

Feudalism in Crisis: The Devastation of the Possessions of the Hospitallers in Provence (1373-1429)

For many years, economic historians have studied the crisis and the long depression of the last centuries of the Middle Ages. The recent publication of the excellent thesis of Guy Bois¹ reinforces the need to study the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

Here, I will analyse essentially the internal transformations the feudal mode of production underwent in the geographical area of south-east France.² More specifically, I will study the evolution of the estates of the Hospitallers of Saint John of Jerusalem, which were situated in the Priory of Provence,³ also called, in the documents of the time, the Priory of Petite Provence,⁴ with reference to the territories on the left bank of the Rhône, from Valence to the Mediterranean and from the Camargue to Nice. This large region offers, for the period under discussion, a remarkable series of documents which, for the most part, have been well preserved. First, we have at our disposal the inquiry of 1338 which provides an overall picture of the estates of the Hospitallers before the great crisis of 1348.⁵ The Papal investigation of 1373 allows us to measure, in the framework of six dioceses (Aix-en-Provence, Arles, Avignon, Gap, Riez, Sisteron), the impact of the crisis, close to a quarter of a century after the Black Death.⁶

Second, two other investigations, said to be on a prioral level, were carried out at the instigation of the Order of Saint John, basically to verify the management qualities of the commanders and thereby to prevent any erosion of property and rights.⁷ In all likelihood all the commanderies were visited, but the records of only five of them in 1411⁸ and of six in 1429⁹ have been preserved.

Despite certain gaps due to the random nature of the documents which remain, we still find in all these investigations some significant examples for each part of the Priory of Provence: the Rhône valley, the Var coast and the upper and lower Alps. The crisis within feudalism, beginning in the middle of the fourteenth century, can be described in its totality and throughout its duration.

The unit of exploitation: the commanderies

The seigniories of Saint John of Jerusalem, to which the Hospitallers gave the name preceptoria or commandery, provided the basic wealth of the Order. In the middle of the fourteenth century, these commanderies

appear to be supported from two main sources: firstly, from pious bequests and purchases intended to finance, in a permanent way, the crusades to the Orient, and secondly, from the acquisition of the estates of the Templars in Provence in December 1319.¹⁰

The wealth of the commanderies varied greatly according to the nature and extent of the property and rights of the Order. Thus, for example, at Manosque, Les Omergues and Puimoisson, the Hospitallers possessed the right of high justice. Elsewhere, especially when close to larger centres like Marseille, Arles or Avignon, where competition with other seigneurs was more intense, the knights of Saint John did not have any rights over persons and owed their power to direct exploitation of their land and vineyards.

In 1338, the majority of commanderies had affiliated houses under their jurisdiction which were called members. In many regions where the Hospitallers had neither commanderies nor member houses, they still had certain rights, relics perhaps of bequests considered of too little importance to justify the construction of a house.

The inquiry of 1373 shows us a society already profoundly unsettled. An immediate observation is that the Hospitallers had to renounce the exercise of their rights in places where they had no centre of exploitation. A pertinent example is the village of Lauris, dependent on the commandery of Manosque, through the intermediary of Saint-Jean-de-la-Tour-d'Aygue. On 6 June 1373,¹¹ the investigators called as a witness Hugo Bosse, an inhabitant of Lauris. He described the progressive impoverishment of the estates of the Order in that region. He also confessed to having rented land from the Hospitallers for an annual amount of two florins, but he had to return the land to the commander in the second year of a six-year lease, as the lease was so detrimental to him.¹² Faced with such a situation, and unable to locate any better-informed witness, the investigators had no alternative but to call on the priest to summon the parishioners of Lauris and to ask them to declare, under oath, whether or not they had any obligations to the Hospitallers. Several of the parish members admitted timidly to owing a few denarii as annual dues. Thirty-eight years later, the prioral investigation of 1411 did not reveal any obligations in existence at Lauris.¹³ This example, which could be duplicated, shows the rapid erosion of feudal rights where they were not reinforced by the presence of a house of the Order.

The simplification of the map of the estates of the Hospitallers in Provence is carried out in another way, too, namely, certain commanderies being judged non-profitable, or having been victims of considerable destruction, were attached to other, more important, commanderies. This is

the case, among others, of Notre-Dame de Calissane which became a member of Aix-en-Provence¹⁴ and of Orange, which was attached to Avignon before 1373.¹⁵

Simultaneously, one witnesses what could be called a de facto parcelling-out of properties of certain larger commanderies. This is the case at Aix-en-Provence in 1373; although there was a titular commander, the noble Richan de Châteauneuf, the majority of the member houses of the commandery had been surrendered ad vitam for an annual rent. Therefore we can say that in this troubled period the commander unburdened himself of the responsibility of exploiting the small units which made up the commandery. With the rent from the leasing of the members, he could, with little effort, pay his responsio to the Rhodes treasury and even keep a substantial profit.¹⁶ In the same way at Avignon, in the same period, six brothers of the Order lived in the administrative centre (caput) of the commandery while nine others lived in the member houses. Together, the latter paid an annual rent of three hundred florins to the commander of Avignon who, in turn, paid only one hundred and sixty-six florins and eight gros as responsio.¹⁷ It is difficult to measure the exact effects on the Order of Saint John of the dispersion and break-up of the communities of Hospitallers which, according to the inquiry of 1338, were still living communally.

The Household and the Familia

Everywhere the investigators were interested in the number of seigneurs who resided in the commanderies, for their style of life implied the use of considerable resources which could have put the economic health of the Order in danger.¹⁸ Almost everywhere the investigators of 1373 as well as the prioral investigations of 1411 and 1429 showed a distinct decline in the number of brothers of the Hospital. For example, at Gap in 1338, eight brothers and twelve lay brothers were counted;¹⁹ in 1373, there remained only three brothers and three lay brothers.²⁰ At Aix-en-Provence, of the twenty-seven brothers and ten lay brothers counted in 1338,²¹ there remained only sixteen brothers and two lay brothers in 1373.²² The household of the commandery of Avignon seems to have resisted this tendency more effectively; fifteen brothers were counted in 1373,²³ against twelve in 1338, but the eight lay brothers of 1338 had not been replaced.²⁴ It would be interesting to compare the age of the brothers from one investigation to the other, because in 1373 it appears high. Unfortunately, age was not recorded in 1338.

While a pronounced decline in the number of seigneurs is shown, the documents reveal an especially severe drop in the members of the familia.

These were the permanent, salaried employees of the commanderies who should not be confused with the occasional workers hired for ploughing, harvesting or grape-gathering. They were the ox-drivers (*bubulci*), stablemen (*boaterii*) and transport workers (*saumaterii*). The withdrawal of the system of direct exploitation, along with an increase in the quantity of land rented, were the major causes of the decline in their number. However, it must also be remembered that the members of the *familia* were the first victims of the decline of rural activities, since they faced increased dangers of a political and military nature which need to be discussed now.

Destruction and Upheavals

In 1373, as well as in 1411, the investigators had been struck by the extent of damage caused to the estates of the Order, and also by the distinct decline in the value of the commanderies. During the second half of the fourteenth century, Provence was ravaged by war. The houses of the Order, like other rural dwellings, were choice targets for bands of pillagers. Thus, before 1373, at Saint-Christophe de Brignoles, a member of Beaulieu, the buildings were destroyed in the fighting.²⁵ The same situation prevailed at Gravezon, a member of Avignon,²⁶ at Sainte-Luce d'Arles, where the buildings themselves were saved but the interiors were completely stripped,²⁷ and in the neighbouring commandery of Saliers in the Camargue.²⁸ The same destruction was evident at Cavalerie de Limaye, a member of Manosque,²⁹ and at Saint-Martin of Gap.³⁰ In 1411, the material signs of destruction were still more evident. At Avignon, the entire commandery was in a state of abject poverty³¹ and the value of the rent fell from three hundred and eighty to two hundred florins.³² Its members, Orange, Châteauneuf, Argenton, Tarascon, Barbentane and La Brasse, were completely destroyed.³³ The devastation was so great that the investigators realised the futility of budgeting for repairs and instead, proposed a complete reconstruction of the member houses.³⁴ Total destruction was also noted at Biot, a member of Nice,³⁵ as well as for the members of Ruon: Entrecasteaux, Astros, Vidauban and La Ruète.³⁶ A similar situation existed at Claret, in the Alps, where the administrative centre of the commandery, as well as its members, was entirely destroyed.³⁷ Thus, none escaped damage, except those like Manosque and Puimisson, where security was guaranteed by strong fortifications.

During the same period, the estates of the Order were struck by natural disasters. The commanderies along the Rhône had to cope with serious floods. The sudden inundation destroyed important property at Avignon, Saint-Pierre de Camppublic, close to Beaucaire, along with the possessions of Trinquetaille and of Saliers in the Camargue, where the pastures and hunting grounds were badly damaged.³⁸ There were also problems manifest of a demographic nature. Various allusions to the first

epidemic (*ante primam mortalitatem*), or to the lack of inhabitants (*deffectus gentium*) are not frequent but they do appear occasionally. Those whom the documents call *homines ligii Hospitalis vel tisiones* were fewer and fewer in number and the exploitation of their services, profitable as it was, fell to almost nil.

The Hospitallers were not only the helpless victims of the events that marked the impoverishment of their estates. On occasion, the negligence of the commanders themselves was noted by the investigators. Thus, in 1373, at Brantes and at Lachau, dependent houses of the commandery of Les Omergues, it was pointed out that the old houses of the Order had gradually deteriorated because of inadequate maintenance by those in charge.³⁹ At Tour d'Aygue, a member of Manosque, where the same farmer had lived for nearly thirty years, the house was practically in ruins.⁴⁰ The same situation existed at Saint-Maurice de Régusse (Var), where one witness was of the opinion that all the buildings were falling into ruin because of poor maintenance.⁴¹

The least one can say is that for the most part, the officers of the Order did not seem to show much interest in the rebuilding or even the proper administration of their commanderies. With only a few exceptions, such as the commander of Mallemort in 1373 who agreed to invest some money in it,⁴² the rule in general seemed to be to do as little as possible. Thus we see that the commanders of Sainte-Luce and of Trinquetaille at Arles, entrusted all the administration of their estate to a Jewish manager (*proseneta*) by the name of Mosson Bonni Anni. As if to excuse them, a witness declared that if a Jew had been chosen to administer these Christian religious establishments, it was because he was the most competent.⁴³

Moral Decline

In 1373, only the records of the Riez diocese which included the commanderies of Puimoisson and of Saint-Maurice de Régusse show that, in accord with papal orders, questions pertaining to the moral health of the Hospitallers had been posed. In the other dioceses the investigators limited themselves to questions of a material nature. The Bishop of Riez, taking very seriously the letter from the Pope ordering an investigation,⁴⁴ prepared a list of six questions, the last of which concerned the chastity of the brothers of the Order, the quality of the divine services offered in the affiliated churches and finally, the exercise of charity and hospitality. In the light of the answers, one can trace a pretty sombre picture of the moral health of the Hospitallers. We can ask ourselves if the picture painted would have been any different in the other dioceses if the investigators had dared to pose questions of the same nature.

According to the testimony of several witnesses who were residing at Puimisson, a strongly fortified commandery, a lay sister lived there, who had the upper hand in the administration of the house. Thereafter the evidence differs. For some, including Jean Bargème, a brother knight of the Order, everything boiled down to a question of money: the brothers of the household did not receive enough of the essentials of life from their leaders, so that their life proved to be a difficult and precarious one.⁴⁵ According to the chaplain, Hugues Olivier, the lay sister in question was a woman of immoral persuasion who exercised a great influence on the commander. The witness considered that this situation discredited Puimisson since it was shameful that such a woman managed a religious house.⁴⁶ The most astonishing fact in all this is that certain witnesses, residents themselves of the commandery, claimed that they saw no cause for moral reform. Were they afraid? Did they approve of the presence of the lay sister, Alacta Fabrisa, at the head of their house? We will never really know.

Charity and hospitality, the practice of which had been the reason for the foundation of the Order, appeared to exist no longer in the expenditure of the commanderies. Thus, the witnesses interrogated at Saint-Maurice affirmed that hospitality was poorly practised.⁴⁷ The situation was worse at Puimisson where it was admitted that alms-giving was not carried out at all.⁴⁸ The same situation existed at Bras, in the diocese of Aix.⁴⁹ At the commandery of Claret in 1411, the investigators verifying that hospitality was no longer practised according to the custom, ordered that henceforth, fifteen *emine* of wheat be distributed three times a week, from Christmas until Easter each year.⁵⁰ Elsewhere, when funds were still budgeted for alms-giving or hospitality, they were generally a negligible proportion of total expenditure.

The churches and the chapels of the Order did not present a more favourable picture. Thus, at the Priory at Saint-Jean d'Aix, no more than twelve priests were to be counted instead of the eighteen who would normally reside there.⁵¹ At the member house of Royère, affiliated to Manosque, there remained no priest in residence.⁵² At Saint-Maurice, in spite of the presence of sergeants of the Order, a chaplain who was called to testify affirmed that divine services were poorly carried out.⁵³ His testimony was corroborated by a certain Bertrand Jean, inhabitant of Régusse.⁵⁴ The situation was the same at Puimisson where, according to a witness, the parish churches were badly served whilst the other chapels were in an even sadder state.⁵⁵

The prioral inquiries of the fifteenth century did not concern themselves with the moral state of the Hospitallers but rather with the material condition of the commanderies. The inquiries therefore give more evidence about churches destroyed or devastated than about the quality of the divine

services provided. What the investigators of 1411 tell us about the ruin of the house of Orange is, however, indicative of the moral corruption of certain brothers of the Order. There, a past commander of the house, now expelled from the Order, had sold sacred vases and relics of the church and had dared to speculate with the feudal titles of the commandery, the most heinous crime within the framework of feudalism.⁵⁶ Because of his depredations the member house of Orange, ruined at the beginning of the fifteenth century, never recovered its former status.

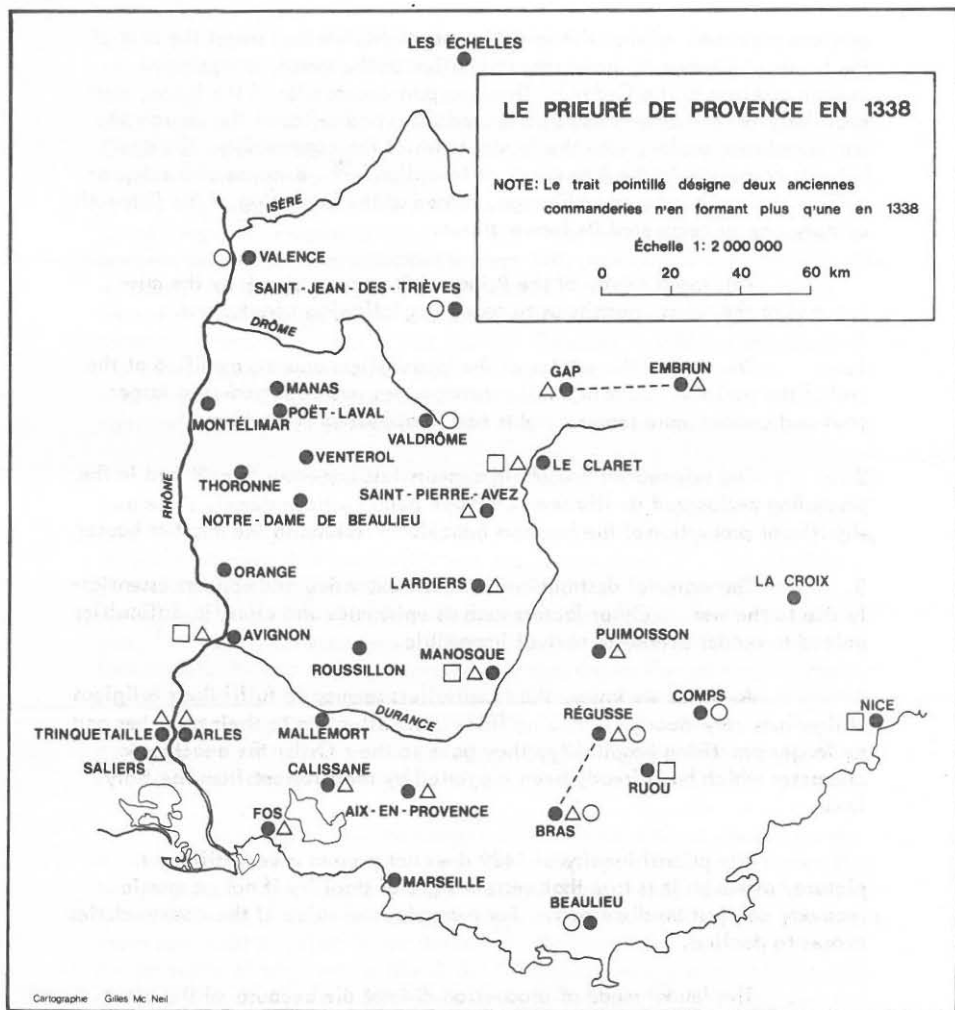
This rapid survey of the Priory of Provence, struck by the misfortunes of the times, permits us to reach the following conclusions.

1. The map of the estates of the Hospitallers appears modified at the end of the period. Certain small commanderies had been added to larger ones and certain more tenuous rights had disappeared in the turmoil.
2. The seigneurial household appears less numerous than it had in the preceding period and its life seems to have been less communal, since a significant proportion of the brothers henceforth resided in the member houses.
3. The material destruction had been extensive and appears essentially due to the war. Other factors such as epidemics and climatic difficulties helped to render economic revival impossible.
4. As far as we know, the Hospitallers seemed to fulfil their religious obligations very poorly. Paying little or no attention to their churches and no longer practising hospitality, they gave to their Order the anachronic character which had already been suggested by their retreat from the Holy Land.

The prioral inquiry of 1429 does not present a very different picture, although it is true that certain signs of stability if not economic recovery can just be discerned. For example, the value of the commanderies ceases to decline.

The feudal mode of production did not die because of the great crisis of the fourteenth century, but it did come out of it in a simpler form freed from certain archaic obligations.

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NOTES

1. Guy Bois, *Crise du féodalisme*, Paris, Fondation Nationale des sciences politiques, 1976. See the review by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie 'En Haute-Normandie: Malthus ou Marx?', in *Annales (Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations)*, 1978, pp.115-124.
2. See map.
3. Archives départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône, H 56 H 123, fol. 2 Ro: '*In Prioratu Provincie*'.
4. E.g., H 56 H 124, fol. 91 Ro.
5. The publication of this vast inquiry, which has been postponed for many years, is now at hand thanks to an agreement for joint publication by the University of Provence and the University of Québec at Rimouski.
6. On the inquiry of 1373 see Jean Glénisson, 'L'enquête pontificale de 1373 sur les possessions des Hospitaliers de Saint-Jean de Jérusalem', in *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Chartes*, 1971, pp.83-111. The commanderies visited in 1373 in S.E. France are: Aix-en-Provence, Sainte-Luce d'Arles, Avignon, Bras, Calissane, Claret, Fos, Gap, Mallemort, Manosque, Moydans, Les Omergues/Lardier, Puimoisson, Saint-Pierre-de-Camppublic, Saint-Maurice-de-Régusse, Saliers, Trinquetaille. This is rather more than half those visited in 1338 for several diocesan records are missing for 1373.
7. H 56 H 124, 213 fol.
8. Commanderies visited in 1411: Avignon, Claret, Nice, Manosque, Ruou.
9. Commanderies visited in 1429: Beaulieu, Comps, Saint-Maurice-de-Régusse, Trièves, Valdrôme, Valence.
10. On the distribution of the Templars' possessions in Provence see Cl. Faure, *Etude sur l'administration du Comtat-Venaissin*, Paris, Champion, 1909, pp.204-207. Also, H 56 H 2 (Inventaire Raybaud), p.20, which summarises a letter from Robert de Provence on 8 December 1319 ordering his officers to hand over the possessions of the Templars to the Hospitallers.

READING MEDIEVAL STUDIES

11. Archives vaticanes, Coll. 17, fol.183 Vo.
12. Ibid., fol.184 Vo.
13. H 56 H 124, fol.23 Ro to 30 Vo.
14. Archives vaticanes, Coll. 17, fol.149 Vo.
15. Ibid., Coll. 51, fol.1 Ro.
16. Ibid., Coll. 17, fol.156 Vo to 179 Ro.
17. Ibid., Coll. 51, fol.314 Vo.
18. Benoît Beaucage, 'Une énigme des Hospitaliers: la non-rentabilité chronique de leurs commanderies du Moyen-Rhône', Provence Historique, 1980.
19. H 56 H 123, fol.111 Ro.
20. Archives vaticanes, Coll. 17, fol.201 Vo.
21. H 56 H 123, fol.259 Ro.
22. Archives vaticanes, Coll. 17, fol.133 Vo to 140 Ro; 156 Vo to 179 Ro.
23. Ibid., Coll. 51, fol.313 Vo to 314 Ro.
24. H 56 H 123, fol.245 Ro.
25. Archives vaticanes, Coll. 17, fol.180 Ro.
26. Ibid., Coll. 51, fol.313 Ro: 'quandam aliam grangiam in loco de Gravizionì cum terris et redditibus licet tempore guerre fuerunt edificia destructa'.
27. Ibid., Instr. Misc. 5851, fol.5 Ro: '... dixit etiam dictam domum non habere statum licet est dictum averia propter guerram ducis Andegavie neque habet utencilis hospicii'.
28. Ibid., fol.6 Vo.
29. Ibid., Coll. 17, fol.132 Ro: '... omnes singulares domus ipsius sunt disrupte et destructe ...'.

30. Ibid., fol.200 Vo: '... domus Sancti Martini prope Vapinco que destructa est propter guerras ...'.
31. H 56 H 124, fol.3 Vo: '... et sic quasi totus status preceptorie tam in capite quam in membris defficit ...'.
32. Ibid.
33. H 56 H 124, fol.4 Vo; 6 Ro; 6 Vo; 8 Ro.
34. Ibid., fol.9 Ro.
35. H 56 H 124, fol.48 Ro.
36. Ibid., fol.38 Ro; 44 Ro; 41 Vo; 42 Vo; 43 Vo.
37. Ibid., fol.13 Vo; 15 Vo; 16 Vo; 18 Ro; 19 Ro; 20 Ro.
38. Ibid., fol.7 Vo, 8 Ro. Archives vaticanes, Instr. Misc. 5851, fol.8 Ro; 3 Vo.
39. Archives vaticanes, Coll. 17, fol.216 Ro: '... aliam domum ... quia jam destructa est ... propter parvam reparationem ...'.
Ibid., fol.217 Ro: '... unam magnam domum que cessidit propter malam reparationem et modo est casale ...'.
40. Archives vaticanes, Coll. 17, fol.114 Vo.
41. Ibid., Coll. 419 A, fol.11 Ro: '... dixit quod male conservantur et manutentur hospicia et loca membrorum predictorum dicte preceptorie subjecta et quod quasi omnia ruunt et dissipantur'.
42. Ibid., Coll. 17, fol.143 Ro.
43. Ibid., Instr. Misc. 5851, fol.4 Ro.
44. Letter published in Jean Glénisson, art. cit., pp.106-107.
45. Archives vaticanes, Coll. 419A, fol.5 Ro.
46. Ibid., fol.6 Ro.
47. Ibid., fol.11 Ro.
48. Ibid., fol.6 Ro.

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49. Archives vaticanes, Coll. 419A, fol.11 Ro.
50. H 56 H 124, fol.21 Ro.
51. Archives vaticanes, Coll. 17, fol.134 Ro.
52. Ibid., fol.119 Vo.
53. Ibid., Coll. 419A, fol.12 Vo.
54. Ibid., fol.11 Ro.
55. Ibid., fol.7 Vo.
56. Ibid., Coll. 51, fol.4 Vo.