REELING IN THE EELS AT LA TRINQUETAILLE NEAR ARLES*

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While records preserved by the Order of the Hospitallers are usually associated with histories of crusade and reconquest, the military religious orders also had many properties and small communities in the west as well. The archival documents about land-holding that these western communities produced, much like those created by other monastic and clerical groups of the time, can have considerable interest for western European history. This is particularly the case for those communities located in areas like the lower Rhône river valley and its delta, the Camargue. It is possible that surviving records for the military religious Orders are thicker on the ground for this than for any other single region in western Europe.1 It was here at Aigues-Mortes that Louis IX (1214–1270) built the embarkation port for his crusade.2 Both Templars and Hospitallers had major headquarters at Saint-Gilles and the Hospitallers in support of the crusade would engulf many earlier pious foundations made for the care of local populations into the Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem. Such Hospitaller foundations in the Camargue and lower Rhône valley found places in the interstices between other religious foundations of the region because the delta region was not only an embarkation point to the East, but a major internal frontier. The regrouping of peasant populations from more isolated areas into the vicinity of towns and castles, which has been called incastellamento, had begun in the eleventh century to create real villages for the first time, and this opened up rural spaces for

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new monastic, religious, or military-religious groups to establish themselves not so much by their own efforts at clearance and reclamation as by profiting from the efforts of their anonymous predecessors. The constantly changing dimensions of landscape, fields, river beds, ditches and channels, levees, salt and fresh water marshes, woodland, pasture, and salt pans created a fluidity of land ownership and political control in a highly productive region which could provide material for the crusading effort. The Hospitaller records offer tantalizing hints of efforts to supply timber, grain, salt, and meat and fish in brine or salt to the East or to Spain for the Christian armies on the major military fronts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But these documents also provide information on local habitats and changes in access to fisheries, particularly with regard to Anguilla anguilla, the European eel.

This paper will discuss such hints of habitat change found in documents surviving in a book of charters, the cartulary of the medieval hospital at Arles of Saint-Thomas of la Trinquetaille. La Trinquetaille was part of the system of commanderies and dependencies of the great Hospitaller commandery at nearby Saint-Gilles. Its documents, along with associated sources for the important Porcelet family of Arles, provide considerable evidence for the rapidly changing medieval ecology in the lower Rhône valley and its delta, the Camargue. Changes in the environment itself resulted in changes in patterns of exploitation and water use, documented as access conflicts and fears of over-exploitation of eel fisheries in the medieval Camargue, an economy which continued until extensive pollution in the lower Rhône and Camargue in our own lifetimes threatened those fisheries.

Records of disputes over waterlands also have bearing on the environmental history of the region where the Rhône’s fresh water reaches the sea. These sources suggest that the expansion of drainage, the construction of levees and channels, and changes in the riverbed were a result of both natural and human activities, creating an environment in which eel fishing became a major resource, and in which medieval eel farming may have been possible. For those activities to prosper, they required close control by village communities and authorities to prevent overfishing. Documents also mention payments in eels to local religious

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