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Introduction

Late medieval England was still a crusading country. The greatest military order after 1312, the Knights Hospitaller, also called the Order of St John of Jerusalem, held extensive English estates and supplied the crusading war effort with both money and manpower into the Tudor age. Their head, the Prior of St John, had his headquarters at Clerkenwell, just outside the city of London. This book focuses on the role of the Prior of St John in service to the crown between 1273 and 1540. Developments within both the crusading movement and England make this an appropriate starting point. In November 1272, Henry III of England died. The Lord Edward, at that time on crusade in the Holy Land, succeeded him, and appointed Joseph Chauncy, Hospitaller treasurer at Acre, as treasurer of England. Thus, a tangible link developed between the crusading movement and the realm of England, with the former offering service to the crown, and the latter promising support for future crusading campaigns. The later thirteenth century is also a suitable place to begin because the changes in the Prior's role in England can in part be explained by the perceived failings in the crusading movement that led to the loss of Acre in 1291. It is from 1295, for example, that the Prior started to receive regular summonses to parliament. A state of almost constant war from the 1290s with either Scotland or France also had a significant effect on the Prior's role. In 1540, the suppression of the English Priory took effect alongside the general dissolution of the religious houses.

It is the contention of this book that there was a sudden increase of participation by the English Prior in English royal affairs from a routine level, such as on courts of oyer and terminer, to high-profile political and diplomatic service. Although this development can be traced to the latter half of the fourteenth century, it was not until the mid-fifteenth century that the Prior started to serve on a regular basis. That this increased frequency occurred simultaneously for both king's council and diplomatic missions suggests that there was a common reason. This involvement in English public affairs continued until the eve of the English Reformation.

The primary aim of this book is to investigate the unique political role of the Prior of St John in England with reference to parliament, royal council and foreign affairs. The investigation of parliament includes full parliaments, great councils and colloquia. The royal council includes the king's council and its associated committees. Foreign affairs cover the Prior's diplomatic and military roles. The book will investigate changes in the Prior's public role over time, with reference to particular

moments when individual Priors were senior political figures. Secondly, the study examines changes in the English Priory to see how they influenced the development of the Prior's role. The Prior was never as independent or as active a crusader as is normally supposed, but neither did his office quite become a royal sinecure. This book will investigate alterations in the degree and balance of service between crown and Hospitaller duties rather than complete changes. Related aims include investigation of the effect of events in the eastern Mediterranean on the policy of the central chapter of the Order and the ensuing consequences for the Order and Prior of England, and exploration of the loss of the Order's political control of its estates to local aristocrats.

The Hospitaller Order

The Hospitallers originated in a hospice for pilgrims at Jerusalem in about 1070. They were formally recognised as a religious order in 1113, in the bull *Pie postulation voluntatis*, by Pope Paschal II (1099–1118). They quickly developed a military role in the first half of the twelfth century, at first by providing safe conduct to pilgrims and later by taking on the responsibility for protecting Christian strongholds in the Holy Land. After the fall of Jerusalem in 1187, the Hospitaller headquarters (the Convent) was moved to their castle at Margat, in the county of Tripoli, before settling in Acre in 1192, where they remained until the fall of the city in 1291. During the period covered by this book, the Hospitallers had their headquarters firstly at Acre, then Limassol on Cyprus (1292–1309), Rhodes (1309–1522) and finally, after temporary residences in Viterbo (1523–27) and Nice (1527–29), on Malta from 1530. Unlike the other military orders, such as the Teutonic Knights, who were active mainly in Eastern Europe, the Hospitallers remained a truly international order throughout the period of this study.

The Hospitaller brethren fell into three categories, knights, sergeants and chaplains, all of whom took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. They had a strict hierarchy.¹ At their head was the Grand Master, who was elected for life by the brethren in the Convent, where the Grand Master usually resided, although during the Great Schism, as Tipton has noted, he often resided at Avignon.² The Grand Master was assisted by other important officials of the Convent; the grand commander acted as the Grand Master's lieutenant; the marshal was responsible for military affairs; the turcopolier, who originally commanded the light cavalry, was in charge of coastal defences on Rhodes and Malta; the treasurer dealt with finances; the hospitaller was in charge of the hospital; the draper in charge of clothing; and the prior of the Convent dealt with spiritual matters. The position of

¹ For greater detail see A. Luttrell, 'The Hospitallers at Rhodes, 1306–1421', in *A History of the Crusades*, III, ed. H. W. Hazard, Madison, WI, and London, 1975, 278–339; Sire, *Knights of Malta*, 25–39; A. Luttrell, 'The Military Orders, 1312–1798', in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades*, ed. J. Riley-Smith, Oxford, 1995, 326–64; Nicholson, *Knights Hospitaller*, 68–97.

² C. L. Tipton, 'The English Hospitallers during the Great Schism', *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, IV, 1967, 91–124, at 104.

admiral developed after the move to Cyprus, a consequence of their transformation from a land-based to a sea-based force. Whereas the military brethren in the Holy Land had lived together in one large *auberge* (inn), while on Cyprus they started to live in smaller units called *langues* or ‘tongues’ that were based on linguistic or ‘national’ lines. These were in existence from at least 1295, when there were seven tongues, which in order of precedence were Provence, Auvergne, France, Spain, Italy, England, and Germany.³ The head of each tongue held one of the important offices mentioned above.

The most senior member of the English tongue held the office of turcopolier, at least from 1330. Although the turcopolier was technically head of the English tongue, the Prior of England was the position to which English brethren ultimately aspired: they stepped down from the turcopoliership in order to gain it. The other dignities of the English tongue were the prior of Ireland and, from the fifteenth century, the bailiff of Eagle. The Hospitallers never officially recognised a prior or priory in Scotland, only the commandery of Torphichen, under which all Scottish lands of the Order fell. However, from the later fifteenth century the Scottish crown sometimes referred to the commander of Torphichen as the Scottish prior or ‘Lord of St Johns’, the same title used by the Prior of England at that time.

In Western Europe, the Hospitallers were organised into provinces known as priories, again based on the ‘national’ boundaries that determined the tongues. The English Grand Priory, which included Ireland, Scotland and Wales, had its headquarters at Clerkenwell on the outskirts of London, where the Prior of England, who was head of the Grand Priory, resided. The Hospitallers’ lands were organised into houses called commanderies or preceptories, each headed by a commander/preceptor.⁴ These commanderies consisted of manors granted by patrons to the Hospitallers. Typically, commanderies were staffed by no more than two or three brethren, which meant that communal life was virtually non-existent. However, non-brethren such as servants and *confratres* (lay men and women who made a donation or annual gift) also lived in the commanderies. Commanders who were not on service in the East were expected to attend the annual chapters of the Priory, which were normally held at Clerkenwell. The Prior of England presided over these chapters, at which were discussed, amongst other things, leases of land, the reception of new recruits, promotions, discipline and the revenues, known as responsions, that were sent to the Convent. Priors of England were elected by the English brethren and then confirmed by the Grand Master and the Pope. Although the election was meant to be free from lay interference, in practice Priors, as feudal lords, needed the acceptance of the local king and were required to swear fealty to him. Thus the Prior of England, as for the priors in other provinces, had duties not only to the Order, but also to the crown. The purpose of this study is to explore this service to the English crown, which until now has not received detailed attention.

³ Nicholson, *Knights Hospitaller*, 73; Sire, *Knights of Malta*, 32.

⁴ As Helen Nicholson has observed, because some of the Hospitallers’ records were written in French and some in Latin, one finds references to the head of a house in one document as *commandeur* (French) and in another as *preceptor* (Latin), Nicholson, *Knights Hospitaller*, 73, 78.

The State of the Order in England, 1300–1540

By way of a prologue to the role of the Prior, a brief account of the English Priory before 1300 is necessary. More detailed histories can be found by King, Rees, Cowan et al. and more recently by Sire.⁵ The exact date of the foundation of the Order in England is unknown. Henry I (1100–35) founded the Hospitaller commandery of Villedieu in Normandy, but he does not appear to have granted any lands to the Order in England, saving his patronage for other religious orders, such as the Cluniacs.⁶ The first English lands were granted to the Order in Clerkenwell c. 1142–44 by the Bricett family, when the first Prior, Walter, was recorded. These were contemporary with other grants by Sybil de Raynes and the earl of Gloucester (Shingay c. 1144), Agnes de Lacy (Quenington c. 1144–62), Ralph fitz Stephen (Waingrove c. 1147), the Percy family (Mount St John c. 1148), Ranulf, earl of Chester (Maltby c. 1153), Gilbert de Clare, the earl of Hertford (Standon c. 1154), and William, archbishop of York (Ossington c. 1154). Henry II also favoured the Order, as the benefactor of Battsford (1154), and his brother, Henry of Blois the bishop of Winchester, may have founded Godsfield (c. 1167).⁷ By 1154 the Order had nine commanderies in England and Torphichen in Scotland.⁸ At this time, the English Priory was still subordinate to the priory of Saint-Gilles, remaining so until at least 1184, and then came under the control of the priory of France in 1189. It is probable that soon after this the English Priory gained independence, perhaps due to the prominence of English brethren such as Robert l'Anglais, who was grand commander of the Order between 1195 and 1201, and later Prior of England between 1204 and 1214, but also due to the crusading activities of Richard I.⁹ By 1199, the number of commanderies had increased to between 28 and 32. In that year, a royal tax exacted £500 from the Order in England, only half the amount that the Templars paid, but still a sizeable amount, suggesting that the Hospitallers had acquired substantial wealth by the end of the twelfth century.¹⁰ Further commanderies were founded in the thirteenth century taking the total to 43, but the majority dated from the previous century.

The English Priory reached the zenith of its acquisition after the transfer of the belongings of the suppressed Order of the Temple (see Figure 1). It did so with some difficulty, as those who had been awarded custody of the Templar lands during their trial between 1308 and 1312 were unwilling to cede them. The Pope had expressed his wish as early as 1309 that revenues from Templar lands should be used in aid of

⁵ King, *Knights of St John*; W. Rees, *A History of the Order of St John of Jerusalem in Wales and on the Welsh Border*, Cardiff, 1947; I. B. Cowan, P. H. R. Mackay and A. Macquarrie, *The Knights of St John of Jerusalem in Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1983; Sire, *Knights of Malta*.

⁶ Sire, *Knights of Malta*, 176; J. A. Green, *Henry I: King of England and Duke of Normandy*, Cambridge, 2006, 170–2, 201, 277–83.

⁷ *Medieval Religious Houses*, 298–309.

⁸ Sire, *Knights of Malta*, 176; *Medieval Religious Houses*, 494.

⁹ Sire, *Knights of Malta*, 177; *Cartulaire du Prieuré de Saint Gilles de l'Hôpital de Saint Jean de Jérusalem (1129–1210)*, ed. D. le Blévec and A. Venturini, Paris, 1997, *passim*.

¹⁰ Sire, *Knights of Malta*, 177.

the Holy Land, and thus by implication that the Hospitallers should assume their administration.¹¹ However, very little passed immediately into Hospitaller custody, and only a few Templar properties were gained after the formal suppression of the Templars and allocation of their possessions to the Hospitallers in 1313. The king appears to have given up those that were in his possession by 1320.¹²

It took the statute of 1324 to revive the process of redistribution to the Hospitallers. Unfortunately for the Hospitallers, the statute also allowed the right of appeal, and there were many claims against them, so much so that by 1328 only £458-worth of Templar revenues was in Hospitaller hands.¹³ By the time of the 1338 Hospitaller survey, the situation had changed, so that some £2,489 gross, and £1,711 net of Templar possessions were in Hospitaller hands, due principally to the efforts of Prior Leonard de Tibertis, formerly prior of Venice, who had been overseer of the transfer of Templar lands in the West since 1312, and had actually been present at the formal transfer of English Templar lands by the crown to the Hospitallers in 1313.¹⁴ However, some significant possessions of the Templars remained beyond Hospitaller control, such as Guiting and Bradewell (£133), Hurst and Newsam (£120) and Faxfleet (£100), totalling over £776 altogether. Those holding these possessions were people of influence, such as Ralph Neville, the earls of Arundel, Gloucester and Warenne, the countess of Pembroke and the king's physician and financier Pancio de Controno.¹⁵ At this stage, the Hospitallers still had hopes of regaining these possessions, and they were mentioned in the 1338 Survey. Indeed, the total sum of all the Hospitallers' revenues, £6,389, includes the £776 not yet received, and the responsions, set at £2,280 (a third of the income), included these unrealised revenues.¹⁶ This strongly suggests that the Hospitallers were fairly confident of recovering these possessions, although this turned out to be a drawn-out process. In the case of Saddlescombe in Sussex, they only gained possession in 1397. Some properties, such as Bisham (Berks.) and Denny (Cambs.), were never recovered and were used to found other ecclesiastical establishments.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the Priory of England had, by 1338, turned round its perilous financial position of a decade earlier.

The income of the Order in England in 1338 and 1535 is given in Figure 2. The *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535 does not give as much detail as the 1338 Hospitaller survey, so a complete comparison of the state of the English Order in 1338 and 1535 unfortunately cannot be undertaken. Nonetheless two key areas can be tackled, those being the income of the English Priory, and the number of houses. In comparison to the 1338 income of anywhere from £4,602 to £7,406 and expenses of £1,388, in 1535 the English Priory had a net income of about £5,705, with expenses of £496. One obvious difference is the reduced number of independent commanderies and

¹¹ *CPL 1305–1342*, 64.

¹² *Ibid.*, 198.

¹³ *Rot. Parl.*, II, 21, 41–2; 1338 Survey, 217.

¹⁴ TNA E 135/1/25.

¹⁵ 1338 Survey, 212–13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ S. D. Phillips, 'The Recycling of Monastic Wealth in Medieval Southern England, 1300–1530', *Southern History: A Review of the History of Southern England*, XXII, 2000, 45–71 at 47–8.

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Abbreviations

abp archbishop

bp bishop

Br brother

b/wick bailiwick

com commander

cmy commandery

GM Grand Master/Master

KPS Keeper of the Privy Seal

p Preceptor

Pr prior

pry priory

py preceptory

treas Lord High Treasurer of England

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