

Chapter 11

The Knights of the Portuguese Order of Christ on the Island of Madeira (1640–1755): A Socio-historical Approach¹

Fernanda Olival

With the agreement of the papacy, when the Templars were abolished, the King of Portugal founded the Order of Christ in 1319 with the same resources that had belonged to the Templars. The Portuguese king was doing precisely what the king of Aragon had done when he established the Order of Montesa in 1317, with the incomes of the Templars in Aragon and València. This new Portuguese military order was devoted to the fight against the Moors. Over the long existence of the Order of Christ, this ideal changed somewhat, but it survived as a label that could identify the Order. However, and paradoxically, this label bore very little relation to the actual life of the knights. Until the end of the early modern period, the real experience of combat of the Order of Christ was very limited, as compared with the Order of Saint John and its active life in the Mediterranean. Particularly from the late fifteenth century, when the Order of Christ came under royal tutelage (1495), the award of habits became a way to reward services rendered, especially military services.² By the sixteenth century, the idea that the services rendered were a condition to achieve the habit had consolidated. Services had to be performed by the candidate, or by his relatives, prior to joining the Order. Until 1706, there were no restrictions to the type of service that could be remunerated with insignias of the military orders in Portugal. After 1706, however, only military deeds or services rendered in the royal household or in the crown's civil careers, such as judges of the high court and diplomatic services, could be rewarded by the King with a habit, a commandery, lands or other distinctions.

Of course, when someone was awarded the habit by the king – who was also Master of the Order – he still had to qualify through the background investigations (*habilitações*) into the purity of blood and nobility to be able to bear the insignia.

¹ Research for this article was carried out within the scope of the project PTDC/HAH/64160/2006 – FCT (*Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia* – Portuguese Department to promote the advancement of Scientific and Technological knowledge), Portugal.

² Fernanda Olival, 'Structural changes within the 16th-century Portuguese Military Orders', *e-Journal of Portuguese History*, 2 (2004), online: http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese_Brazilian_Studies/ejph/.

These proofs of nobility were fundamental requirements from 1570 onwards, according to the Papal Bull of 18 August of that year.³ Because the medieval vows of chastity and poverty had been set aside, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a Knight of the Order of Christ was a noble like any other in Portuguese society: he could marry and dispose of his assets and property.

Within a few decades of the Portuguese settlement on Madeira, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, the patronage of the archipelago was given to the Order of Christ. Aside from this, the influence exercised by the Order on Madeira was no different from what occurred on the mainland. Patronage meant that the Order could nominate the ecclesiastical staff in the churches of Madeira and the island of Porto Santo, and that the Master would receive an ecclesiastical tax (*dízimo*, i.e. tenth). In 1514 the town of Funchal, in Madeira, became the headquarters of a new diocese; it is worth noting that between 1514 and 1777, only three bishops belonged to the Order. In 1514 the patronage of the Order in Madeira was transformed by the Papal Bull of 12 June, *pro excellenti praeeminentia*, which founded the new bishopric.⁴ The bishops would be nominated by the king as king, while the canons of the new cathedral would be nominated by the king acting as the Master of the Order. King Emmanuel I, with papal support, sought such a solution for two reasons: first, because the Order had an extensive patronage network overseas and was under royal tutelage only for the life of the king and not in perpetuity and, second, because the Order of Christ did not have enough clergymen to staff all the churches under its jurisdiction. In 1551, the Order of Christ turned into a perpetual tutelage of the kings of Portugal, but it was difficult to change the rules of patronage. From 1529 onwards, the Convent of Tomar, headquarters of the Order, was transformed into a monastic space, where the friars led a cloistered life and could not lay claim to the ecclesiastical benefices that the Order had on the mainland or overseas. The situation of the knights or the persons that wanted to be knights was quite different. The military services performed in North Africa or in the ocean fleet were the most valued way to get the habit or a commandery.

The Portuguese Atlantic islands were particularly vulnerable in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In about 1717, a Jesuit born in the Azores wrote that ‘each of these Islands is always a perpetual border, with real war against Moors, corsairs (with whom we never have peace), and against [European] nations hostile to Portugal’.⁵ It was possible to say the same of Madeira and of Porto Santo, the most thinly populated island of this archipelago, which had been frequently

³ *Corpo Diplomático Portuguez contendo os actos e relações políticas e diplomáticas de Portugal com as diversas potencias do mundo desde o seculo XVI até os nossos dias* (Lisbon, 1862–1959), vol. XI, pp. 630–40.

⁴ This Papal Bull can be found in *Corpo Diplomático Portuguez*, vol. I, pp. 257–60.

⁵ *Historia insulana das ilhas a Portugal sugeytas no Oceano Occidental*, ed. Antonio Cordeiro (Angra do Heroísmo, 1981), p. 522.

attacked by pirates and corsairs in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁶ This being so, was it easy to get the habit of a military order in Madeira? What was the social profile of these insular knights? What did the habit represent in local society? It is difficult to know precisely the number of knights who were born or lived in the archipelago. Almost all of the background investigations prior to the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 are lost. The Chancellery of the Order, where the formal letters for the reception of the habit were registered still exists, but these books rarely indicate the place of birth or the abode of the new knight. However, they do inform us where the ceremonies to receive the habit were performed. It is through these elements and cross-references from various sources, including those relating to services, that it becomes possible to provide an approximate number of the new Knights of the Order of Christ in Madeira (see Table 11.1).

Table 11.1 New knights born or living in Madeira (1641–1755)

Year	Number of knights born or living in Madeira	% of the total of knights of the Order
1641–1650	9	1.2
1651–1660	4	0.5
1661–1670	9	0.8
1671–1680	7	0.7
1681–1690	5	0.6
1691–1700	6	0.6
1701–1710	2	0.3
1711–1720	0	0.0
1721–1730	6	0.5
1731–1740	6	0.6
1741–1750	2	0.2
1751–1755	4	0.7
Total	60	0.5

Source: ANTT, *Chancelaria da Ordem de Cristo* and ANTT, *Habilitações da Ordem de Cristo*.

⁶ Jorge Valdemar Guerra, ‘A Ilha do Porto Santo e o corso argelino no Atlântico’, *Isleña*, 23 (1998), pp. 179–208; Jorge Valdemar Guerra, ‘O saque dos Argelinos à Ilha do Porto Santo em 1617’, *Isleña*, 8 (1991), pp. 57–78; Nelson Veríssimo, *Relações de poder na sociedade madeirense do século XVII* (Funchal, 2000), p. 297.

Most of these knights received the habit on the island (see Table 11.2). More were awarded in the seventeenth century (a total of 40, representing approximately 0.10% of the population of the island) than in the eighteenth century until 1755 (only 20 or 0.04% of the population). In mainland Portugal the habit of the Order was given out more frequently in the same period (maybe 0.3 % of the population).⁷ In general, in seventeenth-century Madeira, the insignia was obtained for services performed in the war against the Dutch in Brazil and Angola or in the war against the Spanish in Portugal. Some had also taken part in the struggle against pirates and corsairs around the archipelago.

Due to the wine trade, Madeira was strongly connected to the South Atlantic. From 1621 onwards, Madeira was able to send two ships directly to trade in Brazil.⁸ The island often exported wine that was not going directly to Brazil, but to Angola, where it was traded for slaves who were then sold in exchange for sugar in Brazilian ports. This sugar was important in maintaining Madeira's industry of preserved fruit. It was for these reasons that there was so much involvement with the defence of Brazil and Angola in the seventeenth century. In the following century, service was most commonly rendered in local militias, a path followed by a number of individuals pursuing an administrative career, especially in the Royal Exchequer in Madeira. It is important to note that after 1706 services made in the militia were not rewarded, except when rendered in real warfare. However, seven months later this regulation was changed for extra-European territories, including the Atlantic Islands. In these areas militias were so important to defence and security that the Portuguese Crown recognised the need to continue to reward it.⁹ In Madeira, there were 77 of these companies in 1646, and 75 in 1688.¹⁰ This was a huge number compared with mainland Portugal, where the main militia posts were elected by the municipalities. By contrast, in Madeira they were appointed by the governor, which provided an important opportunity for patronage and favouritism.

Nevertheless, it was not easy to obtain the habit in this insular context. The same applied to the Azores: In the Atlantic islands, from 1671 onwards, it was necessary to have 12 years of service in order to request payment from the Crown for services. The same number of years was required for services in mainland Portugal and in Brazil (by contrast, eight years were sufficient in India and five years in Magazan, in North Africa). To receive commanderies for services in Madeira was also almost impossible, especially in the eighteenth century, when the war in Brazil against the Dutch had ended. More relevant services were required to

⁷ Fernanda Olival, *As Ordens Militares e o Estado Moderno: honra, mercê e venalidade em Portugal (1641–1789)* (Lisbon, 2001), p. 570.

⁸ Alberto Vieira, *A vinha e o vinho na História da Madeira. Séculos XV e XX* (Funchal, 2003), pp. 341–2.

⁹ Feliciano Da Cunha França, *Additiones aureaeque illustrationes, ad librum primum secundae partis Practicae Lusitanae Emmanuelis Mendes de Castro*, II (Coimbra, 1755), appendix, doc. LI; BNP, *Pombalina* 122, fl. 310.

¹⁰ Veríssimo, *Relações de poder*, p. 328.

be awarded a commandery and these were generally reserved for the aristocracy. From a social perspective, being noble was enough to join the Order of Christ, which meant that the candidate, his parents and grandparents had not performed any kind of manual labour. Being *fidalgo*, that is, with noble blood inherited from ancestors, was not necessary. Nevertheless, social status was also rewarded. In 1611, only 18 per cent of the commanderies of the three Portuguese military orders (Avis, Christ and Santiago) were in the hands of the titled nobility, but between 1828 and 1832, the same group held 82 per cent.¹¹

Indeed, the social profile of these knights born on or living in Madeira was not high. Twenty per cent of those who became a knight could only do so because they achieved a royal dispensation to make up for their non-noble status: nine had manual labourer backgrounds, one was born illegitimate and two did not know all of their ancestors. Diogo Fernandes Branco was a wealthy New Christian merchant, but his problem was not reported. He joined the Order without any dispensation. Overall, Knights of Christ from Madeira were mainly from the local nobility, individuals in the process of being ennobled and in some cases from traditional local families with important entailed estates (*morgadios*), but this last social sector was poorly represented and the persons that comprised it did not belong to the aristocracy.

At the end of the first half of the eighteenth century the habit of the Order of Christ did not have a strong impact on local criteria of distinction. These criteria continued to be: possessing an entailed estate; holding significant posts in the Municipality, like 'juiz ordinário' (that is a judge for civil and criminal offences who did not possess a university degree in law and was elected by local notables to hold the position for one year) or 'vereador' (alderman, also elected for one year by local notables), or in the local poverty relief (*Misericórdia*); marrying within the local elite; and being a 'familiar' of the Inquisition (a group with generally few overlaps with the Knights of Christ and with closer ties to the local notables in the town of Funchal). The habit was connected to the Crown, but the king was far from these islands. Local service also meant little to the Crown. The same situation occurred with local servants in Brazil or in the Azores. Was this situation typical of distant peaceful territories? It seems it was and only changed if the area became threatened by conflict. The king as Master had a hierarchy to reward services, and this hierarchy did not favour those who lived in these islands, with only their small troubles, when compared with the decisive attacks to strategic points of the Empire. At the same time, this attitude of the political centre helped to consolidate the local criteria of distinction. They were also the product of isolation and distance.

In short, Madeira had more Knights of the Order of Christ in the second half of the seventeenth century when it was linked to the recovery of Brazil and Angola,

¹¹ Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro, 'Os comendadores das Ordens Militares (1668–1832): perspectivas de uma investigação', in *As Ordens Militares em Portugal e no Sul da Europa: actas do II Encontro sobre Ordens Militares* (Lisbon, 1997), p. 222.

due to its commercial interests, than in the first half of the following century. After the war against the Dutch in the Atlantic and against the Habsburgs in mainland Portugal, its inhabitants saw their main stage of activity reduced to the defence of the islands against the attacks of pirates and corsairs in the Archipelago. This meant a type of war that was undervalued by the Crown when it came to the award of the habit. Many persons who received the insignia in Madeira were not really noble. Twenty per cent needed a royal dispensation to bear the habit and the vast majority of the traditional local families never achieved this distinction in that period. In this context, the traditional elite contributed to reinforce local criteria of distinction where the insignia was not very relevant. In the eighteenth century the ecclesiastic patronage over the archipelago continued to be in the hands of the Order of Christ, but the Order never greatly influenced the social life of these islands. Madeira was not Malta, and the Order of Christ evolved very differently from the Order of Saint John.

Table 11.2 List of knights born or living in Madeira according to the year they received the habit (1641–1755)

SOURCES		Name	Place where the habit was received	Year
ANTT, Chancelaria da Ordem de Cristo	ANTT, Habilitação da Ordem de Cristo			
L° 34,115–116v	A-49-53	António de Freitas da Silva	Brasil	1641
L° 25,198–199v		Matias de Mendonça de Vasconcelos	Madeira	1643
L° 24,203–204		Nuno de Sousa Pereira	Madeira	1645
L° 24,331v–332v		Jorge Moniz de Meneses	Madeira	1646
L° 35,438–439		Brás de Freitas da Silva	Madeira	1647
L° 35,315v–316	F-34-49	Francisco de Bethencourt de Sá	Funchal	1647
L° 40,155v–156	F-34-24	Francisco de Andrade	Madeira	1648
L° 40,134v–135v	M-48-9	Matias Lopes	Luz	1648

L° 40,236–237	A-53-118	Aires de Ornelas de Vasconcelos	Brasil	1649
L° 38,449–451		Francisco Berenguer de Cominhana	Funchal	1655
L° 42,57–58	A-49-95	António de Herédia	Algarve	1656
L° 42,87v–88		Francisco de França Barbosa	Madeira	1656
L° 51,35v–36v		João de Velois	Tomar	1658
L° 47,177v–178v		José da França Berenguer	Madeira	1661
L° 47,263rv		Inácio da Câmara Leme	Madeira	1662
L° 18,337–338		Diogo Fernandes Branco	Madeira	1665
L° 45,328–329		Filipe Gentil	Madeira	1666
L° 45,90v–91		João de Freitas da Silva	Pernambuco	1666
L° 50,205rv	F-34-85	Francisco de Castro Berenguer	Madeira	1667
L° 56,162v–163	G-6-82	Gaspar Ferreira do Souto	Madeira	1669
L° 56,61rv	J-93-122	João de Velloui da Guerra	Luz	1669
L° 46,140v–141v		Inácio da Costa de Vasconcelos	Madeira	1670
L° 46,198v–199v	A-46-87	Antão Lopes	Tomar	1671
L° 53,272rv		Domingos Martins Pereira	Baía	1675
L° 54,75–76		Manuel Teixeira Delgado	Madeira	1676
	A-42-7	António Gonçalves de Ferreira		1677
L° 69,343v–344v	D-12-102	Diogo Valente	Rio de Janeiro	1680
L° 69,266–267		Francisco de Albuquerque Teles	Madeira	1680
L° 69,360rv		Roberto Vilhovirei	Tomar	1680

L° 73,126v–127		Francisco Berenguer Lomilhana	Madeira	1681
L° 73,189–190		Inácio de Bethencourt	Madeira	1682
	M-33-10	Manuel de Freitas Barreto		1682
L° 66,142–143		Manuel de Sequeira de Gouveia	Madeira	1686
L° 79,297–298		Jorge Correia de Bethencourt	Madeira	1688
L° 52,53v–54v		Baltazar de Bulhões de Meneses	Funchal	1691
L° 52,111v–112v		João da Câmara Leme	Madeira	1691
L° 52,102–103		João de Bethencourt Henriques	Funchal	1691
L° 52,153v–155		Lázaro Alberto	Funchal	1691
L° 60,53rv	F-34-169	Francisco Gomes de Góis	Tomar	1695
L° 60,262v–263	R-1-37	Roberto Velouy	Funchal	1696
L° 74,346v–347		Bartolomeu de Sá Bethencourt	Funchal	1702
L° 97,247–248		José de Sequeira	Tomar	1706
L° 139,205v–206v		Pedro de Faria de Abreu	Funchal	1721
L° 170,202v–203v		Aires de Ornelas de Vasconcelos	Luz	1723
L° 173,419–420v		Diogo Luis de Bethencourt Esmeraldo	Funchal	1727
L° 182,216v–218		Francisco da Costa Freire	Funchal	1727
L° 192,40v–41v		José Rebelo de Vadre	Funchal	1729
L° 183,355–356v	D-13-96	Domingos da Silva de Carvalho	Funchal	1730
L° 93,145–147	F-2-8	Francisco de Almeida e Silva	Rio de Janeiro	1732
L° 215,149–150,165	M-40-90	Manuel de Ornelas de Vasconcelos	Angola	1735

L° 221,415–416		António Bethencourt da Câmara	Tomar	1736
L° 196,76–77	M-46-47	Manuel Teixeira de Castro	Madeira	1736
L° 209,270v–273	B-3-2	Bartolomeu de Freitas Esmeraldo	Rio de Janeiro	1738
L° 206,212v–214v		Nicolau Giraldo de Freitas Barreto	Madeira	1738
L° 227,199–200	J-47-12	Jacinto Acchioli	Roma	1747
L° 235,96v–97v	L-17-100	Luis António Esmeraldo de Castro	Madeira	1748
L° 264,141rv		Domingos Afonso Barroso	Madeira	1752
L° 264,81v–82v		Pedro Henriques da Câmara Leme	Madeira	1752
L° 274,96–97	J-12-12	João José de Vasconcelos Bethencourt e Sá Machado	Madeira	1754
L° 274,342v–343v	F-3-4	Filipe Acchioli Ferraz e Noronha	Madeira	1755

