

The province “Alemannia“ in the middle ages. History, structure and possessions ¹

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Abstract

Beyond non-existing states, the common language was the connecting element of the medieval commanderies of the Order of Lazarus. The nine German-speaking houses were loosely united in the province of Alemannia including properties in today’s Germany and Switzerland. The oldest documented foundation is the Hospital of Mary Magdalene in Gotha (Thuringia). The Landgrave himself established it in 1223, continuously supported by his mother, St Elizabeth. During the same years the house of Seedorf near Zurich was founded, according to legend already by King Baldwin IV. But except of Gotha, the founding documents of all houses are partly imitated or not preserved. The houses had developed with territorial expansion due to donations, exchanges, acquisitions or division of accumulated properties. The order had regionally extended land ownerships, numerous ecclesiastical privileges, support of the local upper class and was sometimes bearer of feudal rights. Nevertheless, the possessions were often badly managed and were in debt. Even sales and indulgences did not lead to long-term success. The houses acted semi-independent because of internal disputes, so regional preceptors were established to strengthen the religious and common discipline. By the end of the 13th century the Swiss houses were increasingly turning into women’s monasteries, which were the only remaining Lazarites in the last decades. In Switzerland the plague and Reformation led to the dissolution. In Thuringia, the Order lost its

¹ This is the written version of the correspondent presentation based on the author’s German book *Die Lazariter in Alemannien. Mittelalterliche Ordenshäuser im deutschsprachigen Raum*, Norderstedt 2019. The scientific research includes the appropriate annotations.

properties through amalgamation with the Order of St John by the papal bull “*Nos igitur*”.

Medieval Germany and backgrounds

When we talk about medieval Germany, there’s the risk of imagining today’s state structures. In the Middle Ages today’s Germany had almost 500 sovereign territories: duchies, counties, local baronies and ecclesiastical principalities. Although today’s Switzerland was not so fragmented, there were about 35 free territories as well. In both countries some territories were fiercely contested and the imperial power restricted.

The Order entered this patchwork in the first quarter of the 13th century. As the empire was only a loose union, also the nine houses of the Order were laxly connected. Surely the different regional origin of the members and the social imprint couldn’t lead to a strong union and only the membership was the link. The people never talked about themselves as “German” but as Thuringian, Bavarian, etc. One could really name it an international Order in the same linguistic area.

Nine houses are known today: Gotha, Wackenhhausen, Braunsroda, Breitenbich and Sangerhausen in Germany (resp. Thuringia), Seedorf, Schlatt and Gfenn in Switzerland (resp. the “upper houses” as Schlatt is part of today’s Germany) and the special institution of Megersheim. The documents only mention lepers in a very few places. Comparatively, there were 350 leprosariums run by state, cities or churches.²

² See map at: Dankwart Leistikow. *Bauformen der Leproserie im Abendland*. In: Jörn Henning Wolf. *Aussatz, Lepra, Hansenkrankheit*. Ein Menschheitsproblem im Wandel, pp.103-149 [p. 117].

When talking about the age of the individual houses we encounter archival problems. In most cases the founding documents are no longer available, if they ever existed. On the other hand, there are forgeries. In addition, some houses had developed with territorial expansion due to donations, exchanges, acquisitions or division of accumulated properties by existing commanderies. We do not know anything about leper knights. A recruiting of the sick for the crusade fights would have led an unable long and dangerous journey from Western Europe to the Holy Land.

Preceptory Thuringia

Gotha house

The oldest documented foundation is the Hospital of Mary Magdalene in Gotha (Thuringia). The legend says that there was a member of the Order in the entourage of the Landgravine Elisabeth of Hungary, who was later venerated as a saint. Although Elisabeth was not the founder, leprosy care had of great importance to her, as became clear in the canonization process. The Landgrave himself, her husband, established it the hospital in 1223,³ continuously supported by his wife. Whether the commandery came directly into the hands of the Order, or later, isn't documented. The commandery was probably the largest and most important house in the entire region, model and mother of other houses, and seat of a powerful commander.

Financially it was doing well, the community even took care of a second leprosarium, the Nesselhof. Numerous donations of land and interest payments have been handed down. Also, the chapel of the hospital was equipped with privileges, such as indulgences. The supervision of the house was done by the comital family. Even the Duke

³ Diploma at Sylvia Weigelt. *Elisabeth von Thüringen in Quellen des 13. bis 16. Jahrhunderts* (Quellen zur Geschichte Thüringens 30), Erfurt 2008, pp.23/24.

of Saxony, to whom Thuringia had fallen in the meantime, called for donations to build a new bell tower of the church in 1455. Two papal interventions also underline the outstanding character of the house.

In 1294, the prior of the Saint-Hilaire monastery in Poitiers, France, was commissioned by Pope Celestine V - shortly before his resignation from the pontificate - to return unjustly sold goods to the Order on pain of penalties. In 1404, Heinrich Marquard was appointed preceptor by the dean of Erfurt by command of Pope Boniface IX himself. In the middle of the 15th century, however, the council of the city of Gotha had to intervene, as the house was no longer financially viable. All attempted rescues failed.⁴

In addition, there were different bulls which ordered the amalgamation with the Order of St. John⁵ in 1489. It took two years until the court of the prince bishop of Mainz⁶ judged the bulla had to be noted. Bishop Guiliano della Rovere of Ostia, the later Pope Julius II, was involved and ordered the transfer of the last commander to the Knights Hospitallers.⁷ As the Order of St. John had around 110 commanderies in Germany the financial win was marginal.

⁴ Several legal documents can be found in the City Records (Stadtarchiv) of the City of Gotha under "*Urkunden des Hospitals Maria Magdalena*".

⁵ Until 1538 (when Margrave John II of Brandenburg became Protestant) the "Order of St. John" or "Knights Hospitallers" was the common name for the Order of Malta.

⁶ The Bishop of Mainz was not only a church leader, but one of the most powerful persons in the whole Holy Roman Empire of German Nation. At least the compilation of German laws in 1220, the "*Sachsenspiegel*" named him the highest of all bishops bearing the right to be a member of the Electoral College to elect the German king. In the Golden Bulla of 1356, he was granted the final and possibly decisive vote as chancellor of Germany.

⁷ Letter 11.xi.1500. In: Wilhelm Ernst Tentzel. *Supplementum Historiae Gothanae*, vol. 1, Jena 1701, pp.707/708.

Thuringian houses

Not everywhere the Order could count on the support of the powerful sovereign. They had to lean on local noble families and partly on the church. Wackenhäuser (1268), Braunsroda (1230/1280), Breitenbich (1267) and Sangerhausen (1252) were the four other houses in Thuringia. Walter Rödel, who published a booklet about the Order in 1974, still assumed that the commandery was Gotha and that the other houses depended on her. According to the current state of research, however, this cannot be followed. In various documents the commanders of the five houses had an equal rank in legal documents and seals.⁸ Without talking about the details of those houses, let me point out a few developments or curiosities:

Wackenhäuser: In 1268 the abbey of Fulda enfeoffed the Order with goods. In return, a chapel and altar were to be built and 10 pounds of wax were to be paid annually. 1489 the destroyed altar had not been rebuilt yet. Some years also no wax had been delivered and the commander was even punished with an anathema.⁹

Braunsroda: 1230 the nobles of Heldrungen, certified by archbishop Siegfried of Mainz, donated goods to the "brothers of St. Lazarus of the parts on this side of the sea". Within 50 years an own commandery had developed, because 1280 "the brothers of Braunsroda of the Order St. Lazari" bought goods as it is said in a

⁸ Walter Rödel. *Werden und Wirken des Lazarus-Ordens. Ein Überblick mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Ordenshäuser in Deutschland und der Schweiz*, Köln, 1974.

⁹ See i.a. diplomas from 10.xi.1268 and 28.vi.1489. In: Johann Friedrich Schannat. *Fuldischer Lehn-Hof*, Frankfurt a.M. 1727, pp.263/264 resp. pp.364/365.

diploma.¹⁰ So a regional, provincial, structure had developed in Germany.

Breitenbich: The Order took over a partially destroyed monastery of the Cistercians and accumulated wide properties around.¹¹ For some years the house was also the seat of the land commander respectively the prior provincial. The properties included a second inhabited courtyard. In addition to agricultural land, there was a cattle ranch and a cheese dairy. The diocesan court in Mainz used the house temporary as a court.¹² After the amalgamation the commander kept his office within the Order of St. John.

Sangerhausen: The Order maintained a leprosarium, perhaps because Gotha was 100 km away and thus not in the direct catchment area for the sick. It had been provided with goods by anti-King Wilhelm II. of Holland. 1266 the documents spoke last about sick people, probably the hospital had been abandoned. Unfortunately, numerous documents are missing, which let construct a further development.¹³ However, it was continued by the Hospitallers after 1489.

¹⁰ Diploma 11.vi.1280. In: Caspar Sagittarius. *Historia Gotha*. Jena 1700, pp.238/239.

¹¹ See: Anna Egler. Das Zisterzienserinnenkloster Anrode und die Zisterzienserinnengründung Breitenbich. *Eichsfeld-Jahrbuch*, 2012, 20: Duderstadt pp.5-66.

¹² See: Bernhard Opfermann. Die Klöster des Eichsfeldes in ihrer Geschichte, *Heiligenstadt*, 1998, pp.141/142.

¹³ See: i.a. Friedrich Schmidt. *Geschichte der Stadt Sangerhausen in zwei Theilen*, Sangerhausen, 1906, vol. 1, p. 834ff.

Preceptory “Upper houses”

In the Swiss preceptory every commandery has its own legend. One could claim that Switzerland has been often quite democratic and liberal. Only here women were able to become nearly equal members of the Order and sisters dominated the three houses quickly.

Seedorf house

The foundation of Seedorf cannot be dated exactly. Former historians fluctuate between 1197 and 1225, based on the life of its founder, Knight Arnold von Brienz. Two legends have been handed down: Knight Arnold is said to have returned from the crusade and rested under a palm tree. In a dream he was asked by a virgin and a child to build a nunnery here. Apart from the fact that only a few palm trees grow in Switzerland, the men dominated the house. Another legend even claims a royal foundation. Baldwin IV is said to have travelled to the West to be cured of leprosy at the place where his horse kneeled – non surprisingly this knee fall had happened to Seedorf.¹⁴

Seedorf must have had a large community, 40 brothers died only in the 30 years after 1280 according to the obituary, the *Necrologium*. The origin of these brothers allows conclusions about their origins in the regional upper class, both nobility, ministerialis and wealthy farmers. The same can be observed for the sisters who appeared later. There are also auxiliary nurses and brothers, who were responsible for work around the monastery and hospital without being full members. The house must also have been doing well financially. 470 annual mass stipends for the house

¹⁴ Legends see: Helmi Gasser. *Das Kloster St. Lazarus in Seedorf, UR*. Gesellschaft für Schweizerische Kunstgeschichte, Bern 1987.

are documented, which came from the entire surrounding area of the monastery, in addition to five papal bullas.¹⁵

The new laws of the statute book showed that after the fall of Acre the monastery had developed into a purely spiritual order. Already since 1287 women have been explicitly mentioned, at the latest in 1346 a mistress acts in documents for the house. After a visitor was appointed in 1517 to ensure compliance with the rules of the Order, the plague killed the remaining sisters. In 1559 Benedictine nuns settled here.¹⁶

Schlatt house

The foundation of the Schlatt is also legendary. Gottfried von Staufen, who had got to know the Order with his son Otto and his brother Werner during their participation in the first crusade, promised a donation because of their admiration. After they returned – they were ministerialis of the Duke of Zähringen – they forgot about their promise. Heinrich von Ambringen was sent to them from the master in Jerusalem to remember and admonish. So, the family finally donated properties to the Order.¹⁷

A document of 1220 was already unmasked as a forgery in 1886, due to the witnesses we can suppose a foundation in the 1240s or 50s. Since 1277 there were sisters, like in the Jerusalem house.¹⁸ The support of only

¹⁵ See: Brigitte Degler-Spengler. Lazariter und Lazaritinnen. *Helvetia Sacra IV*, vol. 7, Basel 2006, S.840-943, [pp.918/919].

¹⁶ Diplomas from iii.1346 and 7.v.1418 in: Gall Morel. Aelteste Urkunden des St. Lazarus Spitals zu Seedorf im Lande Uri. 1243-1518. *Der Geschichtsfreund*, 1856, 12: pp.1-53 [p.26 resp. p.44].

¹⁷ Adolf Poinsignon. Die heilkräftige Quelle und das Haus des hl. Lazarus zu Schlatt i Br. *Schau ins Land*, 1884, 11: pp.9-21 [p.11f].

¹⁸ Aloys Schulte. Die Anfänge der Kommende des Lazaritenritterordens zu Schlatt im Br. *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins*, 1886, 40: pp.462-470.

one family and the regional support for the Order of St. John led into financial problems. 1362 the house was highly indebted sold to the Hospitallers. The document listed 264 gold guilders, 18 marks silver and 172 bushels of grain, which they owed to monasteries, towns, the Count of Freiburg and even the Grand Master. The St. Johns commander also talked about personal differences between the members, the inadequate management by the commanders and the bad management of the estates.¹⁹

Gfenn house

Finally, legends about Gfenn. The founding legend of Seedorf also radiated to the house in Gfenn near Dübendorf in the canton of Zurich. After Seedorf had appeared to King Baldwin in a dream, and he had given the Lazarite rule to an existing convent, he rushed to the emperor. At Lake Greifensee, near Dübendorf, his horse refused to move on, which he interpreted as "a mark of his desire to build a monastery there". Thereupon he founded a convent and ordered two sisters from Seedorf to Gfenn. A second legend says that the king controlled the building of the house on his way back from the emperor and found the counts of Rapperswill supporting the new monastery.²⁰

The real foundation date can be dated between 1234 and 1250, probably also for men and women. In 1346 brothers are mentioned for the last time. The house took a new short-term upswing. The practise that

¹⁹ Different diplomas can be found in: Karl Rieder. Beitrag zu den wirtschaftlichen und kirchlichen Zuständen in der Diözese Konstanz in der zweiten Hälfte des 14. Jahrhunderts. Mit urkundenlichen Beilagen. *Freiburger Diözesanarchiv*, 1901, 29: pp. 245-254.

²⁰ Arnold Nürschler. *Die Lazaritenhäuser in Gfenn bei Dübendorf und Schlatt. Kanton Zürich (Mitteilungen der Antiquarischen Gesellschaft in Zürich 9)*, Zürich, 1853-1856, pp.5-7.

goods were transferred, but the care of relatives was to be financed from these goods during their lifetime was frequently observed. Even daughters of preceptors are mentioned, a non-legal but often seen violations of the celibacy.²¹

Over the years, however, the house had developed a life of its own, which had increasingly isolated itself from the entire Order. Even the Grand Master Pierre de Ruaux felt obliged to intervene. In a letter he commanded the sisters of the houses Gfenn and Seedorf to select a "good and faithful priest of mature age and recommendable change", to take him in and to elect him within a few months to the new caretaker resp. supervisor. The reasons weighed heavily, there is talk of "harmful splits and wars between the caretakers". The sisters were asked, which they apparently hadn't done, to look for a confessor, to live in the monasteries, to dress in religious garments, to go to church not to interfere in any foreign affairs. If they repented and confessed, he granted them indulgence.²²

In 1413 the town council of the City of Zurich was also granted supervision. This went in part so far that in 1496 the council appointed a new commander. He was in fact violent, had to be dismissed and was convicted to bear the costs of the medical treatment of the violated sisters.²³ In 1525, during the Reformation, the possessions of the Order fell to a leprosarium of Spannweide.

²¹ See examples at the same place, p. 12. Schreiner presented a study on monastic life in the middle ages in Germany including the "family" problems, Klaus Schreiner. *Gemeinsam leben. Spiritualität, Lebens- und Verfassungsformen klösterlicher Gemeinschaften in Kirche und Gesellschaft des Mittelalters*, Berlin, 2013.

²² Diploma 8.xii.1413, in Morel, *op. cit.*, pp.37-40.

²³ See: Nürschler, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

Organisation and prior provincial

What is striking about all three houses is that even though there were only women left, and they elected their own mistresses, a male preceptor was needed for legal actions. The province's division into preceptories was probably intended to avoid legal disputes, the possibility of arbitration in inner affairs and ensured a link to the headquarters in Boigny. However, there were problems of acceptance as the preceptor. Usually he was the commander of a house and therefore not always neutral. Although individual houses within the region always dominated his power was not uncontroversial, as shown on several disputes.

The ninth house, Megersheim, is closely related to the organisation of the Order within the province but isn't comparable to the other houses. The properties came to the Order by way of exchange with possessions in Nierstein. It seems that since it was not manageable from the far away houses, it became headquarters of the prior provincial. Around 1250 the Order had received an estate here and administered it as an independent commandery.²⁴ But the estate, which only existed for about 60 years, was not financially viable. 1316 it was sold due to large debts on command of the grandmaster himself.²⁵

Also, a prior provincial or visitor, as he was called sometimes, was no longer mentioned afterwards. He was during his existence involved in greater financial transactions, represented the grandmaster and was –

²⁴ See: Georg Schneider Friedrich Wagner. *Die vormaligen geistlichen Stifte im Großherzogthum Hessen*, Bd. 2, Darmstadt 1872, p.514.

²⁵ Diploma 7.ix.1316. In: Valentin Ferdinand von Gudenus. *Codex diplomaticus anecdotorum*, vol. 2, Göttingen 1747, p.472.

according to the Seedorf statue book – involved in the appointment of commanders.²⁶

Probably the structure of largely independent houses, under the supervision of the preceptor, had proved its worth. The Order in Boigny was far away, the houses often had nothing more to do with leprosy. In the end it was about self-administration and monasticism. A military organisation was no longer needed in the German-speaking area, the province of Alemannia.

²⁶ See Statue Book: Gall Morel. Die ältesten Statuten für die Lazaritenklöster Seedorf, im Gfenn, und in Slatte. *Der Geschichtsfreund*, 1847, 4; pp.119-158 [p. 143].