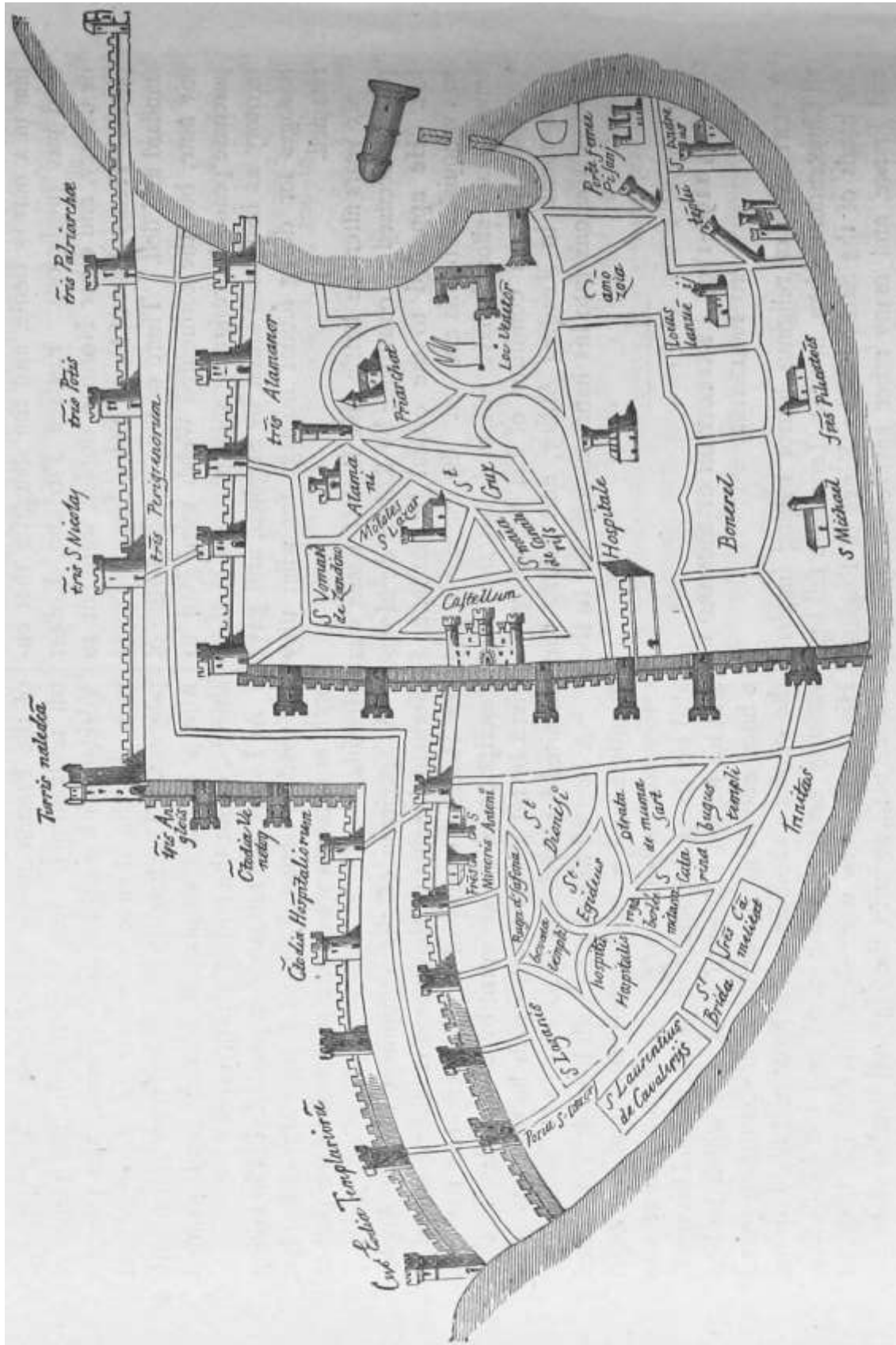


Guardians of Faith: The Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon



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Plan of Acre after Drawing by: Marino Sanuto circa 1894

Preface

In the annals of history, there are few organizations that have endured the test of time with as much resilience and unwavering dedication as the Hospitaller Order of St Thomas of Acon. Founded in 1191 during the tumultuous times of the Third Crusade, this noble order has stood as a bastion of faith, chivalry, and humanitarian service for over eight centuries.

As we embark on a journey through the rich tapestry of the Order's history, from its origins in the Holy Land to its re-establishment as the modern-day Knights of St Thomas of Canterbury in 2022, we bear witness to the timeless ideals and enduring legacy that have shaped the character of this venerable institution.

Through triumph and adversity, the guardians of faith within the Order have remained steadfast in their commitment to uphold the values of compassion, integrity, and selfless service. Their unwavering dedication has not only left an indelible mark on the pages of history but also continues to inspire and guide the noble endeavours of the Order in the present day.

In the following pages, we will delve into the remarkable story of the Hospitaller Order of St Thomas of Acon and the triumphant resurgence of its historic values in the form of the Knights of St Thomas of Canterbury. It is a tale of honour, sacrifice, and the enduring power of faith that transcends the boundaries of time and continues to illuminate the path for those who seek to follow in the footsteps of these noble guardians.

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Author's note:

Akkor, Acon are the original names for a city still in existence today being Acre, within these pages I may switch between names.

Many will recognise some of the name's given as prominent Knights of the Templar Orders. However, in my research I have discovered at the Templars and Order of St. Thomas worked closely together and took orders from the Templar grand masters.

Introduction – Who as St. Thomas Becket

Saint Thomas Becket, also known as Thomas à Becket, was born in 1118 or 1120 in Cheapside, London, to Gilbert and Matilda Becket. He was the son of a prosperous merchant and received a good education in London before studying in Paris and Bologna. He eventually became a clerk and financial administrator for Theobald, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who sent him to study canon law in Bologna and Auxerre. Becket became well-versed in ecclesiastical and secular law, and his talents and connections propelled him to high office.

In 1154, King Henry II appointed Becket as Chancellor of England, a position of great power and influence. Becket and Henry developed a close friendship, and Becket became known for his lavish and luxurious lifestyle. However, in 1162, to the surprise of many, Henry nominated Becket to be the new Archbishop of Canterbury, the most senior ecclesiastical position in England.

Upon his consecration as Archbishop, Becket underwent a radical transformation. He embraced a life of humility, piety, and religious devotion, which put him at odds with King Henry II. Becket began to prioritize the interests of the Church over those of the crown, leading to a bitter and protracted conflict with the king over the rights and privileges of the Church.

This conflict came to a head when Becket excommunicated several of the king's supporters. In a moment of frustration, Henry II reportedly uttered the infamous words, "Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?" Taking this as a command, four knights loyal to the king journeyed to Canterbury and murdered Becket in Canterbury Cathedral on December 29, 1170.

Becket's murder shocked medieval Europe and led to his rapid canonization as a martyr. His shrine at Canterbury Cathedral became a major pilgrimage site, and he was venerated as a saint. His feast day is celebrated on December 29. The cult of St. Thomas Becket grew rapidly, and he was venerated as a powerful intercessor and a champion of the church's rights and privileges. Pilgrims flocked to Canterbury to seek healing, forgiveness, and spiritual solace at his shrine, and many miracles were attributed to his intercession.

The popularity of the cult of St. Thomas Becket continued to grow throughout the medieval period, and his influence extended beyond England to continental Europe. His martyrdom and sanctity were

celebrated in art, literature, and religious devotion, and he became one of the most revered saints in Christendom.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, various religious and military orders were founded in honour of St. Thomas Becket. One of these was the Order of the Knights of St. Thomas of Acon, also known as the Order of St. Thomas of Acon, which was established in the late 12th century in Acre, the capital of the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

The Order of St. Thomas of Acon was originally founded as a military order, similar to the Knights Templar and the Knights Hospitaller, with the purpose of protecting Christian pilgrims and defending the Holy Land. However, unlike the other military orders, the primary focus of the Order of St. Thomas of Acon was the veneration of St. Thomas Becket and the support of his cult.

The Order maintained chapels and hospices dedicated to St. Thomas Becket, and its members participated in religious ceremonies and processions in honour of the saint. The order also provided assistance and support to pilgrims visiting the shrine of St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury.

The Order of St. Thomas of Acon continued to exist for several centuries, enduring through the tumultuous events of the Crusades and the later Middle Ages. Although it never achieved the prominence of the more well-known military orders, it played a significant role in perpetuating the cult of St. Thomas Becket and promoting his veneration among Christians in the Holy Land and beyond.

Overall, the cult of St. Thomas Becket remained a potent force in medieval religious life, inspiring devotion, pilgrimage, and the establishment of religious institutions dedicated to his memory, such as the Order of St. Thomas of Acon.



The story of Thomas Becket has been the subject of numerous works of art, literature, and drama, including the famous play “Murder in the Cathedral” by T.S. Eliot. His life and death continue to be remembered and studied as a powerful example of the struggle between church and state, the clash of conflicting loyalties, and the enduring power of martyrdom and religious conviction.

Timeline of The Order of St. Thomas of Acon

The Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon, a lesser-known branch of the Knights Hospitaller, has a rich history intertwined with the Crusades, royal and papal decrees, and the acquisition of holdings by the Mercers. Here's a timeline capturing key events from the founding of the order onwards:

1180: The Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon is founded in Acre, a major city of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, as a fraternity of Knights Templar and Hospitallers dedicated to the aid of pilgrims and the defence of the Holy Land.

1187: The Battle of Hattin is a significant turning point as Saladin's forces defeat the Crusader army, leading to the fall of Jerusalem. The loss of the Holy City prompts the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon to strengthen its resolve in defending Christian interests in the region.

1191-1192: The Third Crusade, led by King Richard the Lionheart of England, King Philip II of France, and Emperor Frederick I of the Holy Roman Empire, sees the recapture of some territory, including Acre. The Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon plays a role in the defence and subsequent negotiations for the city's control.

1204: The Fourth Crusade results in the sack of Constantinople, leading to the establishment of the Latin Empire. This event reshapes the political landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean and influences the activities of the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon.

1217-1221: The Fifth Crusade, sanctioned by Pope Honorius III, aims to recapture Jerusalem. The Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon participates in the campaign, contributing to various battles and sieges in the Holy Land.

1259: King Henry III of England grants the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon the manor of Clerkenwell in London, providing the order with a significant base of operations in England.

1291: The fall of Acre marks the end of Crusader presence in the Levant, prompting the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon to shift its focus to other activities, including charitable works and the acquisition of properties in England.

14th-15th centuries: The Mercers' Company, a prominent London guild, becomes involved in the support of the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon, contributing to the purchase and management of properties and holdings.

1538: King Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries results in the seizure of religious properties in England, including those held by the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon. This event significantly impacts the order's presence and activities in the country.

While the specific activities of the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon may not be as widely documented as those of its parent order, the Knights Hospitaller, the order's history is undoubtedly intertwined with the broader narrative of the Crusades, royal and papal decrees, and the support provided by entities such as the Mercers' Company.



The Mercers' Christ

This limestone sculpture is owned by the Worshipful Company of Mercers and depicts a life-sized recumbent figure of Christ laid out following his crucifixion. It was discovered beneath the floor of the original Mercers' chapel in Cheapside during the excavation of this site in 1954 following bomb damage from the Blitz. The artist is unknown, but it is thought that the figure was carved in the late medieval period.

Chapter One

Legends and Origins: Unravelling the Myths of the Order's Founding

When the English Crusade fleet had passed through the British Sea and the Sea of Poitou, and had come into the Spanish Sea, on Ascension Day [1190], at the third hour a mighty and dreadful tempest overtook them, and in the twinkling of an eye they were separated from each other. While the storm was raging, and all in their affliction were calling upon the Lord, the blessed Thomas, Archbishop of Canterbury and Martyr, appeared at three different times to three different persons who were on board a London ship in which was William Fitz-Osbert, and Geoffrey the goldsmith, saying to them,

Be not afraid, for I, Thomas, the archbishop of Canterbury, and the blessed Edmund the Martyr, and the blessed Nicholas, the Confessor, have been appointed by the Lord guardians of this fleet of the king of England; and if the men of this fleet will guard themselves against sin, and repent of their former offenses, the Lord will grant them a prosperous voyage, and will direct their foot steps in His paths." After having thrice repeated these words, the blessed Thomas vanished from before their eyes, and immediately the tempest ceased, and there was a great calm on the sea.

The Hospitaller Knights of St. Thomas of Acon, also known as the Knights of St. Thomas, have a rich history shrouded in myths and legends. The order, which originated in the 12th century, played a significant role in the Crusades and the defence of the Holy Land. Over the centuries, numerous stories and myths have emerged surrounding the founding and early years of the order, adding to the mystique and allure of the Knights of St. Thomas of Acon. In this chapter, we will explore some of these myths and legends and examine their significance in shaping the identity and legacy of this esteemed order.

Here is perhaps the most well-known story (myth), relating St. Thomas to the Holy Land and perhaps the early origins of the Order of St. Thomas of Acon (Acre)

There are at least three versions of a miracle story in which St Thomas saved an English ship from a storm on the way to the Third Crusade in 1190. In the chronicles of Roger of Hoveden and Roger of Wendover, Thomas appeared in a vision to three Londoners, including William FitzOsbert and Geoffrey Aurifaber ('Goldsmith'), on the 'London ship'. He promised them that he, St Edmund, and St Nicholas, arguably the three most popular male saints in late-12th century England, were protecting the entire English fleet. William

FitzOsbert himself was to become venerated as an unofficial saint by Londoners after his part in a popular revolt in 1196.

Ralph de Diceto, dean of St Paul's Cathedral, wrote that his chaplain William fulfilled a vow to St Thomas to found a chapel in Acre as thanks for safe transport over the seas. This was the start of the 'Order of St Thomas of Acre' established in Acre in 1191/2 with the backing of King Richard the Lionheart. It never had more than four houses, and its operations in the Holy Land were hindered by their poverty. The most important house of the order was that founded in London in the 1220s on the site of Thomas Becket's birth. The name of the Order of St Thomas of Acre may have given rise to the belief that Becket had Syrian heritage, and thus provided the basis for the story of his Middle Eastern mother.

Another according to legend, Thomas Becket, who was known for his piety and devotion to the Church, played a crucial role in establishing the order. It is said that during his exile in France, Becket encountered a group of knights who had been wounded in battle. Touched by their suffering, Becket vowed to create a charitable order dedicated to caring for sick and injured knights. This order would later become known as the Knights of St. Thomas of Acon, in honour of Becket's legacy.

While this myth has captured the imagination of many, historians have cast doubt on its veracity, citing the lack of concrete evidence to support the claim. Nevertheless, the legend of Thomas Becket's involvement in the founding of the order endures as a testament to the order's commitment to charity and compassion.

Perhaps the most interesting of myths involves Reginald FitzUrse, William de Tracy, Hugh de Morville and Richard le Bret. To many the names may not sound familiar, they are however infamous in being the Knights who in anger assassinated Archbishop Thomas Becket.

After the assassination, the knights were reportedly exiled to the Holy Land as penance for their crime. Legend has it that during their time in the Holy Land, they underwent a profound change of heart. Instead of leading lives of further violence, they supposedly repented and devoted themselves to defending pilgrims and caring for the sick, adopting a more chivalrous and noble path.

The Order of St. Thomas of Acon is a historical and somewhat mysterious order that is said to have been founded in the 12th century, possibly in London. According to legend, the order was established by the repentant knights as a way to atone for their actions and to continue their newfound dedication to serving others. The order was supposedly dedicated to the

eneration of St. Thomas Becket and to the care of pilgrims traveling to the Holy Land.

The story also includes the belief that the four knights, after their deaths, were buried at the gateway to Acre (also known as Acon), a prominent city in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. This detail adds to the mystique and legend surrounding the knights' supposed transformation and their connection to the Holy Land.

It's important to note that the historical accuracy of these events and the subsequent establishment of the Order of St. Thomas of Acon are matters of debate among historians and scholars. Much of the information about the knights' post-assassination activities and the order is based on legend and tradition rather than concrete historical evidence. Nonetheless, the story of the repentant knights and their supposed acts of penance has been a compelling part of the enduring legacy of Thomas Becket and the events surrounding his death.

Any scholars and writers on the myth of the *Holy Grail* associate the story to The Knights Templar. However, The Knights of St. Thomas of Acon have also long been associated with the enduring myth of the Holy Grail, the legendary cup said to have been used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper. According to some accounts, the order was entrusted with the guardianship of the Holy Grail, embarking on a sacred quest to protect this fabled relic from falling into the wrong hands.

Legends surrounding the order's connection to the Holy Grail abound, with tales of valiant knights undertaking perilous journeys and facing formidable challenges in their pursuit of the sacred artifact. One popular myth suggests that the Knights of St. Thomas of Acon concealed the Holy Grail within their secret chambers, safeguarding it from those who sought to misuse its divine power.

The association with the Holy Grail has elevated the order to an almost mythical status, imbuing its members with a sense of purpose and destiny. Whether or not the order truly possessed the Holy Grail, the enduring myth has become an integral part of the order's identity, symbolizing their unwavering commitment to upholding the values of faith, chivalry, and selflessness.

Chapter Two

Origins and Founding: The Birth of the Hospitaller Order

Introduction

The origins of the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon are deeply intertwined with the history of the medieval Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the development of charitable organizations during the Crusades. This chapter will delve into the founding of the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon, exploring its early years and the individuals who played a pivotal role in its establishment.

The Rise of Pilgrimage and the Need for Assistance

During the medieval period, pilgrimage to the Holy Land emerged as a significant aspect of Christian devotion. Pilgrims from across Europe embarked on arduous journeys to visit the sacred sites associated with the life of Jesus Christ. However, these pilgrimages were fraught with dangers, including the perils of travel, banditry, and the risk of illness. As a result, the need for organized assistance and protection for pilgrims became increasingly apparent.

In response to these challenges, a network of charitable organizations, known as hospices or orders, began to emerge in the Holy Land and along the pilgrimage routes. These organizations provided shelter, medical care, and protection to pilgrims, reflecting the Christian ideals of charity and service.

The Birth of the Order of St. Thomas of Acon

The Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon, also known as the Order of the Holy Cross and the Red Star, was one such organization dedicated to serving the needs of pilgrims and the sick. The exact date of its founding is a matter of historical debate, but it is widely believed to have originated in the late 12th century, during the era of the Crusades.

The order's namesake, St. Thomas of Acon, was an English martyr who became associated with acts of charity and healing. The precise circumstances of the order's founding remain shrouded in the annals of history, but it is likely that a group of devout individuals, inspired by the example of St. Thomas and motivated by a desire to aid pilgrims, came together to establish the order in the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

The order's early members were drawn from diverse backgrounds, including knights, clergy, and laypersons, all united by a common commitment to the principles of hospitality and Christian charity. These founding members recognized the need for a formalized structure to coordinate their efforts and provide sustainable support to pilgrims and the infirm.

The Role of the Knights Templar

In the early stages of its development, the Order of St. Thomas of Acon maintained close ties with the Knights Templar, a prominent military order tasked with safeguarding pilgrims and protecting the Holy Land. The Templars provided invaluable support and guidance to the nascent Hospitaller order, sharing their expertise in managing estates, organizing resources, and ensuring the safety of pilgrims.

The Templars' influence on the Order of St. Thomas of Acon extended beyond practical assistance. The two orders also shared a commitment to upholding the values of chivalry, service, and devotion to the Christian faith. This kinship facilitated a fruitful exchange of ideas and principles, enriching the spiritual and organizational foundation of the Hospitaller order.

The Leadership of Blessed Gerard and Raymond du Puy

Among the key figures who shaped the early identity of the Order of St. Thomas of Acon were Blessed Gerard and Raymond du Puy. Blessed Gerard, a revered figure renowned for his piety and dedication to charitable works, played a pivotal role in defining the ethos of the order. His experiences in tending to the sick and destitute during pilgrimages to the Holy Land provided invaluable insight into the practical challenges faced by those in need. Gerard's vision for the order emphasized not only the provision of physical care but also the nurturing of spiritual well-being, reflecting a holistic approach to Christian charity.

Raymond du Puy, a respected cleric with a deep commitment to the Christian faith, brought his organizational acumen and spiritual guidance to the fledgling order. His leadership was instrumental in shaping the order's administrative structure and fostering a sense of unity and purpose among its members. Raymond's vision for the order emphasized the cultivation of a community bound by shared values of compassion, humility, and service to others.

The order's early activities centred on the provision of medical care, shelter, and sustenance to pilgrims, as well as support for the local Christian communities in the Holy Land. These endeavours were carried out with unwavering dedication, laying the groundwork for the order's future expansion and influence.

Founding Principles and Ethos

Central to the ethos of the Order of St. Thomas of Acon were the principles of hospitality, compassion, and Christian charity. Members of the order embraced the ideals of selflessness and generosity, recognizing the inherent dignity of every individual and the importance of alleviating suffering and hardship.

The order's commitment to these principles was reflected in its emblem, the red star, which symbolized the guiding light of Christian charity shining in the darkness of adversity. This emblem served as a poignant reminder of the order's mission to provide hope and succour to those in need, even in the most challenging circumstances.

Furthermore, the order's dedication to St. Thomas of Acon as its patron saint underscored its emphasis on healing and spiritual renewal. St. Thomas, revered for his acts of mercy and his steadfast faith, served as an inspirational figure for the order's members, guiding them in their endeavours to bring comfort and solace to the afflicted.

Expansion and Influence

As the Order of St. Thomas of Acon grew in prominence and influence, it expanded its activities beyond the Holy Land, establishing a network of hospices and commanderies throughout Europe. These outposts served as vital hubs for the order's charitable work, providing assistance to pilgrims, the infirm, and the marginalized in various regions.

The order's presence in Europe facilitated the cultivation of alliances with local rulers, nobility, and ecclesiastical authorities, further enhancing its capacity to fulfil its mission. These alliances also provided the order with access to resources and support, enabling it to broaden its scope of activities and deepen its impact on the communities it served.

The Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon's dedication to its founding principles and its unwavering commitment to the values of Christian charity earned it widespread acclaim and support. Its members, drawn from diverse backgrounds and professions, stood united in their pursuit of a noble cause, exemplifying the enduring power of faith and compassion to effect positive change in the world.

Conclusion

The founding of the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of Christian charity and service. From its humble origins as a small band of devoted individuals in the Holy Land, the order evolved into a formidable force for good, leaving an indelible mark on the history of the Christian faith. The Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon's dedication to its founding principles and its unwavering commitment to the values of Christian charity earned it widespread acclaim and support. Its members, drawn from diverse backgrounds and professions, stood united in their pursuit of a noble cause, exemplifying the enduring power of faith and compassion to effect positive change in the world.

In conclusion, the founding of the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of Christian charity and service. From its humble origins as a small band of devoted individuals in the Holy

Land, the order evolved into a formidable force for good, leaving an indelible mark on the history of the Christian faith and the broader tapestry of medieval charitable organizations.

The chapter weaves together the historical tapestry of the founding of the Order of St. Thomas of Acon, shedding light on the individuals, principles, and activities that shaped its early years. By delving into the founding ethos and the expansion of the order, it becomes evident that the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon holds a significant place in the annals of medieval Christian philanthropy and continues to inspire acts of compassion and service in the modern era.

Authors Note:

Blessed Gerard and Raymond du Puy were highly influential figures in the Hospitaller Order, which later became known as the Order of St. John, or the Knights Hospitaller. However, the influence of these figures on the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon is less direct, as the latter was a separate and distinct order.

Blessed Gerard, a lay brother who is considered the founder of the Order of St. John, established the Hospitaller Order in Jerusalem in the 11th century. He played a pivotal role in the early development of the Order, setting the groundwork for its humanitarian and military activities.

Raymond du Puy, who succeeded Gerard as the head of the Order, further shaped its organization and activities. He is credited with establishing the military character of the Order and expanding its presence in Europe.

The Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon, on the other hand, was a distinct order established in the 12th century in England. It was closely associated with the Order of St. John and adopted a similar religious and hospitaller mission. While there may have been indirect influences or inspirations from the earlier Hospitaller Order led by Gerard and du Puy, the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon operated as a separate entity with its own leadership and organizational structure.

In summary, while Blessed Gerard and Raymond du Puy had significant influence on the development of the Hospitaller Order that later became the Order of St. John, their direct influence on the Hospitaller Order of St. Thomas of Acon was likely more limited due to the latter order's separate origins and development.

Chapter Three

Militae Hospitalis St. Thomae Martyris Cantuariensis

An alternative and more readily accepted founding and brief history
of the Order

During the Third Crusade (1189-1192), there was a group of knights who decided to establish a new order of chivalry in honour of Saint Thomas Becket, the martyred archbishop of Canterbury. The Order of Knights of St. Thomas of Canterbury was founded by William, a chaplain to Ralph of Diceto, with the possible involvement of Hubert Walter, archbishop of Canterbury, and King Richard I of England. In the "Theatre of Honour" lib. 9, cap. 11, the author, in giving an account of the military orders of the Holy Land, says:

"The order of St. Thomas was instituted by the King of England, Richard, surnamed Catur de Lyon, after the surprisal of Acars and being of the English nation they held the rule of St. Augustin , and wore a white habit and a full red cross, charged with white scallop in middle"

The chronicle of the Teutonic Knights. in relating the capture of Acre, in 1191, places the Knights of St. Thomas at the head of the 5000 men, whom the king of England sent into the Holy Land, and Herman Corner, writing a century later, mentions them among the defenders of Acre.



Matthew Paris an english Benedictine monk, chronicler, artist in illuminated manuscripts, and cartographer, asserts in the *Historia Anglorum*, that the knights were originally seculars, but that the order was re-modelled and affiliated to the Templars by Peter de Rupibus, Bishop of Winchester, during his visit to the Holy Land about the year 1230. He also says that Richard I on his expedition to the Holy Land in 1190, being overtaken by a storm in the Levant, was saved from shipwreck by the miraculous intervention of St. Thomas, who appeared to him and promised that he should come safely to land. He goes on to say that many citizens of London, who were on board ship in the following year when Acre was taken, founded a hospital there. The

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