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The Hospitallers presence in Rhodes (1309/10-1522)
Some considerations on their social and cultural influence on the island

*In loving memory of a dear friend,
Michael Heslop (1941-2022),
who loved Rhodes and Medieval Studies.*

In the aftermath of the Crusades and more specifically of the Fourth Crusade (1204) and at the beginning of the 14th century, new developments occurred in the south-eastern Mediterranean as a new Latin power established itself in the Aegean Sea, creating a new ‘state’. It was the Hospitaller Order who in search of a new basis found a vital area in Rhodes and the Dodecanesian Islands. The presence of the Knights of Saint John there for over two centuries (1306/1309-10 to 1522/23) created new realities and had a specific impact on the life of the Greek Orthodox inhabitants.

During the following two centuries the Order also developed a certain dynamic contact with the local population. Before the Hospitallers’ arrival the island had been ruled by the local Byzantine dynasty of the Gavalades, namely the *caesars* Leo and John Gavalas (c. 1204-c. 1240 and c. 1240-c. 1250 respectively)¹ who had maintained the ambition to keep Rhodes and its surrounding islands under their exclusive authority separately from the Byzantine Empire, which had fallen to the Latins in 1204. The central administration of Constantinople was not in a position to put a halt to the local *archons*’ authority and ambition, therefore Rhodes was to remain even after the Gavalades in a semi-autonomous position already before the arrival of the Knights.² This was a critical moment for the future of the area, leaving open opportunities for other candidates, mostly of Western origins (Venetian and Genoese), to rule it.

Observing the behaviour of the local Greek population while all these changes were taking place is of great interest. Since 1306 the Hospitallers were coveting Rhodes as a prospective basis, yet the Byzantine Emperor still considered Rhodes as a part of the Byzantine state. Reality though very soon proved different, as the Order managed to capture the island without a serious resistance. At that point, the local Rhodians in a way took matters in their own hands, by making a deal with the Knights and choosing to ignore the fact that Emperor Andronicus II Palaeologus never acknowledged the authority of the Hospitallers over the island.³ It was a sample on how a Greek population handled the presence of a Latin ruler, as during that time in other Helladic lands, there

1 On Leo Gavalas’ personality and career, see A. Savvides, Βυζαντινά στασιαστικά και αυτονομιστικά κινήματα στα Δωδεκάνησα και στη Μικρά Ασία: 1189-c. 1240, Athens 1987, p. 301-341 and on the subsequent period until the advent of the Knights, see also Idem, “Rhodes from the End of the Gavalas Rule to the Conquest of the Hospitallers: A.D. c. 1250-1309, *Domus Byzantinus*, 2 (1988), p. 199-232.

2 A. Luttrell notes that the island of Rhodes had escaped from the larger conquest of the Greek lands after 1204, allowing the inhabitants to preserve many of their institutions and forms as continued by the traditions of the Byzantine era: on this see A. Luttrell, “The Greek of Rhodes under Hospitaller Rule: 1306-1421”, repr. on his *The Hospitaller State on Rhodes and its Western Provinces, 1306-1462*, Variorum Reprints, 1999, p. 193.

3 A. Luttrell, “Το Βυζάντιο και οι Ιωαννίτες Ιππότες της Ρόδου (1306-1409)”, *Symmeikta*, 11 (1997), p. 193.

had taken place the establishment of other Latin authorities as well, with different reactions of the part of the inhabitants. For instance, nearby Crete was under Venetian rule since 1210/11, but with the Cretan families of Byzantine aristocratic origins, strongly opposing Venetian authority for a long time until the 1520s.⁴

A crucial part of the mutual agreement with the Order was involving the preservation of the Orthodox Church. The clergy and the Orthodox churches as well would remain untouched provided that they would recognize the supremacy of the Latin Church.⁵ This was of great importance comparing again with other cases of Latin rules. In fact, the local Orthodox Metropolitan was able to preserve his position, something rare in Greek lands under Latin rule. Attempting a comparison again with the Venetians we need to mark the fact that the Serenissima prohibited the Orthodox clergy of higher rank by replacing them with another ecclesiastical office, the one of *Protopapas*.⁶ As the late Zacharias Tsirpanles († 2023) observed, the Venetians did not show such kind of tolerance in their domains in Greek lands despite the fact that were considered as more “secularist”.⁷ Therefore and from this point of view the Rhodians and the inhabitants of the rest of the Dodecanesian islands could be considered as privileged compared with the population of other Greek areas in the mainland and on the islands of the Aegean or Ionian Sea under Latin rule and, consequently, with the Catholic Church in charge.⁸

The Hospitallers’ presence in Rhodes and the Dodecanese had also a crucial impact in social life and structure. In general, we do not observe major changes in the social pyramid. The initial intention of the Order to insert and apply the feudal system failed due to the nature of the Order itself, which meant that there were no noble families established on the island in order to create a crucial class of noble feudal lords. On the other hand, not many older Byzantine aristocratic families had survived on the island, thus securing a Greek aristocratic class.⁹ What we can observe during the 213 years that the Order ruled the island, is that in fact an upper Rhodian class was formed, that rallied around the Hospitallers, offering services and enjoying a close collaboration with them. Many rich and educated Rhodians served as members of a kind of diplomatic corps, as interpreters and envoys, especially in delicate missions, related with the Muslims and more specifically with the Ottomans.¹⁰ The knowledge of languages in addition to Greek made them ideal cases for such kind

of missions and also absolved members of the Order from potential dangers in a mission of such kind.¹¹ The collaboration of local Rhodians with the Knights actually contributed to the creation and consolidation of a rich and educated upper middle class that framed the brotherhood and assisted in its administration. The very fact that, following the surrender to the Ottomans after the 1522 siege, many of those families chose to leave the island for good and follow the Order to its new historical adventures, away from their homeland, is indicative enough. This kind of fermentation is unique in Latin Greece and it is visible only in the case of the Hospitallers’ rule.

Relevant with the aforementioned realities, is also the contribution of the Order to the intellectual efflorescence in Rhodes during their long sojourn, with more visible signs of it in the 15th century. Tsirpanles made some noteworthy observations putting things on a balanced basis. The historical research on this particular subject is rather difficult and can be seen from many aspects. The remarkable thing in the case of Rhodes is that despite the fact it was smaller and more isolated compared for instance with Crete, it was able to manifest examples of a flourishing intellectual life. Again, Venetian dominated Crete consists of a useful measure of comparison due to the geographical vicinity and the interaction that the Hospitallers had with Crete and the Venetians in general.¹² There is also the fact that both were brilliant examples of a non-typical feudal dominion in Greek lands. One of the important aspects in the cultural life of Rhodes is the presence even for a short time of important intellectual personalities and the list included Westerns and Greeks as well. Of great importance was the initiative of the Greek and Latin inhabitants of Rhodes to seek the employment of a teacher with the objective to educate all the children of Rhodes, rich and poor.¹³ The matter is a complicated one and has many points of view, yet the bottom line is that Rhodes managed to accomplish a high level of educational and intellectual performance.

The over two-centuries presence of the Knights in Rhodes and the Dodecanese can be viewed as a ‘precursor’, a miniature form of the modern European Union’s function on a late medieval Greek Island with its surrounding territory.¹⁴ Their impressive fortifications echo through the ages.¹⁵ The Hospitallers, a multinational organization, flourished in its Dodecanesian dominion and living side by side with the Greeks offered an example of cultural interaction, which marked the history of Rhodes and its area in a most turbulent period of its historical fortunes.

4 See A.G.C. Savvides, “A Bibliographical Survey of Latin-Dominated Crete after A.D. 1210.1211 (with notes on its Byzantine prosopography), *Byzantiaka*, 35 (2018-19), p. 243-279, esp. 250 ff., 266 ff.

5 A. Luttrell, *The Town of Rhodes: 1306-1356*, Rhodes 2003, p. 77.

6 Concerning the institution of “Protopapas”, see Despoina Michalaga, “Το εκκλησιαστικό οφφίκιο του «πρωτοπαπά» και η λειτουργία του στα βενετοκρατούμενα Επτάνησα”, *Κερκυραϊκά Χρονικά* (Ι΄ Διεθνές Πανιώνιο Συνέδριο, Κέρκυρα, 30 Απριλίου-4 Μαΐου 2014), p.369-382.

7 Z. Tsirpanles, *Η Ρόδος και οι Νότιες Σποράδες στα χρόνια των Ιωαννιτών Ιπποτών* (14^{ος}-16^{ος} αι.), Rhodes 1991, p. 151.

8 It is not our intention in the limited frame of this article, to compare analytically the situation of the Orthodox population under several Latin dominions. What is clear though, is that under the Hospitallers the Greek Orthodox population was enjoying a kind of religious freedom that could not be noted in other cases (Frankish, Venetian, Catalan etc.).

9 A. Luttrell, *The Greek of Rhodes under Hospitaller Rule: 1306-1421*”, *ibid.*, p. 196.

10 A detailed pertinent bibliography now in A. Savvides & Photeine V. Perra, “Hospitallers and Ottomans between the two great sieges of Rhodes (1480-1522/23)”, in Simon Phillips (ed.), *The 1522 siege of Rhodes: causes, course and consequences*, London & New York, 2022, p. 11-39.

11 See Photeine V. Perra, “Homines dicte insule sunt Greci et fidem grecam tenent: A prosopographical contribution to Greek-Hospitaller relations”, *Byzantiaka*, 36 (2020-21), p. 347-358.

12 Cf. the late Elizabeth A. Zachariadou’s († 2019) *Trade and Crusade: Venetian Crete and the Emirates of Menteshe and Aydin (1300-1415)*, Venice 1987, see index at Hospital(ers) of Rhodes & Rhodes.

13 On the cultural coexistence and intellectual movement in Rhodes, see the extended study of Z. Tsirpanles, “Ελληνική και λατινική παιδεία στη Ρόδο”, in *Η Ρόδος και οι Νότιες Σποράδες στα χρόνια των Ιωαννιτών Ιπποτών* (14^{ος}-16^{ος} αι.), Rhodes 1991, p. 341-412.

14 This notion was expounded between 2001 and 2009 in A. Savvides’ lectures on late medieval and early modern S-E Mediterranean history at the University of the Aegean (Rhodes Town).

15 See the collected studies by the late Michael Heslop in his *Medieval Greece: encounters between Latins, Greeks and others in the Dodecanese and the Mani*, London & New York, 2021.

Street of the Knights, *Ippoton*, in Rhodes, lined with the residences, or 'auberges' representing the seven 'langues' constituting the Knights Hospitaller: France, Provence, Auvergne, Italy, Aragon, England and Germany. As Photeine Perra refers to Alexios Savvides' lectures at the University of the Aegean in her article in the previous pages, could the multilingual Knights be regarded as a 'miniature form', a forerunner of the European Union?

Photo: Felix Bonfils (1831-1885), 1870s.

