Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours

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Military-religious Orders and the Mongols around the Mid-13th Century

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The present study aims to analyze the activity of the major military-religious orders (Hospitallers, Templars, and Teutonic Knights) during the Mongol invasion in the mid-13th century (c.1240–1260). The geographical frame of the study covers both East-Central Europe and the Levant as these regions were at the forefront of Christian–Mongol struggles in the period under query. Although these religious communities are known among scholars of the field, it seems advisable to briefly review the major characteristics of these orders in order to properly understand the role they played during the fight against the Mongols. By the same token it also seems crucial to figure out a clear demarcation line between the brethren of the military-religious orders and the crusaders, since the commonplaces of recent decades have led to several misunderstandings concerning the status of the professed brothers and those who took the cross.

The order of the Hospital (also known as the Knights of St. John or Hospitallers) became independent from the canons of the Holy Sepulchre in 1114 in Jerusalem. The institution grew out of a lay confraternity which was attached to the Santa Maria Latina Benedictine community in the Holy City. The members of the confraternity ran a guest-house (*hospitium, xenodochium*), originally (from around the 1070s) for Italian merchants from Amalfi, an institution which housed the growing number of pilgrims following the success of the First Crusade (1099). A decade and a half later the community started establishing guest-houses (*hospitia*) along the major pilgrim-routes leading from Europe to the Holy Land both on sea and land. In order to accelerate the activity of the Hospitallers, the popes (Paschalis II and his successor) not only provided protection for the new autonomous corporation but also secured numerous privileges (*exemptio*) to enable the community to respond to pilgrims' needs. It is to be emphasized that the Hospitallers' primary goal was not the care of the sick but rather to provide shelter for those travelling on Christ's business (*negotium Christi*) towards the Holy Land (Riley-Smith 2010; Riley-Smith 2012).[1] Though the chronology is still debated, most scholars of the field agree that by the 1160s the Order of the Hospital had gone through a several decades-long process of militarization. By the last third of the 12th century the Hospitallers completed almost the same military functions as did the Templars. The shift in the Hospitallers' basic attitude was so fundamental that

1 Throughout the present study I prefer references to international scholarly literature but at times there are only Hungarian studies available.

in the 1170s the papal curia warned its "beloved sons" that their primary duty was the service of the poor (Riley-Smith 2012: 36). Military activity meant from the 1120s to participate in war councils, to recruit and garrison troops at the Order's expense, to defend/control strongholds and, ultimately, to fight the infidel in battles.

Hospitality had also been the basic activity for the poor knights of the Temple of Solomon, known as the Templars from the very beginning of the 12th century. After the capture of Jerusalem from the Muslims, several European knights remained in the Holy Land, despite the fact that they had fulfilled their crusader vow. By 1119/20, similarly to the Hospitallers, they established a lay confraternity based in the Holy City. They received a building from the King of Jerusalem for the purpose of a headquarters in the very part of the city where the Temple of Solomon was supposed to have been centuries before. As is clear by now, this was not the place of the temple, close to the al-Aqsa mosque, nonetheless, the knights and the Order used this headquarters for two centuries. A decade later, the Order received papal protection at the Council of Troyes (1129) where the fundamentals of their rule (*regula*) were also laid down. The Templars' primary duty was to safeguard the pilgrims arriving in the Holy Land and visiting the holy places. Even those territories which fell under Christian control were regarded as unsafe for unarmed travelers. Meeting such expectations, the Knights of the Temple soon assumed the same role as the Hospitallers, fighting the infidel and defending strongholds in Outremer (Barber 1994). One of the major differences in comparison with the Hospitallers is that the brethren of the Temple were mostly French while the balance among the Knights of St. John tended towards the Italian preceptories. The territorial distribution became somewhat striking upon the establishment of the third major military-religious order, the community of the Teutonic Knights.

The foundation of this "German" order coincided with the siege and (re)capture of Acre in 1190/91 from the Muslims. Merchants and pilgrims from Bremen and Lübeck established a shelter for German pilgrims in Acre with the same purpose as the Hospitallers decades earlier in Jerusalem. Although there is a prevailing legend concerning the foundation of the Teutonic Order in the 1120s in Jerusalem, no convincing proof has been found so far. Being backed by the Empire, the newly founded order soon reached the same level of privileges and exemptions that the Hospitallers and Templars had received decades earlier. Moreover, the original hospitality-focused community became a *par excellence* military order by the very end of the 12th century and thus, it resembled the activity of the Knights of St. John. The difference between them was geographical rather than functional in nature. In the light of the later activity of the Teutonic Order of the Holy Virgin most readers may automatically think of Prussia or the Baltic region but historically their "early" sphere of action was the Holy Land and Southern Italy: Apulia and Sicily (Militzer 2005: 35–38).

Simultaneously with the foundation of the Teutonic Order, the headquarters of the Templars and that of the Hospitallers moved to Acre in 1191, to the capital of the Latin Kingdom until 1291. By this period the *status quo* of the Outremer had fundamentally changed. The Muslims had recaptured a remarkable part of Syria and Palestine between 1174 and 1192. What was left in the hands of the Franks were the port cities along the Mediterranean coast from Ascalon (modern Ashkelon) to Jabala (Jableh). Admittedly, it was a narrow but very important corridor for long-distance trade leading from the Far East towards Europe. The first third of the 13th century saw several struggles for the possession and control of these towns as well as for the commercial relations concerned in the Levant (Balard 1998). From our present perspective, the Teutonic Order was the first to get in contact with the Mongol advance, though, at first, indirectly. King Andrew II of Hungary (1205–1235) invited the Teutonic Knights into the south-eastern edge of the Carpathian Basin, to Burzenland, in 1211 in order to defend the region against the raids of the nomadic Cumans who had escaped before the Mongols from the steppe region towards the West (Hunyadi 2008, Zimmermann 2011). After several controversies and being opposed by the pope, the Hungarian king expelled the Order from the kingdom in 1225. The Cuman attacks began to cease in the 1220s, as the Mongols defeated the Cuman contingents in 1222. Due partly to this situation, the Hungarian ruler opted for a new diplomatic approach, and, perhaps under strong pressure, the Cumans seemed ready to convert to Christianity. Dominican missions started working among them in 1221, although it is remarkable that the first missionary wave in 1221–1223 was accomplished under the auspices of the Teutonic knights and, admittedly, with little success (Kovács 2014). Finally, the Cuman chieftain accepted Christianity and recognized Hungarian rule in 1227. Despite a renewed papal struggle and further reprimands of the Hungarian king, the Order had no chance to return to Hungary and the knights shifted their balance towards Prussia where they fought against the pagan Slavs facilitated by the Golden Bull of Rimini (1226) (Militzer 2005: 64).

Around the same time, the military-religious orders present in the Holy Land also encountered their first indirect experience concerning the Mongol menace. The crusader states were not directly endangered in the 1230s, however, tension was from time to time strong due to the news of two nomadic powers that had risen in the East, creating a potential threat. At that time it seemed that the more immediate problem was caused by the Khwarezmian Turks. Templar and Hospitaller military activity in the 1230s was mostly concerned with local issues. In 1233 the Templars and the Hospitallers led troops from Jerusalem, Cyprus, and Antioch against the Sultan of Hamah, clearly in order to get hold of an annual tribute (Barber 1994: 137). However, other scholars maintain that from the 1230s onwards a shift can be observed in the Levantine trade routes, and therefore in the commercial activities of the Latins in the Levant, caused by the advance of the Mongol armies (Irwin 1980: 73; Bronstein 2005: 22). The situation in the Holy Land was manifestly deteriorating. The Franks were to face the growing danger from

the rise of the Mamluks of Egypt and the advance of the Mongols from the north-east. The Mongol menace constituted a severe military peril, but it also led to economic consequences. It caused the decline of the influence of Acre as well as other coastal cities which functioned as nuclei of long-distance trade, and in the long run the shifting of trade routes towards the northern Mediterranean coastal area and to some extent to Central Asia (Bronstein 2005: 27). Similarly to the Cumans just outside the Carpathian Basin, the Khwarezmians appeared in the Levant; some decades earlier they had ruled a remarkable part of Transoxania but they were forced by the Mongol menace towards the south-east. Their sphere of action shifted to Cilicia and to northern Syria and they started to establish a new empire, but this process halted because of the death of the Shah Djalāl al-Dīn in 1231 (Hamilton 1980: 263; France 2005: 192; Berkovich 2011: 34–35.)

Despite the fact that the Mongol advance was initially observed in the Levant, the first direct strike reached Central Europe. In the spring of 1241 the Mongols attacked and invaded parts of Poland (Kuyavia, Lesser Poland, Silesia) and Hungary, their approach marked by two decisive battles at Legnica (Liegnitz) and Muhi on 9 and 11 April respectively. The major elements of the chain of events have long been researched (e.g. from Strakosch-Grassmann 1893 until Laszlovszky et al. 2018), thus the present study only attempts to summarize the role played by the military-religious orders. International scholarship discussed the presence of the Templars and the Teutonic Knights at the Battle of Legnica, while concerning the Battle of Muhi the contribution of the Knights of the Temple has been identified so far. The significance of the Templar force has long been discussed by scholars of the field and former historians attributed a remarkable role to the Templars, but recent criticism (Borchardt 2001) has taken the view that the military role played by the members of the Order was rather insignificant. The sources mention 500 warriors sent by the Templars to Legnica in 1241 to fight the Mongols but these were peasants from the landed estates of the Order, and not skilled knights (Borchardt 2001: 237). According to a letter sent by the Master of France Ponce d'Aubon to King Louis IX of France, only three knights of the Order were killed and two sergeants died at the battle-field of Legnica (Irgang 1977: 133 no. 219; Chambers 1979: 99; Jasiński 1991: 122; Weber 1991: 130; Gładysz 2012: 266). The letter also mentions three knights who managed to escape from the battle. Basically, the Templars did not fight the infidels in East Central Europe and they were not prepared for local military activity. The order had to rely upon the brethren stationed in Silesia (Burzyński 2010; Gładysz 2012) where the proportion of knights was most likely very low. Moreover, as opposed to the Hungarian King Béla IV (1235–1270), Duke Henry II (1238–1241) of Silesia was far less informed about the gravity of the Mongol advance. He had minimal chances to recruit troops and this held true for the Templars in the region too.

More problematic is the supposed presence of the Teutonic Knights in the Battle of Legnica as well as any role played by the Order in the fight against the Mongols. According to some historians, the Teutonic Knights, led by the Prussian

Grand Master Poppo von Osterna, provided military help to Duke Henry II at the Battle of Legnica (Chambers 1979: 98; Morton 2009: 97). Morton ascertained that Poppo was appointed Prussian Master in 1241 and was said to have led members of the Order to fight the Mongols who invaded Hungary and Poland. According to Morton, Poppo was deposed in the aftermath of the devastating defeat but following the Prussian revolt he was reappointed in 1244. Poppo was appointed Grand Master of the Order in 1252 in Acre, but he almost immediately left for the Baltic region and did not return (Morton 2009: 120) until his death in 1256. Decades ago Tomasz Jasiński clearly proved that no contemporary source mentions such a contribution, although both the 15th-century historiography of the Order as well as the Polish and Silesian sources of the period under consideration unanimously report the participation of the Teutonic Order in the Battle of Legnica and this view was not challenged until 1827 (Jasiński 1991: 117). For the sake of facts and figures: Poppo von Osterna was Prussian master in 1244–1246, and years later he became the Grand Master between 1253 and 1256 (Sarnowsky 1994: 254–255; Militzer 2005: 27). During the Battle of Leignitz, most likely there was no acting Grand Master of the Teutonic Order since the Grand Master Konrad von Thüringen died in the summer of 1240 and the Grand Master Gerhard von Malberg (1241–1244) was elected around the end of 1241. In summary, one may conclude that the chronicle tradition concerning the role of Poppo von Osterna was not based on strictly contemporary sources, but rather on the fact that his burial place was next to Duke Henry II and the deep conviction that the Teutonic Order maintained close relations with the Silesian dukes (Jasiński 1991: 127; Sarnowsky 1994: 254–255).

The interpretation of the contemporary and 15th-century sources reveals another serious problem, namely, the interpretation of the terms "*cruciferi*" and "*crucesignati*": crusaders or members of the military-religious orders. Contextualizing the problem, it seems to be a Central European terminological issue (Laszlovszky 2001). Without going too deeply into the debate, in my view, those scholars who identify the brethren of the military-religious orders as *cruciferi* and who see crusaders behind the term *crucesignati* seem to have the more convincing argument (Jackson 1991: 6–7; Gładysz 2012: 264–268). Some scholars tend to use these terms as synonyms, but this is clearly a failure. Admittedly, either the meaning or the reference of these terms may have changed over time, yet it seems likely that the legal nature of these terms were quite well known among contemporary members of society. The crusaders made a vow to fight for their faith either against Muslims, pagans, heretics, or other enemies of the Church; it was a penitentially and legally binding obligation (Bird 2006: 1233). Popes normally determined a period – from one to three years – for crusades to the Holy Land in their bulls. The crusaders' vows gradually became limited by the beginning of the 13th century, generally to one year of service, regardless of whether the crusader army had left for the Holy Land or not. On the other hand, the *cruciferi*, the members of the Order of the Hospitallers, the Templars and the

Teutonic Order made the triple vow of professed religious brothers: obedience, chastity and (personal) poverty. This vow automatically forbade the members of the military-religious orders from taking a crusader's vow. However, and this is important from the point of view of the present study: the fight against the Mongols shifted the attitude of the papacy towards offering plenary indulgence (which the crusaders were granted) for the members of the military-religious orders and their people (tenants, warriors, etc.). The process started in the summer of 1241 when the first crusader indulgence was offered for those who fought the Mongols, including the Hungarian King Béla IV (Fejér IV/3: 216–17; Theiner 1863 1: no. 337: 183; Cf. Veszprémy 2003: 388; Gładysz 2012: 258). This indulgence was reconfirmed by Innocent IV in 1243 (Purcell 1975: 68) and the pope submitted this issue to the First Council of Lyon for discussion (Tanner 1990: 297). The peak of the process was reached in 1248 when the pope exhorted the Hospitallers in Hungary to defend the realm against the Mongols. With clear reference to the Council of Lyon, he offered the Hospitallers as well as those who joined them fighting against the Mongols in Hungary, the same indulgence granted to the crusaders for the Holy Land: *Praeceptorem et fratres Hospitalis Hierosolymitani in Hungaria rogat et hortatur ut ad gentem Tartarorum saevissimam conterendam . . . familiae eorum ac omnibus aliis qui assumpta cruce in Hungariam contra Tartaros processerint illam indulgentiam elargitur quae transeuntibus in subsidium Terrae Sanctae in generali concilio concessa est* (Fejér CD 4/1: 465–467; MVH 1: 206; Wenzel 1860 2: 205–206; Delaville le Roulx 1896 no. 2477. Luttrell 2001: 29. Bronstein 2005: 118; Hunyadi 2010: 40). For a better understanding of the primary role of the Hospitallers stationed in the Kingdom of Hungary in the process of the extension of the crusader indulgence, one should turn back to the Mongol invasion of 1241–1242.

The presence of the Templars of the Hungarian province in the Battle of Muhi is a well-known fact in the historiography (Summarized by Stossek 2001, Stossek 2006). Archdeacon Thomas of Spalato provided a short but very informative and vivid description of the participation of the Templars in the Battle: "the master of the Templars with his fellow Latin knights wrought great slaughter among the enemy. All the same, they were unable to sustain the overwhelming numbers, and Coloman and the Archbishop, both now seriously wounded, made it back to their fellows with difficulty. The master of the Templars and all his company (*tota atie Latinorum*) were slain […]" (Karbić 2006: 266–267). Due to the very scattered nature of primary sources of this period, there is no reliable estimate concerning the number of Templars who took part in the battle but it must have been very similar to the figure in the Battle of Legnica: there were only a few professed knights and sergeants. Their master most likely was Rembaldus de Carono or Carumb who headed the Hungarian Templar province from 1235 and is last mentioned in April 1240 (Stossek 2001: 247; Stossek 2006: 184).

Since King Béla IV gathered his army in advance and very carefully, one may suppose that the Hospitallers also fought against the Mongols in the Battle of

Muhi. What sort of military support the Hospitallers provided to Béla IV during the Mongol invasion is unknown. It is likely that the report of Master Rogerius[2] in its present known form is not completely reliable as it reads: "Upon the retreat of the Mongols, King Béla came to Hungary from the coastal areas with the help of the knights of the Island of Rhodes.": *...rex Bela marittimis de partibus per cruciferos de insula Rodi [...] de recessu Tartarorum in Hungariam venit...* (Jackson 1991: 16–17; Bak–Rady 2010: 224–225; Hunyadi 2010: 38). It is a striking anachronism to associate the Hospitallers with Rhodes in the mid-13th century, thus it is an obvious interpolation by a later hand. It cannot be ruled out, however, that in the "original" version *cruciferos* merely referred to the Hospitallers without using the phrase '*de insula Rhodi*' as the Hospitallers were not present in Rhodes before 1309/1310. It would resemble the anachronism of Jan Długosz in the 15th century concerning the confusion of the terms *cruciferi* and *crucesignati* (Długosz 1975: 33–34; Gładysz 2012). Other contemporary sources, however, indicated the Hospitallers' participation in the chain of events. Béla IV complained in his letter to the pope, most likely in 1247 (Senga 1987: 606–609), that at the appearance of the Mongol menace he received help *a nullo christianorum Europe principe, nisi a domo Hospitalis iherosolimitani, cuius fratres ad requisitionem nostram nuper arma sumpserunt contra paganos* (= none of the European princes, only the House of the Hospital of Jerusalem had been taken arms upon our request). Not even any effort and loss of the Templars is mentioned by the Hungarian king a couple of years after the Mongol invasion. What is likely is that the Hospitallers accompanied the king escaping from the Mongols down to Trau (present-day Trogir, Croatia) on the Dalmatian coast (Sweeney 1994: 46–48). This hypothesis is supported by two indirect pieces of information. The corroborating formula of the first extant charter (1243) of the Székesfehérvár preceptory as a place of authentication reads: "due to the fear of the Mongols (*propter metum tartarorum*), our seal was in the coastal area" (Wenzel 1860 7: 144–145). Another charter shows that Raimbaud of Voczon, the Hungarian-Slavonian prior, still stayed in Trau at least until November 1243 when he participated in a legal procedure (Smičiklas 4: 205–206).

Concerning the ideas of King Béla IV in 1247 it seems likely that he attempted to realize a similar defensive plan to what his father, King Andrew II imagined when he invited the Teutonic Order to Burzenland between 1211 and 1225, as discussed above. Béla IV tried to settle the Hospitallers in the region called Severin as far as the River Olt. According to a letter issued in November 1247, the Hospitallers partially occupied it: *quos [fratres] iam partim collocavimus in loco magis suspecto, videlicet in confinio Cumanorum ultra Danubium et Bulgarorum* (those [brothers] we have already settled at a rather suspicious area, that is in the frontier of the Cumans over the Danube and the Bulgars) (Fejér CD 4/1: 447–454; Jakó 1997 1: 191; Delaville le Roulx 1896 no. 2445). However, it is still obscure why

2 *Epistle to the Sorrowful Lament upon the Destruction of the Kingdom of Hungary by the Tartars*; edition and translation: Bak-Rady 2010.

the Order left the region shortly after 1250[3] (Fejér CD 4/2: 75–76; MVH 1: 208–211; Jakó 1997 1: 195), thus wrecking the king's defensive plans. It is worth emphasizing that this was not a genuine grant but rather a concession for occupying and populating the region, and it included the usual exemptions for the prospective settlers. It resembles a contract, as it clearly sets out the military obligations of the Hospitallers, including where and how many armed men they were expected to provide in case of an attack against the kingdom. The Hospitallers were to provide sixty *fratres* for the defence of the frontiers against the Mongols.

Nonetheless, despite the ceaseless fear of the return of the Mongols, Eastern Europe escaped such devastation as happened during 1241–42. Between 1248 and 1254 there were several papal plans for organizing an anti-Mongol crusade led by the Teutonic Order, but eventually none of these ideas came true (Sarnowsky 1994: 256; Bárány 2009: 252; Gładysz 2012: 303). But a real menace, the so called Second Mongol invasion, started brewing in 1259, when Berke Khan threatened East Central Europe including Hungary, and warned of his plans in an ultimatum sent to King Béla IV (Bárány 2009: 253). A promising-looking coalition was organized by Pope Alexander IV but the leading role of the Teutonic Order was not enough to turn the undertaking into an effective campaign (Gładysz 2012: 328). The *status quo* became further complicated by the disintegration of the Golden Horde and the growing number of theatres of war: the Mongols attacked the Levant. But this chain of events is to be sought somewhat earlier.

Right after the Eastern European invasion, the Mongols forced the Khwarezmians from their homeland in the summer of 1243 (Jackson 1987: 55; Berkovich 2011: 20) and it led to a long struggle which ended in 1260 at Ayn Jālūt (Amitai-Preiss 1992, 2006). Though in 1243 the Mongols organized a successful military campaign against the Anatolian Seljuks (Berkovich 2011: 20), in the short run the wandering Khwarezmians proved to be more decisive for the Latins in Syria and Palestine. The Khwarezmians "on the run" soon allied with al-Salih Ayyub and turned against the Franks of the Levant (Bulst 1966: 220; Richard 1999: 329). The consequences were shocking: the Christians lost Jerusalem[4] in August 1244 (Tyerman 2006: 771) and in October the Latin forces were defeated and annihilated at the Battle of Gaza (La Forbie) (Berkovich 2011; Hunyadi 2016). The majority of the troops of the military-religious orders died on the battlefield and prompt and effective recruitment was hindered by the Mongol devastation and in Europe. The Mongols, however, were already present in Syria as they attacked Aleppo in 1244 (Jackson 1987: 56–57) but the Muslims alone were strong enough: the Emir of Aleppo defeated the Khwarezmians in 1246 without any help from the Franks (Tyerman 2006: 771). In the meantime, however, the Church took the

3 Pope Innocent IV confirmed the contract of King Béla IV in 1250.

4 The Holy City was held by the Latins since 1229 when Frederick II regained it through negotiations.

initiative in Europe by convoking the First Council of Lyon in 1245 where crusading and the fight against the Mongols enjoyed primary importance as discussed above. Unfortunately, the military-religious orders could not easily recuperate from the losses of the 1240s (Lotan 2012). The balance of the Teutonic Order's activity shifted towards the Baltic and East Central Europe, and what remained in the Holy Land was a bitter struggle among the Hospitallers, the Templars and the Teutonic Knights, which escalated into a serious conflict known as the war of St. Sabas (Militzer 2005: 27–28; Bronstein 2006: 32; Sarnowsky 2012: 79–80). The conflict was concluded with an agreement in 1258 and the military-religious orders were again able to concert their efforts on the fight against the infidel.

Even this revival was not enough for the Templars to save the coastal city of Sidon when the Mongols, led by Khan Hulagu, destroyed its walls in January 1260[5] (Bronstein 2006: 32, 59; Gładysz 2012: 346). This caused an immediate threat towards Acre, the capital of the Latin Kingdom, though it eventually never materialized. The reason was perhaps quite obvious: the battles of Ayn Jālūt (3 September 1260) and Homs (10 December 1260) fought by the Mamluks of Egypt against the Mongols finally stopped the invaders. They left Syria and Iraq behind and never returned again. This, however, did not save either the Latin Kingdom or the military-religious orders in the long run. Consequently, at the Second Council of Lyon (1274) a profound restructuring of the orders was part of the agenda.

To sum up, it can firmly be stated that the menace of the Mongols seriously impacted the activity of the military-religious orders. The "new type" of enemy (*infidelis*) of the Catholic faith led to an alteration of their original goals, as can be traced through the extension of crusading indulgences in the 1240s. Moreover, the decisive role the Teutonic Knights played in the struggle against the Mongols in Eastern Europe strengthened the elaboration of the notion of "perennial crusade" which had originally been formulated against the heathen in the Baltic region. This activity remained important for many decades but its analysis clearly would require another study.

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5 Damascus fell two months later.

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