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THE GRAND DESIGNS OF GILBERT OF ASSAILLY.
THE ORDER OF THE HOSPITAL
IN THE PROJECTED CONQUEST OF EGYPT
BY KING AMALRIC OF JERUSALEM (1168–1169)

KEYWORDS

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The Order of the Hospital of St John originated as a charitable institution offering medical care and support to pilgrims coming from Western Europe to the Holy Land. However, under the direction of Raymond of Le Puy, master from 1120, it began to take on significant military responsibilities, possibly in emulation of the newly-founded Order of the Temple. In 1136 the Hospitallers were given the castle of Bethgibelin, one of a ring of fortresses which King Fulk of Jerusalem had constructed to isolate the Fātimid stronghold of Ascalon on the kingdom's south-western frontier. In 1142 the Order was given a large, contiguous bloc of territory including the Krak des Chevaliers and four other castles on the frontier of the county of Tripoli by Count Raymond II. While the defence of such territories clearly required military forces, it is difficult to know how far the Order's own personnel was militarised, since it could well have made use of vassals, mercenaries or sergeants to provide most of its forces. What is clear, however, is that the expansion of the Order's possessions meant that it required a far

greater number of administrators than in the days when its functions were purely charitable. By the late 1160s the Hospitaller organisation included several offices with primarily military or administrative responsibilities, such as the constable, marshal and castellans, and it is likely that the combination of skills required for these positions meant that these men were mostly drawn from the growing class of knight brethren.¹

Knight brethren were present at various military actions undertaken by the Franks of Jerusalem and Antioch from the time of the siege and capture of Ascalon (1153) onwards, although their numbers seem to have been relatively small at first. However, the Order's military activity took on a quite different order of magnitude in the years 1168–1169, when it made a major contribution to two separate invasions of Egypt mounted by King Amalric of Jerusalem (1163–1174). The campaigns were to prove one of the most controversial and divisive episodes in its history, leading ultimately to the resignation of Gilbert of Assailly, who had been master since the beginning of 1163.² The aim of this essay is to clarify the aims of the master in these events, as well as their wider consequences for the Order.

Amalric's invasions of Egypt came about as result of a gradual change in the balance of power between the Fātimid caliphate and the kingdom of Jerusalem. In the first three decades of the twelfth century the caliphate had been able to mount major land and sea operations which threatened the security of the Frankish kingdom, but during this time the Franks and their Italian allies were able to capture most of the Fātimid cities of the Palestinian coast.³ The capture of Ascalon by the army of King Baldwin III in 1153 finally extinguished the last Fātimid naval base on the eastern Mediterranean littoral. Within a decade, the south-western frontier of the kingdom of Jerusalem had been further advanced to the small settlement

¹ J. Riley-Smith, *The Knights of St. John in Jerusalem and Cyprus, c. 1050–1310* (A History of the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem 1), London 1967, pp. 53–59; J. Riley-Smith, *The Knights Hospitaller in the Levant, c. 1070–1309*, Basingstoke 2012, pp. 27–32; H. Nicholson, *The Knights Hospitaller*, Woodbridge 2001, pp. 21–23; A. Forey, *The Militarisation of the Hospital of St John*, *Studia Monastica* 26 (1984), pp. 75–89; J. Burgtorf, *The Central Convent of Hospitallers and Templars: History, Organization and Personnel (1099/1120–1310)* (History of Warfare 50), Leiden 2008, pp. 35–36, 43–44.

² H. E. Mayer, *Mélanges sur l'histoire du royaume latin de Jérusalem* (Mémoires de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres. Nouvelle série 5), Paris 1984, pp. 139–158.

³ M. Brett, *The Battles of Ramla (1099–1105)*, in: *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras. Proceedings of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd International Colloquium Organized at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in May 1992, 1993, and 1994*, ed. U. Vermeulen, D. De Smet, K. d' Hulster, Leuven 1995, pp. 17–39.

of El 'Arish on the edge of the Sinai desert.⁴ From the middle of the century, the Egyptian heartland beckoned as a potential military target.

Egypt produced great wealth in the form of agricultural products, with a significant surplus in good years. It was also a major conduit for a lucrative trade in luxury products, above all spices from the Indies, which found a ready market with the many Italian merchants who came to trade at the Mediterranean ports. Yet by the second half of the twelfth century Egypt was no longer the political and military power that it had once been, and the position of its ruling regime was becoming increasingly shaky. The Fātimid caliph and the ruling elite belonged to the Ismā'īlī form of Shī'ite Islam, but they were only a small minority in a country populated by a Sunnī Muslim majority, with significant minorities of Coptic and Melkite Christians as well as Jews. Shī'ites provided religious scholars, propagandists, and army officers, but the Fātimid administration was mostly drawn from Sunnī Arabs, Copts and Armenians. The caliph, who claimed descent from 'Alī, husband of Muhammad's daughter Fātima, represented the figurehead and legitimation for the regime, but real power was exercised by the vizier (Arab. *wazīr*), who was effectively a military dictator. By the mid-twelfth century Egypt had become highly unstable as a result of rivalries and power struggles among its governing bureaucracy and its multiethnic army. The 'Sick Man on the Nile', as Yaacov Lev has characterized the fragile Fātimid state, began to figure in aggressive plans of its neighbours as a potential target. King Baldwin III of Jerusalem was able to impose a large annual tribute to be paid by the caliphate, and had begun to formulate plans for invasion by the time of his premature death in 1163.⁵ Meanwhile Nūr al-Dīn, the Turkish ruler of Iraq and Damascus, hoped to overthrow the Fātimids and restore Egypt to the Sunnī allegiance of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate.

When Baldwin III's younger brother Amalric succeeded to the throne in 1163 he immediately launched an invasion of Egypt; the immediate cause of this action, as the chronicler William of Tyre relates, was that the caliphate had stopped paying the annual tribute.⁶ In 1164 and 1167 Amalric again intervened in response to appeals for military assistance from Shāwar, the Fātimid vizier, against a rival; Shāwar was also afraid that Egypt might fall under the control of an army led by Nūr al-Dīn's general Shirkūh.⁷ Amalric therefore led his army to fight along-

⁴ William of Tyre, *Willelmi Tyrensis archiepiscopi chronicon*, ed. Robert B. C. Huygens, 2 vols, Turnhout 1984, ch. 21.19 (20), pp. 987–988.

⁵ Y. Lev, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt* (Arab History and Civilization. Studies and Texts 1), Leiden 1991; Y. Lev, *Saladin in Egypt* (The Medieval Mediterranean 21), Leiden 1999, p. 53.

⁶ William of Tyre (as n. 4), ch. 19.5, p. 870.

⁷ M. Chamberlain, *The Crusader Era and the Ayyūbid Dynasty*, in: *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1: *Islamic Egypt, 640–1517*, ed. C. F. Petry, Cambridge 1998, pp. 213–216.

side Shāwar against the Syrian forces of Nūr al-Dīn and their local allies. In 1167 the Franks reimposed the annual tribute. By 1168, however, Amalric's aims had changed from merely exploiting Egypt financially, to making a full-scale attempt to conquer the country.⁸

At first sight this objective might seem to be a foolhardy undertaking. Egypt was a vast country whose population, resources and military forces were many times greater than those of the kingdom of Jerusalem. Yet it had several strategic weaknesses in addition to the declining power of its regime. The main sources of its commercial wealth and much of its agriculture were concentrated in the Mediterranean ports, in the Nile Delta and around the capital, Cairo. These areas were now much less distant from Jerusalemite territory than only a generation previously. From the Frankish border post at El 'Arish on the north-western limit of the Sinai desert it was only around 160 km to settlements at the edge of the Nile Delta such as Tinnīs or Bilbeis. An army could travel this distance in under two weeks, which meant that it could carry all the food it required, while sufficient water could be found on the way.⁹ The native Egyptian population had no military traditions, and the Fātimid army was composed of a multiethnic mixture of Sudanese, Bedouin, Turks, Armenians and other groups. During their campaigning the Franks had formed a poor impression of the Fātimid military forces in comparison with the Turkish and Kurdish *mamlūks* of Nūr al-Dīn; William of Tyre talks of 'the worthless and effeminate Egyptians, who were a hindrance and a burden rather than a help'.¹⁰ An invasion of Fātimid territory followed by the annexation of at least part of Lower Egypt could thus be regarded as a realistic military objective, provided that King Amalric could mobilise sufficient forces to capture and garrison the key cities.

The part played in Amalric's plans by the master of the Hospitallers is revealed by William of Tyre when he introduces his account of the campaign which began in the autumn of 1168:

It is said that it was Gilbert of Assailly, master of the house of the Hospital in Jerusalem, who first produced the justification and the incentive for this evil; he was a generous man

⁸ G. Schlumberger, *Campagnes du roi Amaury Ier de Jérusalem en Egypte, en XIIe siècle*, Paris 1906.

⁹ William of Tyre (as n. 4), ch. 20.6, pp. 918–919. On the water supplies, see Y. Lev, *Infantry in Muslim Armies during the Crusades*, in: *Logistics of Warfare in the Age of the Crusades. Proceedings of a Workshop Held at the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 30 September to 4 October 2002*, ed. J. H. Pryor, Aldershot 2006, pp. 185–209.

¹⁰ William of Tyre (as n. 4), ch. 19.25, p. 898: *Egyptis vilibus et effeminatis, qui potius impedimento et oneri essent quam utilitati.*

*who was profuse in his liberality, yet unstable and fickle. After using up the entire treasure of the house, he then borrowed a vast sum of money, all of which he expended on knights who he hired wherever he could find them, with the result that he plunged the said house into such great debt that there was no hope of redeeming it. After this he gave up his office in despair and abandoned its responsibilities, leaving the house indebted to the sum of 100,000 gold pieces. It is said that he spent these great expenses in fulfillment of an agreement previously made by the king, who had granted Bilbeis (which was once known as Pelusium) along with its territory, to be held by the house in perpetuity once Egypt had been conquered and subjugated.*¹¹

At first sight this passage appears to give a clear impression of Amalric's aim of annexing Egyptian territory, as well as the huge financial investment undertaken by Gilbert of Assailly, but it raises some problems. William names only the city of Bilbeis, situated on the south-eastern edge of the Nile Delta, as being offered to the Hospital in return for its military assistance, but as we shall see, Amalric's concessions were much more extensive than this. William states that Bilbeis had formerly been known as Pelusium (*olim dicta est Pelusium*), but this classical name actually related to the town of al-Farama, situated at the eastern extreme of the Delta coast, between Lake Tinnīs (now Lake Manzalah) and the sea. This settlement had given its name to the so-called Pelusiac branch of the Nile, which had become silted up and disappeared by the ninth century.¹² This lack of precision, allied to the fact that William twice distances himself from the events by stating 'so they say' (*ut aiunt*) and 'so it is said' (*dicitur*), suggests an imperfect knowledge of the agreement concluded between Amalric and Gilbert of Assailly.

William's lack of precision can be at least partially explained by chronology. The agreement between Amalric and the Hospital was concluded with a royal charter issued on 11 October 1168. The Jerusalemite forces must have left in the second half of the month, since they had taken Bilbeis by 3 November after ten

¹¹ William of Tyre (as n. 4), ch. 20.5, pp. 917–918: *Causam porro et incentivum huius mali, ut aiunt, ministrabat Gerbertus cognomento Assallit, magister Hospitalis Domus, que est Ierosolimis, vir magnanimus et quadam donandi liberalitate profusus, tamen instabilis et mente vagus. Hic omnes eiusdem Domus thesauros exponens, insuper etiam infinite quantitatis pecuniam mutuum sumens, omnia militibus erogavit, quoscumque invenire potuit sibi alliciens, unde predictam Domum tanta eris alieni mole gravavit, quod non erat spes solutum iri. Ipse etiam postmodum desperans, officium suum deserens et administrationi renuntians, in centum milibus aureorum Domum dimisit obligatam. Ea tamen consideratione tot et tantas misisse dicitur expensas, quod, capta et subiugata Egypto, Bilbeis, que olim dicta est Pelusium, cum universo territorio suo iuri eiusdem Domus ex pacto prius cum rege inito cederet in perpetuum.*

¹² J. P. Cooper, *The Medieval Nile: Route, Navigation, and Landscape in Islamic Egypt*, Cairo 2014, pp. 86–87.

days' march and three days' siege.¹³ During the preparations for the expedition William had, by his own testimony, been sent to Constantinople to help negotiate an alliance with the Byzantine emperor Manuel Komnenos, and did not commence his return journey until the beginning of October.¹⁴ It is thus possible that William was not aware of the full terms of the agreement when it was concluded, and that he judged the failure of the expedition with a considerable degree of hindsight. An additional factor in this puzzle is that while William is certain that Gilbert was keen for the Hospital to share in the spoils of Egypt, he claims that the Templars refused to take part in the campaign. Yet he does not criticise the Templars for failing to support the king, but exonerates them, saying that they preferred to keep the existing peace treaty with Egypt. It is therefore strange that he should give such a trenchant criticism of the master of the Hospital, who would seem to have acted as a loyal subject in doing everything possible to provide military support for the king.¹⁵

William's information about the Templars is directly contradicted by the evidence of the *Annales Cameracenses* of Lambert of Watreloos, who states that the Frankish invasion force was made up of three separate contingents led by the king, the master of the Hospital and the master of the Temple, a formulation that might suggest that the forces of the two military orders were each roughly comparable to that of the king's own vassals. As Helen Nicholson has argued, Lambert claims reliable sources of information for his account of the events of 1168, and it is possible, as she surmises, that the Templars originally argued against an invasion in council, but ultimately were obliged to join it.¹⁶ The main point which comes over from William's discussion of the two orders' involvement in the campaign is his condemnation of the extravagant ambitions of Gilbert of Assailly, which he claims left the Hospital in debt and led directly to the master's resignation. How, then, do we judge the matter? Was Gilbert of Assailly's involvement in the military ambitions of King Amalric a risky and profligate undertaking which bankrupted the Order? Or, given that both Hospitallers and Templars were ultimately prepared to

¹³ *Die Urkunden der lateinischen Könige von Jerusalem (Diplomata regum Latinorum Hierosolymitanorum)* (Monumenta Germaniae Historica), 4 vols, ed. H. E. Mayer, Hannover 2010 [henceforth cited as *D. Jerus.*], no. 336, pp. 578–582; William of Tyre (as n. 4), ch. 20.6, p. 918.

¹⁴ William of Tyre (as n. 4), ch. 20.4, pp. 915–917.

¹⁵ William of Tyre (as n. 4), ch. 20.5, p. 918.

¹⁶ Lambert of Watreloos, *Annales Cameracenses*, in: *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores*, vol. 16, Hannover 1859, pp. 547–548; H. Nicholson, *Before William of Tyre: European Reports on the Military Orders' Deeds in the East, 1150–1185*, in: *The Military Orders*, vol. 2: *Welfare and Warfare*, ed. H. Nicholson, Aldershot 1998, pp. 111–118.

put major efforts into the invasion, is it possible was that it offered a great opportunity for the Hospital of St John?

Amalric's expeditions to Egypt clearly went beyond the customary requirements of the defence of the realm and thus his vassals could not be obliged to participate in them as a condition of their feudal tenures. To raise sufficient troops the king needed to offer significant inducements to his own nobles and any other potential military supporters; the main form of inducement consisted of advance grants of fiefs which anticipated the control of Egypt.¹⁷ The Arab chronicler Abū Shama relates that King Amalric had given one of his officials the responsibility of compiling a list of villages in Egypt together with their revenues, and that the Franks had already started to delimit fiefs and distribute them to those who were to accompany him.¹⁸ There must therefore have been many contracts granting fiefs or revenues in exchange for specified levels of military service.¹⁹ The agreement between the king and Hospital in 1168 is one of only a few to survive, thanks to the preservation of a considerable part of the Order's archive.

The full terms of the agreement between Amalric and the Hospital are set out in a charter issued on 11 October 1168, which can now be consulted in the new edition of royal documents of kingdom of Jerusalem edited by Mayer.²⁰ The

¹⁷ Mayer, *Mélanges* (as n. 2), p. 140.

¹⁸ [Abū Shama], *Le Livre des deux jardins: Histoire des deux règnes, celui de Nour ed-Din et celui de Salab ed-Din*, in: *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades: Historiens Orientaux*, vols. 4–5, Paris 1898, p. 135.

¹⁹ One of the few which has survived is one issued in advance of the 1169 campaign which granted Pagan, lord of Haifa, a considerable fief in Egypt as well as money-fiefs drawn on the royal revenues of the kingdom of Jerusalem: *D. Jerus.* (as n. 13), no. 340, pp. 588–590.

²⁰ *D. Jerus.* (as n. 13), no. 336, pp. 578–582 (here 581): [...] *dedi tradidi et concessi deo et sancto Iohanni baptiste et pauperibus sancti Hospitalis Ierusalem et Giberto tunc temporis eiusdem venerabili magistro et suis successoribus et fratribus in perpetuum Bulbesium eum pertinentiis suis, quas civitatis incole possident, et omnes habitatores, qui in terra et de terra sunt, et tantum terre culte et inculte, que protendatur a viciniore parte Bulbesii versus Syriam et mare, quod singulis annis cum corpore Bulbesii possit plenarie centum milia bisantiorum veterum reddere. Et hanc prefatam terram libere et absolute cum omnibus hominibus, qui in terra et de terra sunt, dono deo et Hospitali sancto et magistro et fratribus et in X civitatibus terre Babylonice quinquaginta milia bisantiorum veterum, scilicet in Babylone quinque milia bisantiorum et in Thanés quinque milia bisantiorum et in Damiata quinque milia bisantiorum, in insula Mall. quinque milia bisantiorum, in Alexandria quinque milia bisantiorum et in civitate Chus quinque milia bisantiorum et in Suana quinque milia bisantiorum et in Wbe quinque milia bisantiorum et in Abideph quinque milia bisantiorum et in Fun quinque milia bisantiorum singulis annis usque in perpetuum; et per omnes civitates totius terre meliorem domum vel palatium post regiam. Et si thesaurus mulani et aliarum civitati et villarum deo volenet sine gladii evagatione ad manus meas venerit, tam de thesauro Cabarii quam aliarum civitatum et de omnibus terre supellectibus decimam integraliter dedi et concessi magistro Hospitalis et fratribus cum supra dictis perpetuo iure libere et absolute [...].*

most valuable single concession was the city of Bilbeis, along with all adjacent cultivated and uncultivated land reaching 'towards Syria and the sea' (*versus Syriam et mare*). This formulation seems to represent the northern and eastern limits of a contiguous territory, but there is no mention of any southern or western boundaries. Bilbeis lay relatively close to the southern edge of the Delta, so it is most likely that the Hospitallers' property was simply regarded as extending as far as the desert area to the south. The western boundary would have been most obviously formed by the eastern branches of the Nile. The main eastern channel separated from the western branch approximately 35 km downriver from Cairo. It divided again downstream into two main branches, with the principal channel flowing roughly north-north-east to Damietta and the sea, and a lesser channel entering Lake Tinnīs at al-Matariya.²¹ Even at a very rough estimate, it would seem that the Hospital was granted rights to land amounting to possibly as much as 1000 km². The annual revenues of this territory were estimated in the royal charter at 100,000 *bisantii veteres*, a term, meaning literally 'old bezants', which indicates that the sum involved was calculated in Fātimid dinars. Certainly it would be quite logical for revenues deriving from the territory of Bilbeis to be denominated in the Egyptian currency, which had a higher gold content than the imitation bezants minted in the kingdom of Jerusalem.²² Bilbeis was well known to the Franks as it had figured prominently in the fighting during the campaigns of 1163, 1164 and 1167, so they clearly had an appreciation of the resources and economic potential of the city and its hinterland, which included a substantial section of the fertile Nile Delta.²³ The twelfth-century Arab geographer al-Maqrīzī estimated the government revenues for the entire Delta at a total of 1,200,000 dinars, of which over 800,000 dinars derived from Alexandria alone. The projected annual income of 100,000 dinars from Bilbeis would thus have corresponded to a quarter of the remainder. This may have been somewhat optimistic, yet the large extent of territory associated with the city in Amalric's grant must have given grounds for believing that it had significant economic potential.²⁴

Yet the concessions to the Order went far beyond Bilbeis. It was to receive revenues of 5000 dinars per annum in each of ten other named cities in Egypt, which are each listed by name, starting with the capital, Old Cairo (*in Babylone*). The concessions elsewhere, however, are listed in a more logical geographical progres-

²¹ Cooper (as n. 12), pp. 78–89 and Figure A2.13.

²² J. Praver, *The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem: European Colonialism in the Middle Ages*, London 1972, pp. 384–386. The *bisantii veteres* presumably correspond to the unspecific designation *aurei* (gold pieces) given by William of Tyre.

²³ Schlumberger (as n. 8), pp. 80–83, 92–100, 107–109.

²⁴ Cooper (as n. 12), pp. 199–200.

sion, starting with the area which was nearest to the kingdom of Jerusalem. The first of these is Tinnīs (*in Thanés*), a city situated on a small island in Lake Tinnīs (now Lake Manzala). The list then proceeds westwards along the Mediterranean coast to Damietta (*in Damiata*) at the mouth of the main eastern branch of the Nile. It is less easy to identify the next name, which is given in the abbreviated form *in insula Mall*. In his commentary on King Amalric's charter Mayer recognises that this toponym, which means a resting-place, is very frequent in Egypt, but suggests al-Mahalla al-Kubrā in the central Nile Delta as a possibility. An additional argument for this identification is that in the twelfth century this Mahalla gave its name to a westerly channel of the Nile which separated and later rejoined the main Damietta branch, forming a large riverine island.²⁵ During Amalric's campaign of 1167, the Franks had seized it from Egyptian forces. William of Tyre describes how this island, formed by separate branches of the Nile, was called *Mabeleth* by the natives of the place and produced abundant crops.²⁶ The list of concessions then moves to the city of Alexandria on the extreme west of the Delta.

All of these locations could be considered as realistic objectives in any invasion of Egypt. Bilbeis and its territory were obviously the main inducement; apart from the sheer extent and value of the concessions, its location meant that it would be one of the first areas to be conquered, and so it could be expected to produce revenues from an early stage. It is interesting that Lambert of Watreloos describes how the master of the Hospital led an attack on Bilbeis during the campaign of 1168; clearly if it had been awarded to the Order then he had every incentive to capture it as soon as possible.²⁷ The Delta ports of Alexandria, Damietta and Tinnīs were also within a reasonable reach of Christian land and sea forces, and offered great opportunities to exploit the lucrative trade between Egypt and the Italian ports. The island of Tinnīs had a rich textile industry and offered access to a port situated between the Nile and the open sea which avoided the most dangerous currents and winds.²⁸

Of the remaining five concessions, three were located in cities in Upper Egypt. Two of them are situated on the Nile: Qūs (*in civitate Chus*), 25 km north-northeast of Luxor, and Aswān (*in Suana*) 180 km south of Luxor, and thus some 600

²⁵ Cooper (as n. 12), pp. 90–91.

²⁶ William of Tyre (as n. 4), ch. 19.22, pp. 892–894; ch. 19.23, p. 894: *Insula hec, unde nobis sermo est, apud eos Mabeleth dicitur: bonis omnibus copiosior et gleba uberi letissima ex divisione fluentium Nili fit.*

²⁷ Lambert of Watreloos (as n. 16), p. 548.

²⁸ J. P. Cooper, "Fear God, Fear the Bogaze": *The Nile Mouths and the Navigational Landscape of the Medieval Nile Delta, Egypt, Al-Masāq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean* 24 (2012), 1, pp. 53–73.

km distant from Cairo. The final one is 'Aydhab (*in Abideph*), now a deserted site on the western shore of the Red Sea on the border between Egypt and Sudan. The port of 'Aydhab served as departure point for pilgrims travelling from Egypt to Mecca, but more importantly, it was a major entrepot for merchant ships coming from Yemen, the Arabian Gulf and India. Trade goods (especially spices) were unloaded there and transported by camel across the desert to Aswān, from where they were taken by ship down the Nile to Cairo, and thence to Alexandria and Damietta, where a large proportion was sold to Italian merchants who imported them to Europe. The Franks were clearly aware of the importance and wealth of 'Aydhab; it was one of the ports later attacked by Rainald of Châtillon, the lord of Transjordan, when he launched a fleet of ships to raid Muslim shipping in the Red Sea in 1182–1183.²⁹ As 'Aydhab is the most southerly of all the sites which can be identified, it seems that the charter's listing of concessions shows – after Cairo – a clear progression from north to south, which would suggest that the remaining two unidentified sites, described as *in Whe* and *in Fun*, were also located in the southern region. The inclusion of these places along with Aswān and 'Aydhab in the listing of concessions shows that Amalric and his advisors anticipated that they would be able to bring the entire country under their control.

King Amalric's grant further specifies that in addition to the revenues from Bilbeis and the other ten cities, the Hospital was to receive the second most substantial house in every city in the country; the best one would be reserved as a royal residence (*meliolem domum vel palatium post regiam*). This would suggest that the Order was expected to maintain personnel in each of its new centres and elsewhere, which offered the prospect of it being able to participate in the lucrative long-distance trade between Western Europe and the Indies. The agreement with the king offered other advantages. The Hospital was to receive a tenth of the caliph's treasure if the Fātimids capitulated peacefully, but if Egypt was conquered by force, the Order was to receive the first choice of booty after the king took his share. In either case, the agreement promised a substantial and immediate injection of cash for the Order in the event of a successful campaign.

In exchange for these concessions the Hospital was obliged to supply a force of 500 knights and 500 Turcoples in the forthcoming campaign. However many knight brethren the Order had available at this time, it must have been impossible for it provide all of these soldiers from its own resources, especially since it still needed to maintain garrisons in the kingdom of Jerusalem and the county of

²⁹ W. Facey, *Crusaders in the Red Sea between al-Qusayr and Sawākin*, in: *People of the Red Sea: Proceedings of Red Sea Project II, held in the British Museum, October 2004*, ed. J. C. M. Starkey, Oxford 2005, pp. 75–86.

Tripoli. After all, the total knight service owed to the Crown by secular lordships was in the region of 600–700 knights. So it is likely that the Hospitallers needed to hire the bulk of the knights from mercenaries and crusaders, while a certain proportion may have come from Western knights serving temporarily with the Order. It is uncertain whether the Turcoples were converted Muslims or Eastern Christians, but there is agreement that they were cavalymen who were more lightly armed than Frankish knights.³⁰ The year 1168 was the first time that Turcoples appear in the service of the Hospital, so it would seem that its employment of this type of light cavalry was directly connected with the requirements of the Egyptian campaign.³¹ Yet any forces of hired knights, and even more so any Turcople forces, would require officers, and these must surely have been recruited from among the knight brethren, which suggests that this class within the Order's membership must have been numerous by this time if sufficient numbers could be spared from the central administration and the various castle garrisons.

A proportion of the wages of hired knights and Turcoples could presumably have been paid from the Order's existing reserves, but William of Tyre's criticisms of the actions of Gilbert of Assailly imply that after the campaign it was still in debt to the amount of 100,000 bezants. It may have been the case that for the king, it was not so much the Order's own military forces which were the attractive factor in the agreement, but its financial solvency. Its landed possessions in the Holy Land as well as its regular and growing income from its estates in Western Europe would allow it to borrow money on good terms; using the Order as a guarantor would thus enable the king to raise greater forces than may have been possible from the resources of the Crown alone.

King Amalric's invasion of 1168 ended after Nūr al-Dīn sent a Syrian army to Egypt under the command of his general Shirkūh, who was accompanied by his nephew Saladin. The Franks withdrew, leaving Shirkūh in control of the entire country, with the Fātimid regime unable to oppose him. For the Hospital, the vast financial investment had brought no gains. William of Tyre claims that the debt incurred by the Order led to the resignation of Gilbert of Assailly as master, but he did not resign immediately. Fearing encirclement by Nūr al-Dīn's forces, Amalric prepared for another, bigger invasion the following year, which was to be carried out with the help of a Byzantine fleet. In August 1169 he concluded another agreement with Gilbert of Assailly. In contrast to the previous year, the new agreement

³⁰ J. Richard, *Les turcoples au service des royaumes de Jérusalem et de Chypre: Musulmans convertis ou chrétiens orientaux?*, *Revue des études islamiques* 54 (1986), pp. 259–270; Y. Harari, *The Military Role of the Frankish Turcoples: a Reassessment*, *Mediterranean Historical Review* 12 (1997), pp. 75–116.

³¹ Burgtorf (as n. 1), pp. 37–38.

granted the Order only Bilbeis and its territory, while the other cities were no longer mentioned. This change may be a reflection of the Franks' experience in 1168, in that Amalric was aiming for the more realistic conquest of Lower Egypt, rather than the entire country. In evident compensation for the altered terms, the income which the Hospital was expected to receive from Bilbeis was now raised to 150,000 dinars. This increase in value is puzzling, since the Franks had destroyed much of Bilbeis during the invasion of 1168 and massacred or expelled many of its inhabitants. Presumably, the Order believed that it could still extract a considerable income from the contiguous agricultural territory around Bilbeis, even if the city itself had suffered.³² These circumstances probably explain an additional clause in this second agreement, which specified that while the inhabitants of the territory of Bilbeis would be reduced to conditions of servitude, this status would not be applied to Christian subjects, 'of whatever race they were.'³³ This would suggest that the Hospitallers were hoping to repopulate the territory with Christian immigrants – presumably Copts – from other parts of Egypt, thus increasing its economic potential. In fact the invasion of 1169 proved as much a failure as that of the previous year, but King Amalric continued to make plans for further expeditions.

Gilbert of Assailly remained in office until 1170. Since William of Tyre links his resignation directly to the campaign of 1168, it is possible that the figure of 100,000 bezants mentioned by him in this connection was actually the cumulative debt incurred by the Order during both campaigns, rather than that of 1168 alone. What is surprising in the light of William's comments is that the Hospitallers were evidently prepared to go along with a second great expedition only a year after the failure of the 1168 campaign. It was of course in the interest of the Hospitallers to maintain the favour of the king, and the conquest of Egypt was Amalric's dearest political project, but they would also profit from the king's concessions. The sums specified in the two royal charters are every bit as realistic as the round figure for the Order's losses given by William of Tyre. We can thus conclude that Gilbert and his advisors could expect that in the event of a successful conquest of the Nile Delta, the income from the territory of Bilbeis would be sufficient to repay the Order's debts after only one or two years, leaving a substantial surplus. So the investment might be costly, but the potential gains for the Order were vast.

Despite the heavy costs involved in one or both of these campaigns, during Gilbert's mastership the Hospital continued to make acquisitions which must

³² [Abū Shama] (as n. 18), pp. 137–138.

³³ *D. Jerus.* (as n. 13), no. 341, pp. 591–595: [...] *exceptis Christianis omnibus de quacumque gente fuerint, quos de omni servili conditione liberavimus.*

have involved additional financial commitments. At some point before 1168 he purchased the castle of Belvoir and carried out a major rebuilding programme, while in 1170 he accepted the strongholds of Arqah and Akkar in the county of Tripoli at the urging of King Amalric. Gilbert's resignation from the mastership has been discussed in some detail by Jonathan Riley-Smith and Jochen Burgtorf, and it is clear from their reconstructions of events that it was not an immediate consequence of the Egyptian campaign. By August 1170 Gilbert had evidently resolved to give up his office, although the king was unwilling to countenance this and did his best to dissuade him. A substantial section of the chapter of the Order also argued that the master did not have the right to resign without its own advice or the approval of the pope. According to Burgtorf's reconstruction of events, those opposed to the resignation included the preceptor, Pons Blan, as well as the marshal of the Order, the castellans of Bethgibelin and Belmont and at least thirty brethren, who also had the support of the patriarch of Jerusalem and several bishops and abbots. However, Gilbert was unwilling to accept the restrictions on his authority as master which were demanded by the chapter. He resigned his office a second time and the chapter chose Cast of Murols as his successor.³⁴

These events are both complex and puzzling. If Pons Blan and his supporters were opposed to the Egyptian campaigns and the acquisition of frontier territories, it seems strange that they simply did not accept Gilbert's resignation and elect a more amenable successor who would direct the Order's activities in a different direction. So if there was opposition to the master and his policies, then it was more likely to be found among those who secured the election of Cast of Murols. Unfortunately it is difficult to discern any consistent policy during Cast's mastership, since he died within a matter of months, with a new master, Josbert, in office by March 1171.³⁵ At this point we should bear in mind the developments within the Order since the 1130s which had produced a structure of senior officers with specific administrative, military and charitable activities, most of whom were recruited from the ranks of the knight brethren. These were men whose family backgrounds in the West made them familiar with the social and legal conventions of noble and knightly society. In the networks in which they and their relatives had grown up, it was expected that lords should only take important decisions after consultation with their vassals; indeed it was the duty of a vassal to give advice and assistance (*consilium et auxilium*) to a lord as a condition of his tenure. The development of an organisational structure of officers with titles which in many

³⁴ Burgtorf (as n. 1), pp. 65–71; Riley-Smith, *The Knights Hospitaller* (as n. 1), pp. 32–36. The discussion which follows relies on the reconstruction of events by Burgtorf.

³⁵ Burgtorf (as n. 1), p. 70.

cases mirrored those of secular courts and households is an indication that these men probably saw themselves as having an analogous position in the government of the Order.³⁶ It is important to note that the chapter did not demand a stop to the acquisition of frontier territories *per se*; the key point was that acquisitions and key commitments should be made with the consent of the chapter. An additional issue may have been Gilbert's closeness to the king, which had been a key factor in the Order's agreement to contribute to the two Egyptian campaigns. It had been Amalric, who was acting as regent for the captive count of Tripoli, who persuaded Gilbert to accept Akkar and Artah, even though both fortresses had been destroyed by an earthquake in July 1170. The transfer of such properties was a quick and easy solution for Amalric, but the Order would need to make a major financial investment to make them serviceable. The officers of the Order may well have resented the extent to which its policies had been subsumed to the interests of the king; the demand that the master should act with the consent of the chapter could be interpreted as an attempt to maintain the Order's autonomy from royal power.

During Josbert's mastership the Order continued to make purchases of property in the kingdom of Jerusalem; even if these were not in frontier areas, the sums involved (up to 6000 bezants in each case) indicate that it had cash available, whether from existing reserves or new sources of income.³⁷ Most importantly, Josbert and his officers put themselves behind the initiatives of the new king, Baldwin IV, who attained his majority in July 1176. By this time Saladin had extinguished the Fātimid regime, and the death of his nominal master Nūr al-Dīn in 1174 left him in undisputed control of Egypt. When Saladin's armies began to contest the possession of Muslim Syria with Nūr al-Dīn's heirs, Baldwin IV and his advisors planned to mount another great invasion of Egypt before Saladin could consolidate the two halves of his dominions. In the second half of 1176 Baldwin issued a charter which confirmed all of the privileges in Egypt previously granted by his father to the Order of the Hospital, adding an income of 30,000 bezants in the territory of Bilbeis. Clearly the Hospitallers were again prepared to contribute to an invasion of Egypt, having received additional concessions in the region where they expected to make the greatest gains.³⁸ However, despite extensive negotiations with the Byzantines, Baldwin's projected invasion eventually fell victim to political disputes within the kingdom of Jerusalem.³⁹

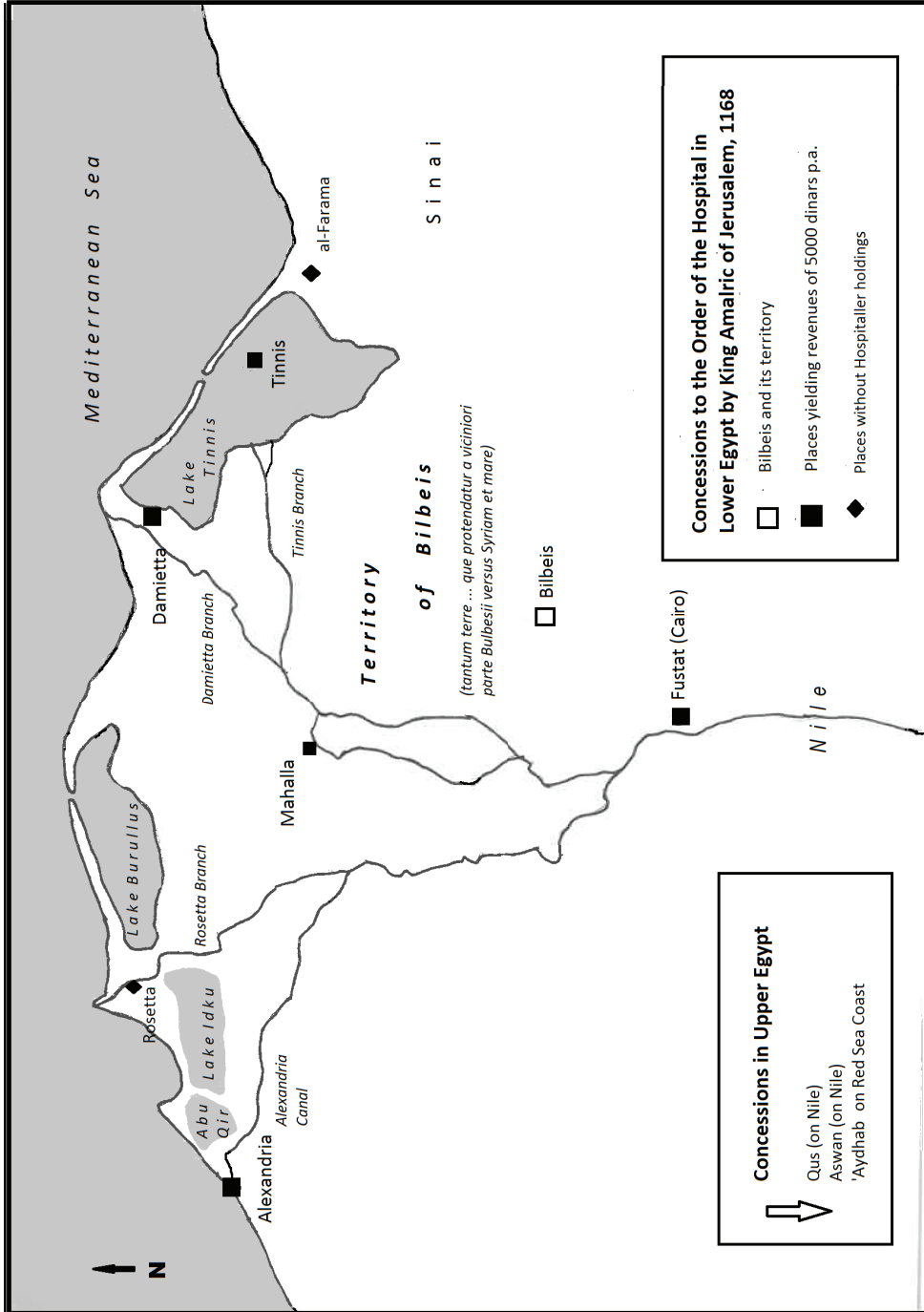
³⁶ Burgtorf (as n. 1), pp. 57–65.

³⁷ *D. Jerus.* (as n. 13), nos. 381, 384, 385, 392.

³⁸ *D. Jerus.* (as n. 13), no. 390.

³⁹ B. Hamilton, *The Leper King and His Heirs: Baldwin IV and the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 111–129.

The policies pursued by the Hospitallers during the mastership of Josbert show a considerable continuity with those of Gilbert of Assailly, which, I would argue, indicate that the Order's involvement in King Amalric's attempts to conquer Egypt were regarded by most Hospitallers far less negatively than is implied by William of Tyre. A close analysis of the two agreements concluded between the king and the Order in 1168 and 1169 reveals that the king's projected invasions of Egypt would involve a large financial investment for the Order, but also that they promised vast gains in the event of a successful outcome. The agreement to participate in a second invasion of Egypt only a year after the failure of the campaign of 1168 indicates a taste for military activity and a desire to profit from the grand schemes projected by King Amalric. The two agreements also reveal something about the changing nature of the Order's structure and personnel. The acquisition of the city of Bilbeis and its substantial dependent territory, as well as other concessions in both Lower and Upper Egypt, would have required the permanent presence of knight brethren with military and administrative experience, who would need to be seconded from Palestine and Syria or brought in from Hospitaller houses in the West. The fact that the master believed this could be accomplished can be understood as a clear indication of the number of knight brethren who must have been available for service by 1168. Finally, the demands which evidently aimed to restrict Gilbert's leadership only three years later need not be interpreted as objections to the increasing militarisation of the Order, but may well have been an attempt by the central convent to introduce a more collegiate system of government.



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ABSTRACT

The Grand Designs of Gilbert of Assailly. The Order of the Hospital in the Projected Conquest of Egypt by King Amalric of Jerusalem (1168–1169)

The chronicler William of Tyre is highly critical of the Hospitaller master Gilbert of Assailly, whom he blames for bankrupting the Order of the Hospital through his support for invasions of Egypt undertaken by King Amalric of Jerusalem. This essay attempts to identify and contextualise the concessions made by the king to the Hospitallers in exchange for their military support. It is argued that while the Egyptian campaigns involved a large financial investment for the Order, they promised vast economic gains in the event of a successful outcome, including a large contiguous territory in Lower Egypt and other property situated throughout the country.

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