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## THE NUNNERIES OF THE ORDER OF ST. JOHN IN MEDIEVAL ITALY

### KEYWORDS

*history; the Middle Ages; military orders; Hospitallers; medieval Italy; nunneries; female religiosity; medieval cities*

### ABSTRACT

This paper's focus is women as professed members of the Order of St John in Italy, as documented in cities such as Milan, Florence, Venice, Genova, Monteleone di Spoleto, Perugia, Penne and Sovereto. The adherence of women to the Order came under several institutional forms. Some women were laypeople, associated *consorores* who carried out the Order's activities, sometimes working in its hospitals. Others lived in the houses of the Order of St John, where they could also take the vows, with consequent formation of "mixed" convents or monasteries. But in some cases, separate nunneries were created or assimilated from other communities. Some historians have seen a different evolution from the initial vocation of women, which consisted of field activities in support of the poor and the sick, and would later become a strictly cloistered life. This change can be observed by examining the biographies of the two Italian female Hospitaller saints, Ubaldesca and Toscana. Yet, local development varied, and the situation in an important city like Florence differed from nunneries in smaller localities like Sovereto or Penne. Finally, several interesting sources allow us a glimpse of the spirituality and norms in those women's daily lives compared to male religiosity. The

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medieval Italian nunneries of St John never became an autonomous branch of the Order, but at the same time, they were not a rare or exceptional phenomenon.

One of the best examples of the practical nature of military orders and their normative acts<sup>1</sup> is the Hospitallers statute, stipulating the conditions of admission of women in the Order. This statute, issued sometime between 1206 and 1262, enabled the Order's local commanders to welcome women as sisters, providing this benefitted the Hospital.<sup>2</sup> This meant that the inclusion of women as professed members was no longer considered an exception requiring confirmation by the Order's master himself.

In reality, there had always been women among the Hospitallers, as proved by the Italian example. Most were not professed sisters and belonged to the vast group of the Order's lay associates. There has been discussion on the terminology used for these women, attempting to distinguish between the *donate* or donates living in the Order's houses and the lay *consorores*.<sup>3</sup> The medieval sources are imprecise, and the terms used in various regions or cities vary. So, the expression *donata* was not used much in medieval Italy, and the lay sisters were mainly described as *oblata*, *consorores* or *converse*.

The Italian sources are vague in specifying those persons' exact status. However, they are generally precise in distinguishing full members from lay associates. This fact relates to a problem which not only the Italian Hospitallers but also the Templars and Teutonic Knights had to face regarding laypeople pretending to be the Orders' members, so that they could benefit from tax exemptions and other privileges given by the military orders.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, marks of distinction

<sup>1</sup> Kristjan Toomaspoeg, "Templars, Hospitallers and Teutonic Knights," in *A Companion to Medieval Rules and Customaries*, ed. Krijn Pansters (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2020), 225–252, at 245–248.

<sup>2</sup> 19 September 1262, *Cartulaire général de l'Ordre des Hospitaliers de S. Jean de Jérusalem*, vol. III, 1261–1300, ed. Joseph M. A. Delaville le Roulx (Paris: E. Leroux, 1899), 43–54 no. 3039, at 48 (§ 22).

<sup>3</sup> Damien Carraz, "Présences et dévotions féminines autour des commanderies du Bas-Rhône (XII<sup>e</sup>–XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)," in *Les ordres religieux militaires dans le Midi (XII<sup>e</sup>–XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Cahiers de Fanjeaux 41 (Toulouse: Privat, 2006), 71–99, at 82; Anthony Luttrell and Helen J. Nicholson, "Introduction: a Survey of Hospitaller Women in the Middle Ages," in *Hospitaller Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anthony Luttrell and Helen J. Nicholson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 1–42, at 3; Luigi M. de Palma, *Il Consiglio e le Costituzioni di fra' Lionardo Bonafedi per le Giovannite di Firenze (XIV sec.)* (Bari: Ecumenica Editrice, 2010), 15.

<sup>4</sup> The problem was specific to the West, as the Templars noted in their Rule: *Surrexerunt namque in ultramontanis partibus quidam pseudo fratres et coniugati et alii dicentes se esse de Templo, cum*

were introduced, and from a specific moment onwards, the Hospital's lay *conso-rores* wore a different habit from that of the professed members,<sup>5</sup> eventually with a three-armed cross.<sup>6</sup>

The oldest testimony of professed Hospitaller sisters existing in Italy is a deed of purchase issued by the Order's commander in Verona in October 1179. It lists three women as *sorores*, named Adelsa, Brethella and Truita. They are also called *domine*, meaning they were of noble origin.<sup>7</sup> In comparison, in January 1259 we find three women among the Hospitallers in Milan, Fomia, Agata and Benvenuta, defined as *dedicate et converse et sorores*, meaning they were lay associates only.<sup>8</sup> At times, professed Hospitaller sisters could be found in other commanderies, such as Barletta in Apulia.<sup>9</sup> Possibly, they existed in a big part of the Order's houses. This brings us to discuss "mixed monasteries", following important research by Francesco Tommasi.<sup>10</sup> Whether those houses were effectively "mixed" is difficult to determine, as there was no abbess or prioress. Instead, the sisters were subordinated to the Hospital's local (male) commander. They were not in every house, and when they did exist, the number of sisters living there was not fixed.<sup>11</sup>

The nunneries of the Order of St John are documented in several Italian cities, and the circumstances of their foundation and history are distinct. The one thing in common was that none was founded directly and deliberately by the Order it-

*sint de mundo* (Reg. lat. 20), Simonetta Cerrini, "Une expérience neuve au sein de la spiritualité médiévale: l'ordre du Temple (1120–1314). Etude et édition des règles latine et française," (PhD thesis, Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne, 1997 [1998]), 132. About the issue in Italy, see Romualdo Trifone, *La legislazione angioina. Edizione critica* (Naples 1921), 174–175.

<sup>5</sup> Francesco Tommasi, "Uomini e donne negli ordini militari di Terrasanta: per il problema delle case doppie e miste negli ordini giovannita, templare e teutonico (secc. XII–XIV)," in *Doppelklöster und anderen Formen der Symbiose männlicher und weiblicher Religiosen im Mittelalter*, ed. Kaspar Elm and Michel Parisse (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1992), 177–202: 187.

<sup>6</sup> Marina Gazzini, "L'ordine di S. Giovanni e la società locale tra religiosità e assistenza. Italia centrosettentrionale, secoli XII–XIV," in *Gli ordini ospedalieri tra centro e periferia. Giornata di studio. Roma, Istituto Storico Germanico, 16 giugno 2005*, ed. Anna Esposito and Andreas Rehberg (Rome: Viella, 2007), 137–157, at 153.

<sup>7</sup> Giovanni B. G. Biancolini, *Notizie storiche delle chiese di Verona*, vol. II (Verona: Scolari, 1749), 579.

<sup>8</sup> Alessandro Colombo, "I Gerosolimitani e i Templari a Milano e la Via Commenda," *Archivio Storico Lombardo* 53 (1926): 185–240, at 205.

<sup>9</sup> Domenico Vendola, "L'Ordine Sovrano di S. Giovanni di Gerusalemme nella diocesi di Trani," *Archivio storico di Malta* 8 (1937): 153–177, at 165–166.

<sup>10</sup> Tommasi, "Uomini e donne," 190.

<sup>11</sup> For Anthony Luttrell and Helen Nicholson, the distinction made between "mixed" and "double" monasteries does not correspond to the medieval reality: Luttrell and Nicholson, "Introduction," 3.

self. The one exception could be the nunnery of Genoa, the foundation of which is unclear.<sup>12</sup> All of the documented nunneries came from preexisting communities, which came to be incorporated into the Order, in one way or another. Some cases remain relatively obscure, such as the Florence nunnery, where a female convent was tied to the Templars. Despite the prohibition expressed in their Rule<sup>13</sup> and although sources are scarce, Templar sisters existed in Italy.<sup>14</sup> However, the case of Florence is hard to assess: a nunnery, documented in four documents from between 1293 and 1319, was located in the Templar house of San Jacopo in Campo Corbolini. From 1311 (shortly before the Order was abolished, which the act does not refer), it had a hospital or hospice.<sup>15</sup> The sources do not specify the sisters' status: in 1293 they were defined as *moniales*, and in 1319, when the house already belonged to the Hospitallers, as *sorores recluse*.<sup>16</sup> It is highly likely that the sisters at San Jacopo were not professed members of the Templar Order and that the Templars exercised their *ius patronatus* on this community, despite it being of another obedience.

Sovereto provided a similar case. Sovereto, a small locality nearby the wealthy harbour city of Trani (Apulia), is a well-known ancient commandery of the Order of St John, where Hospitaller tombstones from the end of the thirteenth and from the fourteenth century have been found.<sup>17</sup> Yet, it is not documented among the

<sup>12</sup> Romeo Pavoni, "Attività e presenza territoriale dell'Ordine Gerosolimitano in Liguria," in *Cavalieri di San Giovanni in Liguria e nell'Italia settentrionale. Quadri regionali, uomini e documenti. Atti del convegno, Genova, Commenda di San Giovanni di Pré, 30 settembre – 2 ottobre 2004*, ed. Josepha Costa Restagno (Genoa: Istituto Internazionale di Studi Liguri, 2009), 37–113, at 80.

<sup>13</sup> *Reg. lat.* 53, cf. Cerrini, *Une expérience neuve*, 145; Règle française 53, cf. Cerrini, *Une expérience neuve*, 203.

<sup>14</sup> Elena Bellomo, *The Templar Order in North-west Italy (1142 – c. 1330)* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2008), 121.

<sup>15</sup> Giuseppe Richa, *Notizie Istoriche delle Chiese Fiorentine*, vol. III,1 (Florence: Viviani 1755), 295; Paolo Pirillo, "Terra Santa e ordini militari attraverso i testamenti fiorentini prima e dopo la caduta di San Giovanni d'Acri," in *Acri 1291. La fine della presenza degli ordini militari in Terra Santa e i nuovi orientamenti nel XIV secolo*, ed. Francesco Tommasi (Perugia: Quattroemme, 1996), 121–135, at 128 footnotes 33, 130. See Ludovica Sebgondi, *San Jacopo in Campo Corbolini a Firenze. Percorsi storici dai Templari all'Ordine di Malta, all'era moderna* (Florence: Edifir, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Richa, *Notizie*, 295.

<sup>17</sup> On this issue, see Gaetano Valente, *Feudalesimo e feudatari in sette secoli di storia di un comune pugliese (Terlizzi 1073–1779)*, vol. II, *Periodo svevo* (Molfetta: Mezzina, 1983), 95, 97, 99; and Raffaele Iorio, "Uomini e sedi a Barletta di Ospedalieri e Templari come soggetti di organizzazione storica," in *Barletta crocevia degli Ordini religioso-cavallereschi medioevali. Seminario di Studio, Barletta 16 giugno 1996* (Taranto: Centro Studi Melitensi, 1997), 71–119, at 109, 118; Francesco

Order's possessions before 1309.<sup>18</sup> The circumstances of its acquisition by the Hospitallers are shady. The core of the future commandery was the church of Santa Maria, documented in 1175.<sup>19</sup> A judicial act from May 1203 described it as belonging to a monastery, under Abbess Maria and home to sisters (two of them undersigning the act) and monks with their own *presbiter prior*.<sup>20</sup> Thus, this was a "double monastery", both female and male, already in existence. The 1203 document concerned a legal dispute over certain assets given to the monastery earlier on by a widow who had chosen to take the vows there. However, the document does not identify the small monastery as belonging to the Order of St John. Instead, an expression used in the text ("[to] take the black veil"<sup>21</sup>) suggests that it was a Benedictine institution.<sup>22</sup> As already mentioned, how and when the Hospital took possession of Sovereto is unknown. In 1332, it was only a *grangia*, an economic dependency of the Order;<sup>23</sup> in 1373, a *domus* inhabited by a Hospitaller;<sup>24</sup> in the early modern period, already a commandery. The Sovereto nuns, however, ceased to be mentioned after 1203.

The case of Pisa and its Hospitaller nunnery has been reassessed entirely after the publication of St Ubaldesca's biography in 1996, by Gabriele Zaccagnini, based on the discovery of a sixteenth-century translation of the (now lost) original *Vita* of Ubaldesca and other unpublished sources.<sup>25</sup> The older historiography, following Giacomo Bosio,<sup>26</sup> considered Ubaldesca to have entered the Order of St John

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Tommasi, "Fonti epigrafiche della Domus Templi di Barletta per la cronotassi degli ultimi maestri provinciali dell'Ordine nel Regno di Sicilia," in *Militia Sacra. Gli ordini militari tra Europa e Terrasanta*, ed. Enzo Coli, Maria De Marco, and Francesco Tommasi (Perugia: Bevignate, 1994), 167–202, at 167–168.

<sup>18</sup> Mariarosaria Salerno, *Gli Ospedalieri di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia (secc. XI–XV)* (Taranto: Centro Studi Melitensi, 2001), 64.

<sup>19</sup> Valente, *Feudalesimo*, 76.

<sup>20</sup> Giosuè Musca, "Una famiglia di "Boni Homines" nella Terlizzi normanna e sveva," *Archivio storico pugliese* 21 (1968): 34–61, at 60–61; Valente, *Feudalesimo*, 179–180.

<sup>21</sup> Musca, "Una famiglia," 60; Valente, *Feudalesimo*, 179.

<sup>22</sup> See Vito Ricci, "Il complesso di Santa Maria di Sovereto: *ecclesia, domus e hospitale* (XII–XIV secolo)," in *Translatio. La Madonna di Sovereto. Arte, culto, devozione. Catalogo della mostra*, ed. Francesco Picca (Terlizzi: Pinacoteca "Michele de Napoli", 2015), 23–32, at 24.

<sup>23</sup> Valente, *Feudalesimo*, 102; Salerno, *Gli Ospedalieri*, 140.

<sup>24</sup> Vendola, "L'Ordine Sovrano di S. Giovanni," 165–166; *L'inchiesta pontificia del 1373 sugli Ospedalieri di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia*, ed. Mariarosaria Salerno and Kristjan Toomaspoeg (Bari: Adda, 2008), 227.

<sup>25</sup> Gabriele Zaccagnini, *Ubaldesca, una santa laica nella Pisa dei secoli XII–XIII* (Pisa: Gisem – Edizioni ETS, 1996), 13–18, source edition: 169–248.

<sup>26</sup> *Acta Sanctorum*, vol. 19, *Maii VI* (Paris–Rome, Apud Victorem Palmé 1866), 844–847; Giacomo Bosio, *Le immagini dei beati e santi della sacra religione di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano e di altre persone illustri* (Rome: Tipografia delle Belle Arti, 1860), 23–30.

as a professed member when she was fourteen, becoming a caretaker of the poor and the sick in the Order's house of San Giovanni dei Freri (today Fieri) in Pisa.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, Zaccagnini has proved that Ubaldesca bore no connection with the Order. Rather, she was a member of a *penitenti* community, probably following the Benedictine Rule. The Hospitallers unsuccessfully tried to take Ubaldesca under their wing, and after her death in 1205 or 1206 to take hold of her remains and acts of remembrance.<sup>28</sup> As part of a strategy of *captatio memoriae*, the community of pious women that Ubaldesca had been part of was incorporated into the Order of St John.<sup>29</sup> The nunnery in Pisa would later become probably the Hospital's largest in Italy,<sup>30</sup> even considering a period of decadency during the mid- fifteenth century.<sup>31</sup>

The Hospital's only nunnery in the Kingdom of Sicily had been in Penne (an important city in the Abruzzi region), since 1291.<sup>32</sup> The nunnery's creation is noteworthy as the first in a series of private foundations in the benefit of the Hospital. The foundation act is the only known document from the nunnery's medieval archives. It was kept in Naples but destroyed in World War II. Thankfully, it had been transcribed by Delaville Le Roulx into his *Cartulaire*.<sup>33</sup> This relatively short document is, however, dense in meaning.

The nunnery's founder was Isabel of Aversa, a member of a Lombard knightly family of average importance, active in Abruzzi. The Aversa family went through complications after Charles I of Anjou took power in 1266. They were declared "traitors" (*proditores*) and deprived of their possessions, but they eventually made peace with the Anjou dynasty.<sup>34</sup> Following the Lombard law, Isabel was legally rep-

<sup>27</sup> Francesco Tommasi, "The Female Hospitallers of San Bevignate at Perugia: 1325 – c. 1507," in *Hospitaller Women*, ed. Luttrell and Nicholson, 233–258, at 235.

<sup>28</sup> On the date of her death, Zaccagnini, *Ubaldesca*, 33–34.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 115–117, 125–126, 138; also Gazzini, "L'ordine di S. Giovanni," 141, 148.

<sup>30</sup> Luigi G. de Anna, "Dame, Militisse e Matrone. Le forme della Cavalleria al femminile," *Studi Melitensi* 27 (2019): 9–40, at 22.

<sup>31</sup> de Palma, *Il Consiglio*, 18.

<sup>32</sup> Several times it has been suggested that the date of foundation was 1230, but without good reason: Antonio Di Vincenzo, *Il monastero delle Gerosolimitane di Penne: altre note storiche* (Penne: COGECSTRE Edizioni, 2019), 13.

<sup>33</sup> 10 May 1291, *Cartulaire général*, ed. Delaville le Roulx, III: 590–591 no. 4154. See also Joseph Delaville Le Roulx, "Les Hospitalières de Saint-Jean de Jérusalem," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* 38/2 (1894), n. VIII: 137–146, at 144. The act is said to be held in: "Naples, Archives d'État, parchemins des Hospitalières de Penne."

<sup>34</sup> *I Registri della cancelleria Angioina*, ed. Riccardo Filangieri di Candida a.o., vol. 28 (Naples: Accademia Pontaniana, 1969), 88; vol. 30 (Naples: Accademia Pontaniana, 1971), 62, 69; vol. 32

resented by a *mundualdus*, Odorisius of Aversa, a well-known individual and the king's household knight.<sup>35</sup> Her father had died, and she never married. At the same time, tensions in the family arose, maybe relating to divisions over the estate belonging to Isabel's late father.<sup>36</sup> Isabel had the nunnery built at her expense between 1288 and 1290,<sup>37</sup> with the intent of spending her life there, although she never took vows.

Isabel bestowed the nunnery to the Order of St John, but this was without immediate spiritual and religious motivations. Rather, it listed a series of practical conditions. The first was that the sisters and abbess should be fully professed members of the Hospital, wear its habit and follow its Rule. Secondly, the nunnery should be visitated once a year by the prior of Capua with two or three Hospitallers, for a maximum of three days. After that time, the visitators should pay for their food and supplies. The local bishop was left out entirely of the nunnery's administration. As with other private foundations of Hospitaller nunneries, the founders were especially interested that those were independent from the local church authorities. At the same time, regular visitations prevented neglect by the Order. Isabel had the right to choose the nunnery's prioress, and the Hospitallers had to accept her choice; after Isabel's death, the nuns inherited the election rights. Finally, they owed the Hospital a tax of no more than six *tari* a year, a minimal sum.

Isabel's nunnery, situated outside the walls but near the city of Penne, must have been quite a small institution at first. Proof of this was that the Hospitaller prior of Capua, Jean d'Orléans, did not personally go to Penne to receive the donation, and was represented by an officer, the "vice-prior in Abruzzi".<sup>38</sup> Despite these humble beginnings, the nunnery became an important institution: it was a beneficiary in a will written in 1348 and remained active in the fifteenth century. In 1436, the nunnery was destroyed by war, and the sisters acquired a new monastery within the town walls.<sup>39</sup>

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(Naples: Accademia Pontaniana, 1982), 4, 21, 40, 42, 115; vol. 35 (Naples: Accademia Pontaniana, 1985), 209; vol. 36 (Naples: Accademia Pontaniana, 1987), 31, 34, 39, 81.

<sup>35</sup> *I Registri della cancelleria Angioina*, ed. Filangieri di Candida a.o., 30, 69 no. 188; 32, 42 no. 234; 36, 39 no. 144.

<sup>36</sup> 1291–1292, *I Registri della cancelleria Angioina*, ed. Filangieri di Candida a.o., 36, 39, no. 144.

<sup>37</sup> Di Vincenzo, *Il monastero*, 13–14.

<sup>38</sup> Pierre de Montlaur, cf. *Cartulaire général*, ed. Delaville le Roulx, III: 590.

<sup>39</sup> For the later nunnery's later history, see Di Vincenzo, *Il monastero*. Its modern era archives are still kept in Penne.

One of the reasons for this and other foundations of Hospitaller nunneries that followed was a growing difficulty in establishing new religious communities, especially female congregations, in the thirteenth century, caused by decisions taken by the church authorities since the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. These became extreme in 1298 and were introduced in canon law via Boniface VIII's decretal *Periculoso et detestabili*, imposing cloistered life as the only acceptable form of female monastic life.<sup>40</sup> In practice, new female communities were only made to join an existing religious order and follow its regulations. This was the case of Perugia, as studied by Francesco Tommasi.<sup>41</sup> The originality of Perugia was that the founder of a community of pious women, Enrico Corboli, a wealthy merchant linked to the Avignon papal court, was not interested, in the beginning, in the Hospital of St John itself but in the buildings of the church and convent of San Bevignate in Perugia. The Hospitallers had obtained those assets from the Templars and experienced difficulties administering them. Corboli offered to buy San Bevignate but was turned down.<sup>42</sup>

Then, in 1324, an agreement was made at the papal court to the effect that the community of Corboli was installed in San Bevignate as a nunnery of the Order of St John. We do not know how this decision reflected the interests of the Hospital in its complex relationship with the papacy, and whether it could have been an imposition. The conditions behind the foundation and the sisters' daily life norms were more detailed than in Penne. The nunnery was freed from episcopal power and came under the Hospitaller prior of Pisa. The sisters elected their abbess, called *preceptrix*, directly for extendable two-year periods. The founder and family kept control of the nunnery and had the right to choose its chaplain. The agreement fixed the number of professed sisters in twenty five, plus the abbess.<sup>43</sup> The development at San Bevignate was the opposite from Penne: after promising

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<sup>40</sup> *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, vol. II (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1959), 1053–1054. On this issue, see Elizabeth M. Makowski, “L'enfermement des moniales au Moyen Âge. Débats autour de l'application de la décrétale *Periculoso*,” in *Enfermements: le cloître et la prison, VI<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Actes du colloque international organisé par le Centre d'études et de recherche en histoire culturelle*, ed. Isabelle Heullant-Donat, Julie Claustre, and Élisabeth Lusset (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011), 107–118.

<sup>41</sup> Tommasi, “The Female Hospitallers,” 237–257.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>43</sup> Published in Francesco Tommasi, “Il monastero femminile di San Bevignate dell'Ordine di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano (secoli XIV–XVI),” in *Templari e ospitalieri in Italia. La chiesa di S. Bevignate a Perugia*, ed. Mario Roncetti, Pietro Scarpellini, and Francesco Tommasi (Milan: Electa, 1987), 53–78, at 69–77; commented in Tommasi, “The Female Hospitallers,” 244–248.



beginnings, the nunnery did not grow much. It fell into deep economic and moral crisis in the fifteenth century, and was ultimately suppressed in 1506.<sup>44</sup>

Another example from Umbria, Monteleone di Spoleto was a small city on the frontier between the Papal State and the Kingdom of Sicily. The leading figure was Napoleone Tiberti,<sup>45</sup> a high-ranking Hospitaller, active between 1330 and 1364 as the prior of Venice. In this case, his actions were motivated by personal reasons and family traditions. The Order of St John had a considerable number of commanderies and possessions on the border territories in the regions of Marche, Umbria, Abruzzi and Latium, due to donations made by local dynasties such as the Tiberti, Labro and Lavareto.<sup>46</sup> The Monteleone nunnery was originally a Poor Clares convent, founded by the Tiberti family. Napoleone passed it on to the Hospitallers somewhere between 1349 and 1364.<sup>47</sup> The first written evidence of the Hospitaller commandery in Monteleone is from 1373,<sup>48</sup> but its female convent is documented only from the mid- fifteenth century.<sup>49</sup>

Equally, Genoa is not very well documented. The Hospital of St John had existed there since 1151,<sup>50</sup> having one of the biggest and wealthiest commanderies in Italy. The papal enquiry of 1373 on the Hospital's personnel and assets is the first source to describe a "double monastery" in Genoa. Eight male brethren resided in the main building of the commandery, San Giovanni di Pré, and nine professed sisters in the hospice of San Leonardo, 60 meters away. A hospital for women also existed. It was not administered by the *sorores*, but by a *mulier stipendiata*.<sup>51</sup>

The nunnery's origins are unknown. Genoa is often used to exemplify the evolution of the religious vocation and spirituality of Hospitaller women: the initial intent to support the poor and the sick would later turn into a strictly cloistered

<sup>44</sup> Tommasi, "The Female Hospitallers," 256–257.

<sup>45</sup> Anthony T. Luttrell, "The Hospitaller Priory of Venice in 1331," in *Militia Sacra*, ed. Coli, De Marco, and Tommasi, 101–143, at 108; Mauro Zelli, *Narnate: storia di un territorio di frontiera tra Spoleto e Rieti dall' VIII al XIII secolo* (Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1997), 36; Stefano Vannozzi, "Gli stemmi dei Tiberti: accattivanti bufale e falsi misteri intorno all'arme di un'antica e potente famiglia monteleonese," *Leonessa e il suo Santo* 333 (2020): 41–44.

<sup>46</sup> Zelli, *Narnate*, 34–35.

<sup>47</sup> Tommasi, "The Female Hospitallers," 237; Vannozzi, "Gli stemmi," 42.

<sup>48</sup> Roma, Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede, Stanza Storica, M 1 C (2), f. 81r.

<sup>49</sup> Tommasi, "The Female Hospitallers," 236–237.

<sup>50</sup> Pavoni, "Attività e presenza," 79.

<sup>51</sup> Anthony T. Luttrell, "Gli Ospedalieri a Genova dall'inchiesta papale del 1373," in *Cavalieri di San Giovanni*, ed. Costa Restagno, 219–223, at 223; Gazzini, "L'ordine di S. Giovanni," 140; Pavoni, "Attività e presenza," 80–82.

life, which explains the introduction of cloistered nunneries.<sup>52</sup> Yet, there is no proof that the women living in the Order's houses between the end of the twelfth century and the thirteenth century were entirely dedicated to assistance roles. In the documented cases, the women in hospitals and hospices were not professed sisters but lay associates. Also, as we have seen, the foundation of Hospitaller nunneries did not follow this scheme: no hospitals and hospices were ever transformed into cloistered nunneries.

The case of two the Hospitaller female saints, Toscana and Ubaldesca, has sometimes been taken to illustrate this theory, depicting Ubaldesca taking care of the sick and the poor, and Toscana as a widow choosing the cloistered life. However, it seems probable that Toscana lived before Ubaldesca.<sup>53</sup> Regardless of her official hagiography, Ubaldesca was never directly tied to the Hospitallers in her lifetime. Thus, the Hospitaller model of female sanctity, based substantially on Toscana, Ubaldesca and Fleur of Beaulieu,<sup>54</sup> should be revisited and updated.

In Florence, developments can be witnessed by the end of the fourteenth century. As we have seen, a community of *sorores* lived in the former Templar commandery of San Jacopo. Its history remains unknown. In 1365, a group of five Hospitaller sisters lived not in San Jacopo but in San Niccolò dei Freri, 800 meters away, but – however probable it seems – it is not possible to establish a link between the two.<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, since 1370 the sisters administered a hospital, which might indicate that they did not live in seclusion.<sup>56</sup>

In 1391–1392, everything changed. During the travel of the anti-Grand Master Riccardo Caracciolo to Florence, five noblewomen of the city asked for his permission to enter the Hospital as professed sisters. Caracciolo replied affirmatively, and this was confirmed also by Pope Boniface IX in May 1392.<sup>57</sup> But the issue was presented as a new foundation of a Hospitaller nunnery, with no reference to any

<sup>52</sup> de Palma, *Il Consiglio*, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Tommasi, "Uomini e donne," 187.

<sup>54</sup> Paulette L'Hermite-Leclercq, "Fleur de Beaulieu (d. 1347), Saint of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem," in *Hospitaller Women*, ed. Luttrell and Nicholson, 209–231.

<sup>55</sup> It is necessary to take into consideration the possible effect of the 1348 plague, particularly hard on Florence, on the first female community: Enrica Viviani Della Robbia, *Nei monasteri fiorentini* (Florence: Sansoni, 1946), 25.

<sup>56</sup> Viviani Della Robbia, *Nei monasteri*, 105; Luttrell and Nicholson, "Introduction," 20; de Palma, *Il Consiglio*, 20.

<sup>57</sup> A transcription of the papal letter of 3 May 1392, originally conserved in Florence and known to some authors, was lost before 1946, cf. Paolo Minucci del Rosso, *Il monastero di San Giovannino dei Cavalieri: da un libro di ricordi (dal 1392 al 1746)* (Florence: Ufficio della Rassegna Nazionale, 1892), 35; Viviani Della Robbia, *Nei monasteri*, 107.

preexisting structures. The reasons were probably several, including the fact that the older community did not have legal documents attesting to its foundation. Undoubtedly, the leading factor was the prestige of the women, who belonged to the Florentine aristocracy. In Florence, maybe the wealthiest city in the West, and Pisa it is possible to find similarities with the urban centres of regions such as Provence, where women enjoyed considerable social prestige and could exercise economic power.<sup>58</sup>

The new nunnery, installed in San Niccolò dei Freri – the site of the former community – was guided by the noblewoman Piera Viviani, the *commendatrix* elected for her lifetime. It was a cloistered community. The original limit of five nuns was allowed to increase, but new admissions had to be approved by the Hospitaller prior of Pisa. The history of this community is known chiefly thanks to a compilation of archive sources made in the eighteenth century.<sup>59</sup> It remained active until the Napoleonic suppressions of 1812.

Except possibly for Genoa, all of the nunneries were created by incorporating preexisting communities into the Order of St John, at different times and regions and in various circumstances. As we have seen, the basic norms established in the foundation could be diverse. In some nunneries, the number of sisters was preestablished, in others not. Their lay founders controlled some, others were directly controlled by the local Hospitaller priors. Some were situated far from other possessions, while in some cases, it is possible to refer to “double monasteries”. Of course, there was no central administration of those nunneries, and they submitted to the local priors more or less strictly.

The norms regulating the sisters’ life inside such institutions can sometimes be retraced. In Penne and especially Perugia, the foundation deeds of the local nunneries list a series of primary conditions. At the same time, in Florence the nuns had statutes of their own, the Constitutions of Lionardo Bonafedi. They were written shortly after the re-founding of the nunnery, between 1395 and 1404,<sup>60</sup> along with pieces of “spiritual advice” to nuns. Interestingly, Bonafedi was not a priest but a high-ranking knight of the Order of St John. He shared the same social and cultural basis as the sisters, who were members of the Florentine aristocracy. His constitutions, published by Luigi Michele de Palma, consist of 25 chapters written in Italian, and spiritual advice is collected in no less than 40 chapters.<sup>61</sup> These are

<sup>58</sup> Carraz, “Présences et dévotions féminines,” 72.

<sup>59</sup> See Viviani della Robbia, *Nei monasteri*, 105–147; de Palma, *Il Consiglio*, 103–111.

<sup>60</sup> de Palma, *Il Consiglio*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–101.

the only medieval statutes of Italian nunneries known, as the other normative acts belong to the sixteenth century: the nunnery of Penne received its statutes in 1525, and new statutes for the Florence community were issued at the end of that century.<sup>62</sup>

The extant medieval statutes for Hospitaller sisterhoods in the West are not numerous. The fundamental source is the so-called Rule of Sigena, dating from October 1188.<sup>63</sup> A fascinating document, its 60 chapters follow the course of the day, from the nuns' awaking to bedtime, more in detail in chapters 31 and 38 (about meals and making their beds), and concentrating more generally on the liturgical aspects of conventual life. However, the Rule of Sigena was never disseminated beyond the monastery, and there was never an attempt to provide the Hospitaller sisters with specific statutes.<sup>64</sup> That is one of the reasons why it is not possible to speak about a "female branch" of the Order of St John.

The foundation acts of Penne and Perugia came into being more than a century after the Rule of Sigena, and the statutes of Florence over 200 years later. Consequently, when comparing their contents, we should take into account the evolutions in time – as seen, for example, in the later Hospitaller statutes. As mentioned, the Rule of Sigena focused mostly on liturgy (the subject of 32 chapters out of 60) and everyday life, including issues such as food, clothes, and care for the ill sisters. Three other chapters concern internal transgressions and solidarity, and two concern administration. Over two hundred years later, in Florence, the statutes focused on everyday life (eleven chapters out of 25) and liturgy, and also on transgressions and their punishment (five chapters), while dealing with administration and issues absent from the Rule of Sigena, such as the ceremony of admission of new sisters.

The head of every nunnery was an abbess, called *preceptrix* (Pisa and Perugia), *commendatrix* (Florence), or *priorissa* (Penne and Genoa). For the election process, the Italian convents did not follow the practice of Sigena. Maybe, this was

<sup>62</sup> Luttrell and Nicholson, "Introduction," 30; de Palma, *Il Consiglio*, 19, footnote 52. See also Luigi Michele De Palma, "Costituzioni di alcuni monastero femminili dell'Ordine di Malta del XVI sec.," *Studi Melitensi* 29 (2021): 93–121.

<sup>63</sup> *Cartulaire général de l'Ordre des Hospitaliers de S. Jean de Jérusalem*, vol. I, 1100–1200, ed. Joseph M. A. Delaville le Roulx (Paris: E. Leroux, 1894), 532–547 no. 859; Delaville Le Roulx, "Les Hospitalières," 139.

<sup>64</sup> Luttrell and Nicholson, "Introduction," 1–2: the rule of Sigena, contrary to the idea of Delaville Le Roulx, never became a general rule of the female branch of the Order.

inspired by the election procedure of the Hospital's grandmaster,<sup>65</sup> by which the chapter chose three of the most respected sisters. Those three then appointed an electoral assembly consisting of five sisters.<sup>66</sup> With Penne being the exception, where the founder exercised the right to designate the prioress, the election was made through a majority decision from the entire chapter. In Perugia, the *preceptrix* was elected for two years, and was usually reappointed after that. Elsewhere, an election was for life. However, the choice of abbess always required confirmation from the local Hospitaller prior. In Florence, if the chapter failed to run the election within a month, the decision fell to the prior of Pisa.

The sources give us but little information about the chaplains in those nunneries. The Florence statutes state nothing about them, whereas in Perugia chaplains were chosen by the nunnery founders, to keep the sisters under their control. Abbesses enjoyed more autonomy in relatively remote houses, such as Penne and probably Monteleone. Florence was original in that its statutes established that the *commendatrix* could be indicted and even punished if she failed to summon the convent chapter, which should be held every Friday. That would be considered a grave offence.

The structure of Italian nunneries was relatively straightforward. It was the contrary of Sigena where there was an array of functionaries, including a butler, sacristan, *cantrix*, several *ministras*, besides a *magistra puellarum* and *magistra adolescentis*, who were responsible for the teaching and conduct of the younger sisters.<sup>67</sup> In Perugia, there was a sub-prioress under the *preceptrix*. In Florence and similarly larger nunneries, the key figure was the *suora camerlenga* (chamberlainess), the only person at the convent to handle money; she administered the convent's economy and ledger. In Florence, the cloistered regime demanded two "sisters concierge" – Leonardo Bonafedi's advice being to opt for physically strong

<sup>65</sup> *Cartulaire général de l'Ordre des Hospitaliers de S. Jean de Jérusalem*, vol. II, 1201–1260, ed. Joseph M. A. Delaville le Roulx (Paris: E. Leroux, 1897), 35–36 (Statutes of Margat); see Anthony T. Luttrell, "The Hospitallers' early statutes," *Revue Mabillon*, new series 14 (2003): 9–11, at 21. The procedure was complicated: after the death of the master, an interim commander selected an election committee consisting of one priest, one knight and one sergeant; in turn, they selected a fourth member. The four then indicated a fifth member and so on, until a committee of 13 electors altogether was rounded up. In the Templar Order, the marshal summoned the chapter, then a "commander of the election" was chosen, indicating a further member. They then elected another two members and so on, until the number of 13 was reached: the committee had to consist of 8 knights, 8 sergeants and 1 priest, from different "nations" and countries: Henri de Curzon, *La Règle du Temple* (Paris: Renouard, 1886), 142–152.

<sup>66</sup> *Cartulaire général*, ed. Delaville le Roulx, I: 547 (Rule of Sigena, § 56).

<sup>67</sup> *Cartulaire général*, ed. Delaville le Roulx, I: 547 (Rule of Sigena, § 57).

women – who kept the convent keys and watched over the corridors at night. Another sister, the *referendaria*, controlled the entrance to the nunnery and the parlour.

At Sigena, the convent's internal hierarchy among the professed sisters is described in great detail. It was based on age, going from *puelle* to *puelle maiores*, through to *domine juniores* and finally *domine priores*. The Italian nunneries were different in that regard. Some sisters were considered “wiser” or “elder”, and sisters under 40 sometimes attracted suspicion. Yet, it seems that the professed sisters enjoyed a similar standing, and no distinction was made, as far as chapters were concerned, between *sanior* or *melior pars* and the other sisters. However, a noticeable difference existed between professed sisters and lay associates. The latter, defined as *commesse* in Florence, might be of humble origin. Not all of them could read, and their knowledge of the liturgy was often limited to the *Paternoster*. They were not allowed to leave the convent until they reached 40 years of age.<sup>68</sup>

In Florence, Lionardo Bonafedi was clearly inspired by the Hospitallers' Rule and statutes, and perhaps by the Rule of St Benedict to some extent. Consequently, unlike the sisters at Sigena, Bonafedi also applied the system of four levels of “faults”, which could be slight, serious, severe and most severe. The most common slight transgressions seem to have been the following: arriving late for mass or meals; making excessive noise; provoking laughter with gestures or words; disturbing others; and breaking glasses or dish wear. Serious transgressions included, for example, arguing with other sisters; engaging with men working at the convent; telling lies; disrespecting silence; sowing discord; insulting others with blasphemy; and scratching one's face in mourning after the death of a relative. More severe faults included talking to people from the outside, not confessing before communion, singing frivolous songs, dancing, yelling or crying so audibly as to be heard from the outside. The most severe faults were to keep money, to bring men into the monastery, to disobey and insult the abbess, to hit other sisters, to kill someone, and to engage in fornication. Punishment consisted of more or less prolonged periods of penitence and, in extreme cases, expulsion and lifetime prison.

As with all the normative acts of the military orders, the Florence statutes insisted on the value of internal solidarity.<sup>69</sup> Specific to the Florence nunnery, during the Friday chapters, the sisters self-reflected, pointing the finger at themselves, as penitence. The matter was so important as to merit a full chapter in the statutes.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> de Palma, *Il Consiglio*, 82 (*Costituzioni*, chapter IX).

<sup>69</sup> Toomaspoeg, “Templars, Hospitallers and Teutonic Knights,” 238–240.

<sup>70</sup> de Palma, *Il Consiglio*, 87–88 (*Costituzioni*, chapter XV).

In the *Costituzioni*, the seventh chapter ordered the nuns to do manual labour and avoid being idle.

Bonafedi's spiritual advice for the sisters at Florence was for them to comment on certain chapters in the statutes, and to offer general reflections on the religious life. Those reflections consist of a translation of Pseudo-Jerome's *Regula monacharum*, with minor and major modifications to the text.<sup>71</sup> Even if not entirely original, Bonafedi's advice bears a fascinating testimony to the male point of view on female religiosity. Pseudo-Jerome and Bonafedi both state: "Your gender is weak, fragile and volatile" and needs to be continuously restrained and corrected.<sup>72</sup> Yet, there is a reversal of the male rules that depict women as dangerous. The following examples are telling: "The voice of the man comes as a bolt from the devil to the woman", and "The lips of the man are poison to women". Lastly, "Male[s] of whatever condition should be a hideous monster to you."<sup>73</sup> The two authors offer an answer to such dangers: "Dear friends, become professed nuns and relish in this. Caring for a husband, children and the household will not be your trouble, nor any of the other difficulties in marriage."<sup>74</sup>

To conclude, the nunneries of the Order of St John in Italy evolved in different ways, and never became an autonomous branch of the Order. The presence of professed sisters in Hospitaller houses was no exception, but it took time until separate female convents were founded. Leaving the monastery of Sovereto aside, which probably did not have ties to the Hospitallers, the oldest of the Order's nunneries was probably Pisa, founded in the early thirteenth century. Penne was founded in 1291, Perugia in 1324, and Monteleone di Spoleto (and maybe Genoa) in the second half of the fourteenth century. The Florence nunnery was a preexisting community that related to the Templars. It is documented earlier in the fourteenth century, but was newly founded in 1391–1392.

As mentioned, none of these nunneries was entirely original. The Hospitaller Order's intentions were clear only with Pisa, where they took over the community founded by St Ubaldesca. Every other foundation stemmed from private initiatives. In Penne and Perugia, the lay founders retained some power over the

<sup>71</sup> de Palma, *Il Consiglio*, 29: the only original parts being the introduction and the first chapter. Consequently, the chapter I of *Regula monacharum* is the chapter 2 of *Consiglio* and so on: *Patrologia latina*, vol. 30 (Paris, 1865), 391–426. Chapter X of the *Regula monacharum* (*Patrologia latina*, vol. 30, 401) is missing from the *Consiglio*.

<sup>72</sup> de Palma, *Il Consiglio*, 51.

<sup>73</sup> de Palma, *Il Consiglio*, 52. All these are translations from *Regula Monacharum* (*Patrologia latina*, vol. 30, 407–409).

<sup>74</sup> *Patrologia latina*, vol. 30, 412; de Palma, *Il Consiglio*, 59.

nunneries, even though those cannot be considered institutions under *jus patronatus*, because the founders' rights were terminated at their death, not passed on to the heirs. The foundation of a Hospitaller nunnery allowed private individuals to make existing communities of pious women legal. For the Hospitallers themselves, such institutions were not always immediately useful. The economic revenues were not impressive, and supervising them took time and resources. The most significant advantage of nunneries was the links and connections created with the urban aristocracy of important cities such as Florence, Genoa, Perugia and Pisa. But the practice was not systematically applied to other urban centres where the Hospital was also present, for example, in Naples.

There have been attempts to categorise the Hospitaller sisters in Italy as *cavaliere*, a sort of female knights, or as *sponse Christi*, as opposed to *milites Christi*, that is the knights of the Order of St John. In reality, in all, many similarities can be seen with other cloistered female communities. The nunneries examined belong to the subject of female religiosity in the later middle ages, and convent life. The fact that they donned the Hospitaller habit, undoubtedly conferred great prestige on those women.

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