession crisis which ensued removed the risk of another siege. In 1523 only a stronger assault conducted by Suleiman compelled the Hospitallers to leave Rhodes.

During a forty-year long period from 1440 to 1480 the Hospitallers had been carefully preparing to face the Ottoman danger, first by experiencing siege fighting while they were assaulted by the Mamluks then by gaining time through negotiations in order to reinforce their defences and to be better armed before further attacks. They maintained a strategy which proved to be the right one in spite of many difficulties: the strong divisions within the convent, the abysmal financial crisis and the failed crusading efforts of the Papacy.

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<sup>85</sup> See the short but convincing account of the siege in L. Vissière, *Les fondements d'une guerre nouvelle, Rhodes et Otrante en 1480*, Société de l'Histoire et du Patrimoine de l'ordre de Malte, Bulletin 24 (2011), pp. 45–59.

<sup>86</sup> J.-B. de Vaivre, L. Vissière, "Afin que vous entendez mon intencion des ystoires que je vueil, et des lieux où ils seront". *Essai sur le manuscrit de dédicace des œuvres de Guillaume Caoursin à Pierre d'Aubusson (v. 1483)*, Société de l'Histoire et du Patrimoine de l'Ordre de Malte, Bulletin 27 (2012).