

FROM JERUSALEM TO VALLETTA: THE EVOLUTION OF THE ORDER OF ST JOHN'S CHAPTER-GENERAL (1131 - 1631)

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The Hospitaller's chapter-general was the Order's sole legislative authority. It also supervised routine administrative business and acted as the highest court of justice. The decisions of chapters-general were recorded in the statutes, which thereby built up into a corpus of regulations on all aspects of the Order's structure. The chapter-general, together with the Grand Master and Council was the heart of the Hospitaller government. Indeed, in many respects it was the chief organ of that government for no member of, or body within, the Hospital, could refute to ignore its decrees.

The concept of the chapter-general

The chapter-general of the Order of St John was a direct adoption from similar bodies found in monastic institutions. The basis of monastic orders or communities was the Rule. The Hospitaller Rule provided them with a basic structural framework which identified clearly the ideals of discipline and common life, and which laid the foundations for an organization centred round the Convent, seat of the central government.¹ By the thirteenth century the Hospital's familiar administrative and territorial division into langues, priories and commanderies was in place.² Appointed officials were in each case responsible for many aspects of administration; their authority was however 'counterbalanced by chapters',³ which met regularly in every priory and commandery, so that the respective heads could consult with the other brethren on various matters of interest to their community. The chapter-general, on the other hand, brought together representatives from the Convent and from all the Order's territorial units. All brethren, including the Grand Master, had to submit to its decisions which could only be amended or revoked by a successive chapter-general.

In theory a chapter-general was supposed to meet every five years. This decision lay not within its powers however, but in those of the Grand Master, the only Hospitaller

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1. The most useful work on the structure of the Hospital during these early years remains J. Riley-Smith, *The Knights of St John in Jerusalem and Cyprus, c. 1050 - 1310* (London, 1967).

2. A. Forey, *The Military Orders - from the Twelfth to the Early Fourteenth Centuries* (London, 1992), pp.18 - 19.

3. *Ibid.*, p.153.

who could convene it. As was often the case with the king of France and the Estates General, the Grand Masters were frequently reluctant to do this unless it was absolutely necessary, since they tended to view the chapter-general as an intrusion upon their authority. Thus at different periods in the history of the Order, there was a tendency for chapters-general to meet either because of pressure exerted upon the Grand Master by the senior brethren, or sometimes even the Pope, or else in response to perceived, or actual, periods of crisis. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries conventual officers demanded frequent meetings of chapters-general in order to regulate and limit the authority of the Masters, as they were then known, especially to prevent them from ruling arbitrarily without seeking advice.⁴ In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, on the other hand, the trend was for chapters-general to meet more 'according to the needs of the time and the urgency of legislation to meet new situations'.⁵ Thus during the difficult years in between the Siege of Rhodes of 1522 and that of Malta in 1565, the chapters-general met frequently and granted extraordinary powers to Grand Masters, which enabled them to rule more effectively. At various times a chapter-general also helped the Convent to exert more effectively its authority over the priories, upon which it depended for the greater part of its revenue, and which it seems, were often beset by 'corruption and disorganization ... which prevented the Hospitallers from mobilizing their full resources'.⁶

Giacomo Bosio, the Order's official historian, described the chapter-general as an assembly where 'the customs of the Order are reformed, to whom government is answerable and where those matters concerning common interests are put in order'.⁷ Within this carefully-worded definition there are effectively stated the functions and authority of the chapter-general. Its decrees, or statutes, as they were called, could amend or add to the Rule on any constitutional matter; they also permitted the chapter-general to act as the Order's highest court of justice; and they oversaw procedural administrative business, such as the appointment of officials and the administration of the Treasury. Thus a chapter-general could, for example, increase, or impose new, financial demands on the priories, whose responsions were the Order's principal source of revenue. It also had the authority to dispatch commissions which reassessed, for purposes of taxation, the value of land and other assets within the bounds of priories and commanderies. In other instances extraordinary levies were imposed

4. *Ibid.*, 163.

5. A. Williams, 'The Constitutional Development of the Order of St John in Malta, 1530 - 1798', in *Hospitaller Malta, 1530 - 1798: Studies on Early Modern Malta and the Order of St John of Jerusalem*, (ed.) V. Mallia Milanese (Malta, 1993), p.295.

6. A.T. Luttrell, 'The Hospitallers at Rhodes: 1306 - 1421' in *A History of the Crusades*, (ed.) K. Setton (Wisconsin, 1975), p. 289.

7. G. Bosio, *Gli Statuti della Sacra Religione e Illustrissima Militia di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano* (Rome, 1589), p. 77.

for a number of years.⁸

The combination of judicial, administrative and legislative functions embodied in the chapter-general was in conformity with contemporary political theory, where 'the comprehensiveness of the functions [of government] ... derived from the very nature of authority as contemporaries interpreted it'.⁹ The powers of the chapter-general indeed were often an important safeguard against recurring instances of autonomous pretensions on the part of rich priories. These same priories and langues however, were just as likely to use the chapter-general as a confrontation ground in order to seek to acquire the greatest number of, or the most prestigious offices, in the top echelons of the Hospital's command structure. In fact after the fifteenth century Rome regularly forbid issues of precedence among langues for the allocation of these offices from being discussed at chapters-general.¹⁰

The summoning of a chapter-general

The chapter-general was one of the most solemn events in the Order's calendar. Its proceedings were developed over a number of years and numerous assemblies. There are no exact records for us to establish at what date the chapter-general was given 'its characteristic form'¹¹ as a general assembly with representatives from the priories in the East and West, but Riley-Smith has noted that 'Cistercian practice, which influenced so many Orders, was well established by the middle of the twelfth century'.¹² According to Bosio, it was first convened in 1118, by Master Raymond du Puy as a result of the Hospital's growth.¹³ Certainly the term *Capitulum Generale* was first used in 1176 and 1182.¹⁴ The chapter-general held at a latter date levied responsions on a number of priories, which would indicate that it was already a form of general assembly of the Order's higher officers.¹⁵

8. On the finances of the Order see A. Hoppen, 'The Finances of the Order of St John of Jerusalem in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *European Studies Review*, iii, 2 (1973) and *Id.*, *The Fortification of Malta by the Order of St John: 1530 - 1798* (Edinburgh, 1979).

9. H.A. Lloyd, *The State, France and the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1982), p. 52.

10. B. dal Pozzo, *Historia della Sacra Religione et Illustrissima Militia di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano* (Verona, 1703 -1715), p.92.

11. Riley - Smith, *The Knights of St John*, p.287.

12. *Ibid.*

13. G. Bosio, *Dell 'istoria della Sacra Religione et Illustrissima Militia di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, i, Part 2 (Rome, 1630), p.63.

14. Riley-Smith, *The Knights of St John*, p.287.

15. *Ibid.*

In his *Compendio Alfabetico*¹⁶ of 1718, G.M. Caravita gave a detailed description of the workings of the chapter-general. According to him the year and date when the chapter-general met were dictated by contemporary needs and was usually within the period stipulated by the preceding chapter-general. Summons from the Convent were sent one year ahead, notifying those required to attend. By 1631, the assembly of the chapter-general consisted of the Grand Master, the Conventual Bailiffs, the bishop of Malta and the Prior of the Conventual Church, as well as representatives of langues, priories and commanderies.¹⁷ Any absence on their part had to be justified in writing to the assembly of the chapter-general.

The chapter-general opened with the Mass of the Holy Ghost, after which the Rule was read to the assembly followed by the Grand Master's address to the congregation.¹⁸ Once these preliminary procedures were over, the Capitular Bailiffs surrendered the insignia of their office as a symbol of their submission to the chapter-general and, along with the other representatives presented the *ruolli*, which contained proposals for discussions during the sessions of the chapter-general.¹⁹ Then there took place the election of the *Reverendi Sedici*, two from each langue. These were the only brethren who were empowered to affect legislation to amend the Rule. They took an oath of impartiality and vowed to act solely in the interests of the Order.²⁰ Although by 1631 the Grand Master took no part in either their election or their deliberations, it seems that at least during the Order's period in Syria, the Master himself chose these members, who retired with him, his Companions and the conventual prior to their chamber.²¹ The rest of the assembly in turn swore to uphold their decisions.

The Sixteen could levy or increase taxes and responsions. They studied the reports submitted by the representatives, and legislated according to shortcomings and needs revealed through them on various institutional and procedural matters, such as those concerning commanderies, reception of brethren and the Treasury. They also appointed the Conventual Bailiffs, who, by the time that the Hospital moved to Rhodes, numbered eight: the Grand Commander, the Marshal, the Hospitaller, the Drapier, the Treasurer, the Admiral, the Turcopolier, and the Conventual Prior.²²

16. G.M. Caravita, *Compendio Alfabetico de Statuti della Sacra Religione Gerosolimitana* (1718), p. 19.

17. L. de Boisgelin, *Ancient and modern Malta*, ii (London, 1804), p.288

18. Riley-Smith, *The Knights of St John*, p. 288.

19. Ibid.

20. Caravita, p.18.

21. Riley-Smith, *The Knights of St John*, p.288.

22. Ibid., p.349.

Next came the appointments of the Bailiffs, Capitular Priors, Castellans and Commanders, as well as the commanderies of grace, 'bestowed on brethren for life or for a term',²³ from which they were entitled to draw an income. The Sixteen's decisions were final and no appeals were allowed from their decisions.

Initially the chapter-general lasted around one week, but as its proceedings became more complex with the growth of the Order's responsibilities and the increase in its landed property, this was deemed to be too short. The statutes of 1300 made allowances for it to be extended up to ten days.²⁴ By the time of the chapter-general of 1631, the proceedings normally lasted for fifteen days, but could be extended for a further eight.²⁵

On termination of the deliberations and proceedings, the Vice-Chancellor read the revised statutes, revocations and appointments, and any brethren who disputed anything regarding them could speak and address his reservations to the chapter-general.²⁶ Finally the Master made the concluding speech and the Conventual Prior recited the final prayers. This brought an end to the proceedings of the chapter-general. Any work still outstanding was terminated by an appointed council.²⁷

One of the Order's modern historians has commented that as the Hospital developed from humble origins into a complex institution with characteristics of a Sovereign state, its 'vast international machine was rarely able to function as its creators intended'.²⁸ Within this context, the chapter-general often reflected the strengths and the weaknesses in the Order's structure. At times its authority was put to use by the Convent in order to enforce the Rule and to govern as efficiently as possible. At other times it revealed jealousies and nationalist animosities among the langues and priories, to the detriment of the Order.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., p. 289.

25. Caravita, p. 18.

26. Williams, p.293.

27. Ibid.

28. Riley Smith, p.475.