

The Receiver in the Military and Hospitaller Order of St John: Formation of the Patrimony of the Hospitaller Order

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Abstract

Spurred by the outcome of the First Crusade in 1099, the Military and Hospitaller Orders in the first half of the twelfth century saw an exponential growth of their land-based assets, not only in the middle eastern Kingdoms and Principalities but also in the lands Outremer, in mainland Europe. The distances that separated the convents of the Orders and their satellite assets were enormous, and supervision of the proper management of these consequently limited. Instructions took weeks to be delivered, sometimes too late to alter events that were changing rapidly. The organization needed someone who could shoulder the responsibility of managing the assets of the Order in the best interests of the latter. It was only when the Order of St John of Jerusalem instituted officially the post of Receiver, as late as 1358, that management of the widespread donations which the Orders had garnered became almost lucrative. The tasks pertaining to the office of the Receiver were innumerable, the responsibility was colossal, but the post came also with prestige and pre-eminence that was the hallmark of the top posts of the Order.

Introduction

Soon after the first crusades in the late twelfth century, the Hospitaller Order of St John had amassed a considerable amount of donations that were mostly fixed assets spread out both on the European continent and in the middle East. These were mostly arable land that could be farmed, buildings, manors and sometimes whole villages with their judicial rights. All were exempt from ecclesiastical and sovereign taxes and rights. With the passing of years, this Hospitaller wealth saw an exponential increase and managing these assets judiciously and at a profit soon became difficult for an Order which was continuously involved in military campaigns and at a great distance from their business end.

The Hospitaller donations can be grouped and divided into two periods.¹ There was a first phase which started from the beginning when the Hospitaller Order started to receive bequests and donations in earnest, around the decades 1160/70. The proper term used for the unit asset in this time frame was 'preceptory'. This included the Hospitaller religious communities, economic exploitation of the asset, and hospitality centres. These centres were also called *Obedientiae* (statutes of Raymond de Puy), *Domus*, and *Mansiones*.² All of these conformed to resident households, with the residents leading a semi-enclosed life, with regular attendance at prayer, much as their monastic brethren. Some of the assets also had *hospitia* which gave refuge to pilgrims and patients.

These preceptories had a multiplicity of functions. It had the main residence of the commander which included, in most instances, the main hall, lodgings for the chaplains and other brothers, and the servant quarters. Most rooms in the *piano nobile* had wall frescoes and fireplaces. The land was used mostly for agricultural work, but some preceptories also became a place of refuge for the surrounding villagers, especially in time of war and disease. The asset also catered for the practice of the religious cult and the church and/or chapel ground was also used for burial. Parts of the outbuildings were also used for hospitality of itinerant pilgrims and travellers.³

The second phase dated from 1350 onwards. The term used for the unit asset at this time was 'commandery'. At this stage, the Hospitaller commandery had a much-diminished religious factor, a decreased hospitality output; the essential aim of the asset was exclusively economic management. Bestowing a commandery to a knight was part of the *cursus honorum* of the Hospitaller Order. It augmented his social status according to the different types of commanderies that were available, and

¹ LM Guida. *L'Ordine di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme. Le sue commende e i suoi conventi*. Taranto: Centro Studi Melitensi, 2007.

² Jonathan Riley-Smith. *The Knights Hospitaller in the Levant, c.1070-1309*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p.185.

³ Guida, *op. cit.*, p.212.

increased his personal gain. The sole purpose of a commandery was economic exploitation. It dissolved the previous ties between the resident brethren of the Order and the local community. Increased absenteeism of the commander in commanderies of *di cabimento*, the least onerous of all types of commanderies with sub-standard and at times a total lack of residence, aggravated this to a certain extent.

By the middle of the fourteenth century it became evident that the two parts of the Order of St John, the convent located in the Levant and the European provinces were becoming dysfunctional. The Hospitaller Levant headquarters was the seat where economic policies were expounded, in an attempt to improve the behemoth structure of the Order and adapt it to changing political realities. However, the European provinces were thousands of miles away. The sole aim of these provinces was to support the central convent in the East. It soon became clear that statutory decisions taken in the East were not always being enforced in the West.⁴ Because of this, the reliance of the convent in the Middle East upon European states was becoming unhealthy.

The post of Receiver of the Hospitaller Order

It was at this point that the position of the Receiver came into being. With time, the post of the Hospitaller Receiver encompassed a multitude of functions.⁵ The duties assigned to a Receiver of the Order were many and complex. The statutes and the capitular ordinances, especially those pertaining to the Common treasury laid down in specific detail these duties and what was expected from these receivers by the central convent.

The officer served as the main link between the central convent and the priories. It controlled the financial fluxes from the European provinces towards the central convent. The Receiver was the administrator of debts and credits and he was responsible for the

⁴ Riley-Smith, *op. cit.*, p.186.

⁵ AOM 1666, *Compendio del Codice Gerosolimitano*, 133 Ricevidori

collection of *responsiones*, rents and leases, passage fees, income of vacancy and mortuary, and the *spogli* for the Hospitaller common treasury. Infrequently, he was also involved directly in the management of a commandery. It was his responsibility to maintain a registry for the copies of leases and rents – the books were called '*libri dei Conti*'. He replaced the prior if *in absentia*. He made sure that all the incumbents respected the obligations of the improvement visits and the *Cabrei*, the outcomes of the prioral visits and instituted punishment for the maladministrators. He took immediate possession of any commandery that fell into the period of *mortorio* or *vacanze*, and he also collected the monetary rights of the *mortorio* and the *spoglio*. He was also involved in the procurement of commodities. Finally, he also assumed ambassadorial duties.

Each priory had to have its own receiver/s, and the brethren chosen for the post had to have at least the grade of Commander. The post of Receiver had to be elected by the Hospitaller Council, and election had to have the mandatory two-thirds of the Council votes. Prior to applying for the post, the person needed to have had a good working relationship with the Procurators of the Common Treasury. The letter of mandate was given by the Grand Master, and the office of Receivership lasted for a period of three years. Their position was only confirmed however at the beginning of the third year where they would have given their annual returns of two years of balanced accounts, as well as the balance of the first trimester of the third year.

The statutes also stipulated their place of residence. This was a place where the Grand Master deemed fit was the best location from where the receivers could give the best service to the Treasury and to the commanderies. Receivers enjoyed a position of pre-eminence amongst their peers, including a conventual residence with the associated trappings. They kept this status for six months after their position was terminated. The time spent in their office counted as time spent in the convent, important when counting their *antianitá*. The receiver replaced the function of the Prior when he was absent. He provided and presented

the benefices when the prior was absent. He had to present the circulars and orders emanating from the convent and had to make sure that these would be carried out.

The receiver collected all the dues, rights and credits that were owed to the Common Treasury, including the tax from the six priories of the langue of Provence, Auvergne and France. These included the credits collected annually as in *responsiones* and impositions, and also the debts owed to the priory. He had the authority to query these and to receive them officially in the Provincial Chapter. He further had the authority to delegate the duties of debt collection to his procurators and the statutes of the Order gave him authority to publicly denounce the debtors. If the receiver did not collect the rents and leases due, he was bound to pay these from his own pocket. If the debtors were deprived of their commanderies, the receiver could not obtain these under any circumstances.

He had to keep copies of all the rents and leases pertaining to the commanderies under his charge; later on these were catalogued either under the *cabrei* or in the various *processi di miglioramenti* which each commander was duty bound to do every five years, especially if he wanted to improve his situation and standing in the order. He had to take instant and immediate possession of any commandery that fell vacant or was in *mortorio* with the death of the commander, to prevent the possession from being usurped or taken over by third parties outside the convent. It was stated specifically in the statutes, however, that this role should not impede the possession of the commandery by a designated member nominated by the convent.⁶

He was also charged with the collection of the dues of the *spoglio* and the *mortorio*. The statutes stipulated that he was not to do this alone, but needed the presence of one of the brethren from the closest neighbouring commandery, or failing this, a secular person, and together

⁶ Stat LIV Tesoro

the receiver undertook to do two inventories, one on the state of the commandery including the stable and moveable assets, and the other what constituted the *spoglio*. These inventories had to be minutely detailed, listing the provisions of the house, including the amount of wine in the cellars. Nothing could be taken either from the commandery itself or from the *spoglio* under pain of very heavy penalties.⁷ He was also responsible for the liquidation by public auction of the inventoried *spoglio* which was given to the highest bidder, except for the gold and silver items and other *gioje* that were sent directly to the convent.⁸ The exception here were the *spogli* of the commanders of Germany where the silverware was left in the commandery. This was collected by the new commander when he was installed who paid a third of its true value, and an assurance that it would not be given away. The receiver was asked to send a notification to this effect with his accounts to the common treasury.

Other items that were part of the *spoglio* but were not sold included the books, farm machinery, mathematical instruments, statues, insignia and curiously, things related to natural history including stuffed animals; these were sent to the Library of the Order at the Convent.⁹ Any part of the *spoglio* that was not auctioned off could not be sent to the creditors but was to be deposited in a public place and the procurators of the Treasury informed to be given the necessary instructions.¹⁰

The receiver was also responsible for the rents and the leases during the *mortorio* and *vacanze* periods when a commander is absent. The statutes specified that he was not allowed to pocket this income for himself, nor give it to the Priory; nor to powerful ecclesiastical dignitaries, or seculars, or to the *Università*, or college, nor to the new incumbents of the commandery, but was required to maintain its viability during this caretaker period. If the place where the inventory of the spoils was being

⁷ Stat LVIII and LX Tesoro

⁸ Ord 57 Tesoro

⁹ Ord 123 Tesoro

¹⁰ Ord 58 Tesoro

carried out or the sale of the effects of the *spoglio*, or the rents of the *Mortorio* or *Vacante*, or any other thing that interested the common treasury happened to be the place where the Procurator of the treasury resided, the receiver had to inform him.¹¹

During the *mortorio* and *vacanze* period, the receiver was responsible to carry on with the litigations and lawsuits. He was also due to advise the new incumbents about these. During these periods he was allowed to carry on with some running repairs that the commandery was in need of, especially if the income of the commandery was sufficient and with the advice of another two or three commanders. He was also responsible to advise the new incumbent or their procurators about the repairs and their cost. He also had to respect the precepts and obligations of the *processi di miglioramenti* and the *cabrei* including their renewal, as well as the visitations. He was obliged to take definitive actions against brethren, including priors and bailiffs who mismanaged their commanderies.

He was responsible for all the funds generated by the priory and was obliged for its safe keeping, either himself or depositing it in the care of dependable personnel, giving a full account to the Provincial Chapter. Together with the annual accounts that are presented to the chapter for verification, he also had to present and count all the cash that remained.¹² The statutes laid down that *col conto annuale, che presentano al capitolo per la verificazione, devono esibire, e contare il denaro, che deve esser loro rimasto in cassa...* This obligation was carried to the extent that money robbed off the receiver, in whatever way, had to be refunded by the receiver, personally.¹³ The receiver had to dispose of cash of the Religion according to the instructions given to him by the Convent. He had to send appropriate currency, of the right weight. He had to send receipts of all policies of carriage of transactions carried out in the name of the Order.¹⁴

¹¹ Ord 52 Tesoro

¹² Ord 68 Tesoro

¹³ Ord 61 Tesoro

¹⁴ Ord 116 Tesoro

After the provincial chapter, he had to provide a register of all the payments done, and a list of the remaining debtors, under pain of having to pay double the amount due. Those who were found to have paid were reimbursed in their totality and with interest.¹⁵ He submitted a monthly administrative account with checks and balances of the index priory to the common treasury; this account was initially displayed at the Provincial chapter and examined thoroughly, each expense dutifully accounted for, justified and verified, before it was sent onwards to the common treasury. He did the same with the annual accounts and whatever the procurators of the treasury suggested. He was also accountable for its transport to the convent.

At the end of his three-year term, the receiver must have surrendered all the funds, gold, silver, gifts and paperwork to those who were to receive the consignment in the name of the common treasury, before the expiry of one month. And by the end of eight months, he was obliged to have given a final balance of accounts of his administration to the convent. The statutes dictate various penalties if the balance of account showed that the receiver was a debtor. If the debt was not repaid within a month, the receiver was to be exposed publicly in convent and was inflicted with severe penalties as mandated by the statutes of the Order.¹⁶ If he remained a debtor after the prescribed period had elapsed, the receiver was deprived of all his assets and was imprisoned for life. Worse offenders including those that had run up a debt of more than a thousand scudi and not paid within a stipulated year were remorselessly severed from the Order; they were deprived of the habit and consigned to the secular courts.

The receiver had to use some of the treasury money to settle expenses for the execution of instructions given to him by the chapter general, the grand master and the convent in matters relating to the

¹⁵ Ord 72 Tesoro

¹⁶ Ord 73 Tesoro

business of the Religion. Less onerous tasks for the receiver included the surveillance of the *minoritá* that they were not carrying the gold cross of the Order before their proofs of nobility having been accepted by the Order; and that they did not take over the guardianship of any steel armour of whatever sort without the licence of the Grand Master sent from the chancellery. Finally, he was also responsible for providing notarial-authenticated copies of all legal sentences of important cases given in favour of the Religion. He had to send these to the Convent to have them registered in the chancellery.

The private life of a Receiver in the Settecento

Fra Vincenzo Crescimanno was the Hospitaller Receiver in Scicli in Sicily, around the middle of the sixteenth century. He lived sumptuously in his house in Scicli, certainly not lacking in the comforts that were *de riguer* at the time.¹⁷ The *sala* of the house must have covered several square metres in area. On its wall were mounted thirty-six fine oil paintings, very large in dimensions and showing a variety of scenes, including those of the city, presumably of Scicli, images of war, and other paintings depicting *natura morta*. There were also several chairs with seats lined in red velvet, and a white basin and vase.

In the anteroom or waiting room leading to the hall was a black ebony writing desk, with a meticulously carved frieze the size of one and a half palms. This room also contained an ordinary cupboard and a lined carpet of various colours. There was also a large mirror framed in black ebony as well as a small chest without a lid and another small ebony writing desk. The inventory also listed a set of twelve chairs with carved and decorated frames and finished in red silk. The room also contained a set of four large fine oils, one representing the Madonna with the pilgrims, another showing a hermit nursing the sick, another of St Catherine, and the fourth one showing the beheading of St John the Baptist. In the same room there were also twelve small landscape

¹⁷ AOM, cod. 6073, fol. 120r

paintings. There was also a pair of curtains of fine lustrous silk made up of red and yellow tints that hung in the doorway.

The inventory of the *camera*, the master bedroom, included a large bed with two pure wool mattresses and a bedspread of matching silk. There were two cupboards, or chests covered in silk, and six chairs covered with lined green velvet seats. The room also contained a covered chest and a carpet as well as a carved ebony writing desk. There were also two travelling trunks and four Dutch shirts, a tablecloth of red silk with decorations and another mattress of pure wool. There was another large lined carpet. Finally, there were seven ordinary sized butts, full of wine.