



Fig. 1
Melchor de Monserrat (bottom left), depicted in the vault of St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, by Mattia Preti (1613–1699).
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Melchor de Monserrat

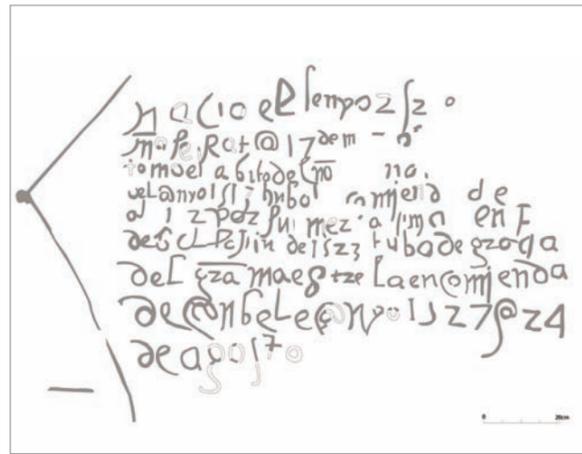
Christopher Gerrard and Alejandra Gutiérrez elaborate on one of the heroic figures of the Great Siege, the Monserrat family and the preceptory in Ambel, Spain

On display in a chapel of the church at Ambel (Zaragoza) in north-east Spain is a mummified head, thought to be that of Hospitaller Knight Melchor de Monserrat who commanded the Fort of St Elmo during the final days of the Turkish assault. The head is little known, even among those with interests in the Military Orders, and in this article we follow the confused trail of clues which connects Malta and the Great Siege of 1565 with a Hospitaller commandery 1500km away by land and sea.

We know only fragments about Melchor's life on Malta. According to the Hospitaller chronicler Bosio, he was already there in March 1552 when he had been placed in charge of the infirmary.¹ This connection is an important one for our story, as we shall see. The following year Melchor is listed among those responsible for remedial repairs around the island against a possible Turkish attack, but we lose sight of him again until 1565, when he is registered as one of the Knights of the Tongue of Aragon present before the siege.² Immediately prior to the Turks' final and fatal assault on St Elmo, Grand Master Jean de

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left: Fig. 2
Graffito on the main staircase of the preceptory of Ambel (Zaragoza) that reads: '[Pedro de] Monserrat was born on 17 M[arch ...], he went into the Order of St John in 1513; he obtained the commandery of [...] because of his [role] in Rhodes; in June 1523 he was given the commandery of Ambel by the Grand Master. 24 August 1527' (Nació el señor fray [don Pedro de] / Monserrat a 17 de m [...] / tomó el hábito del [Sr San Juan el ...] / del año 1513; hubo la encomienda de [...] por su [...] en R[odas] / de [...] / el [...] de 1523 tuvo de gracia / del gran maestre la encomienda / de Ambel; año 1527 a 24 de agosto).

below: Fig. 3
Tripartite shield dated 1532, showing the coat of arms of the Order with that of Grand Master Philippe Villiers de l'Isle Adam (1521–1534) and Pedro de Monserrat, at the preceptory of Ambel.

Valette handed *Melchior de Monserrat, com[endad]or de Ambel y Caravela y Valonga* the command of the fort, a letter of instruction which still survives in the archives of the Order in Malta.³ Described as an honest man of good habits and reputation, Melchior was one of the few knights from the Order subsequently selected for portraiture by Mattia Preti on the vault of St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta in 1666 (Fig. 1).⁴

Melchior would die defending St Elmo on Friday, 22nd June 1565. The Ambel commander was shot dead by an arquebus while he attempted to repair one of the cannons. Bosio says that he was subsequently buried under rubble when a wall was struck by a cannonball, but – remarkably – his intact body was found afterwards, still armed, and with his hands clasped together as if in prayer,⁵ just as Preti depicts him. In an alternative account, Balbi writes that Melchior's head was probably one of the four mounted on spikes and raised on the Turkish platform attacking the post of Francisco Sanoguera.⁶ This, however, seems unlikely if Melchior was indeed buried under rubble.



The Monserrat connection

The Monserrat family was originally from Canet, today a small village in Castellón (Valencia) with strong historical links to the Military Orders.⁷ During the sixteenth century there were three Monserrats linked with Ambel, and unravelling their biographies is essential to understanding the context for the head. The first Monserrat related to Ambel was Francisco, who became commander there (together with Alberite and Mallén) in March 1520. Francisco spent his time on Rhodes and rented out his preceptory to a merchant from Zaragoza. We know little of him, other than that he was Bailiff of Caspe, Castellan of Amposta and Captain General of the Galleys of the Order. He died during the siege of Rhodes, just two years after first taking possession of Ambel.⁸

The second Monserrat to interest us is Pedro. According to graffiti recently found at Ambel, he became commander there in 1523 on the death of his uncle Francisco, and continued to hold the preceptory until his own death thirty-three years later (Fig. 2). Though his movements are hard to track with any precision, the evidence suggests that he resided in Ambel at the beginning of his time there, and in March 1546 he was living in nearby Zaragoza where the headquarters of the Castellany of Amposta were located. He had an outstanding career within the Order; in 1533 he was elected Receiver of the Common Treasure (taking charge of the Order's finances and property) and in 1552 and until his death he became Conservator, one of the eight principal offices of the Order, and a responsibility traditionally held by the Langue of Aragon. Appropriately enough for one placed in charge of clothing and material supplies, Bosio describes him as a 'grave knight and of most honorable costumes, who liked to dress with long robes' and he evidently treated his knights with generosity.

Similarly Escolano says he had an unsurpassable spirit, majestic style, extraordinary prudence both in times of peace and war, and a magnanimous heart. He is said to have

right: Fig. 4
The entrance to Pedro de Monserrat's chapel in the Church of St Michael.



below: Fig. 5
The preceptory of Ambel on the left, and the Church of St Michael with the Monserrat tower in the centre.

had a close understanding of the affairs of the Order and it was under his direction that the reform of the Statutes of the Order was completed.⁹ He clearly had some diplomatic flair too, being sent as the Order's ambassador to Flanders to negotiate 'most important business' with Charles I of Spain and the future Philip II; he was also chosen by the Order to go to Rome and offer the new Pope Paulo IV the allegiance of the Grand Master and the Order. In July 1555 Pedro de Monserrat was required to travel to England and collate information about the property of the Tongue of England, previously seized from the Order by Henry VIII. There he was instructed to follow the advice of Antonio de Toledo and Cardinal Pole, and given the power to admit new knights and chaplains into the Order should commanderies become available.

Monserrat carried with him letters of recommendation from Pope Paulo IV, hoping it would ease in his negotiations with Queen Mary I. The process he initiated was successfully concluded in 1557.¹⁰ Philip II made him Viceroy and General

Captain of the Kingdom of Sardinia, but he died in Brussels in 1556 en route there and, according to Escolano, the Spanish king then asked the Grand Master to give Ambel to Pedro's brother Melchor, who was living in Malta. The Order not only accepted this, but also paid Pedro's debts in honour of 'his good name and valuable service'.¹¹ His final resting place is not known to us.

Ambel in the sixteenth century

That the sixteenth century was the century of the Monserrat in Ambel is immediately evident to the visitor even today; several coats of arms of the family survive in the preceptory and its adjacent church. The only example which is dated precisely, however, is placed above the main entrance to the conventual house. This is a tripartite shield, carved in stone, depicting the coat of arms of the Order and the Grand Master Philippe Villiers de l'Isle Adam (1521–1534) together with





left: Fig. 6
The chapel built by Pedro de Monserrat in the middle of the 16th century, in the Church of St Michael, Ambel.

below: Fig. 7-8
Two views of the supposed head of Melchor de Monserrat.

palatial style. This process had in fact begun with the previous commander, Martín de Lavata (1504–1520), who sought to open up an austere medieval building in the Renaissance style¹² but many of the major works came later. Under Monserrat's supervision a new facade was added to the south side of St Michael's church with arches on three floors with liberal use of shields, including those of the family, the Order and Grand Master Villiers de l'Isle Adam.

Crucially for our story, Pedro de Monserrat refurbished the base of the western church tower as a chapel dedicated to the Holy Christ, which he also endowed with a daily and yearly mass. This chapel is accessed through a locked metal screen door decorated above with the Monserrat shield (Fig. 4). Within, a ceiling with a starred vault and a frieze of decorated *arista* tiles around the walls complete the setting for a mid-sixteenth-century altarpiece commissioned by Pedro.¹³ This comprises a wooden sculpture of Christ on the Cross framed by columns decorated with the symbols of the



below left: Fig. 9
Another view of the supposed head of Melchor de Monserrat, showing a clean cut through the neck.

below right: Fig. 10
One of the two lamb figures placed next to the head, most probably at the beginning of the 17th century.

Passion, and the figures of the Virgin Mary and St John on either side; beneath the main sculptures, two reliefs show St Helena discovering the Holy Cross and the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius entering Jerusalem bearing the Cross (Fig. 6). The frontal of the altar is decorated with the Maltese cross supported by angels, and to consecrate it Pedro donated a small reliquary box made out of eight carved ivory tablets, probably dating to the fifteenth century and showing minstrels and dancing figures in the French style. A later account reveals that relics were brought to Ambel by Pedro in person,¹⁴ among them a fragment of the *Lignum Crucis* which had previously belonged to Grand Master Juan Fernández de Heredia and was donated to Ambel by the Hospitaller preceptory at Caspe (Zaragoza) on the 25th August 1548. This event is still venerated today in Ambel with religious festivities in honour of the Holy Relics.

The head of Melchor today is placed on a hand-modelled plaster podium behind a simple metal door and

glass in a small niche high up on the north wall inside the chapel. Initial inspection shows that it was carefully or surgically removed from the neck, with the skin neatly folded over the cut (Fig. 7-9). There is no sign of damage at the base of the neck, and nothing to suggest that it had ever been placed on a spike or similar. The remains are mummified and the skin on the front is still preserved, hardened and darkened in colour, but with some remnants of facial hair around the chin. The skin around the scalp, particularly at the back of the skull, is lost.

Further clues can be found in the church archive, where there is a copy of a letter sent in response to an enquiry from Melchor's nephew, the Marquis of Cruillas, in the seventeenth century.¹⁵ This letter, written by the prior of the church Fray Miguel Muñoz, must be dated between 1612 and 1631 and reads as follows in translation:

You inform me in your letter that you are aware that I have looked after, and am still looking after, the head of saint brother Melchor de Monserrat, your uncle, who together with his brother fray Pedro, most certainly ascended to heaven when they died. You ask me to return this head and I cannot oblige for two reasons: first, when he lived in this village he ordered the construction of a chapel dedicated to the Holy Christ, where Our Lord makes numerous miracles; and also it was his wish that his own head was brought here from far away lands and buried in this chapel. In obligation to you I have re-situated the head with greater decency, a sense of duty that I will carry for the rest of my life.

Signed: fray Miguel Muñoz, prior of Ambel.

The head retains all its skin; I am told that when they brought it to Ambel it looked the same as the day it was cut more than 40 years ago, with all its hair and beard.

The Monserrat family in Castellón therefore clearly knew of the existence of the head in the early seventeenth century, and the priest tells us that the head was never buried and that the arrival of the letter obviously moved him to improve its display. Muñoz explicitly links the head with Melchor de Monserrat, the only independent evidence we have of its identification, but the letter also contains major inaccuracies. As far as we know Melchor never lived in Ambel and he did not build the chapel, and this raises the possibility that the head is in fact that of Pedro de Monserrat, however unlikely it may seem that the head of a prominent Hospitaller would be preserved so intentionally in this way and placed on display. He too, of course, had died in 'far away lands'. Even if this is Melchor, there are still many unanswered questions. How could his head have remained in good condition during three summer months from the 22nd June to early September when the Turks retreated? Why was the head separated from the body at all if it was not severed by the Turks? How was the head conserved before and after transport, and might this link in some way with

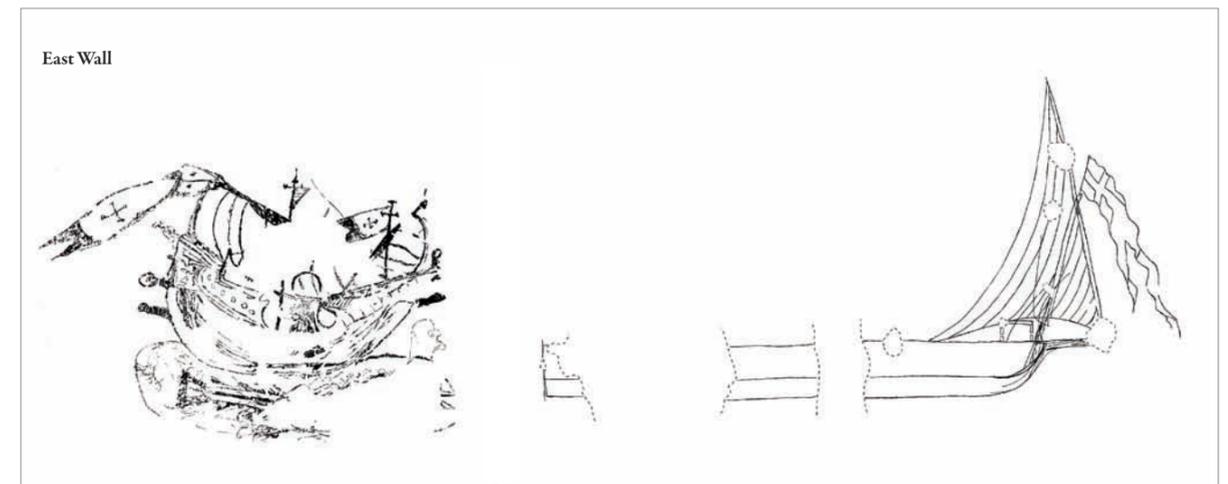
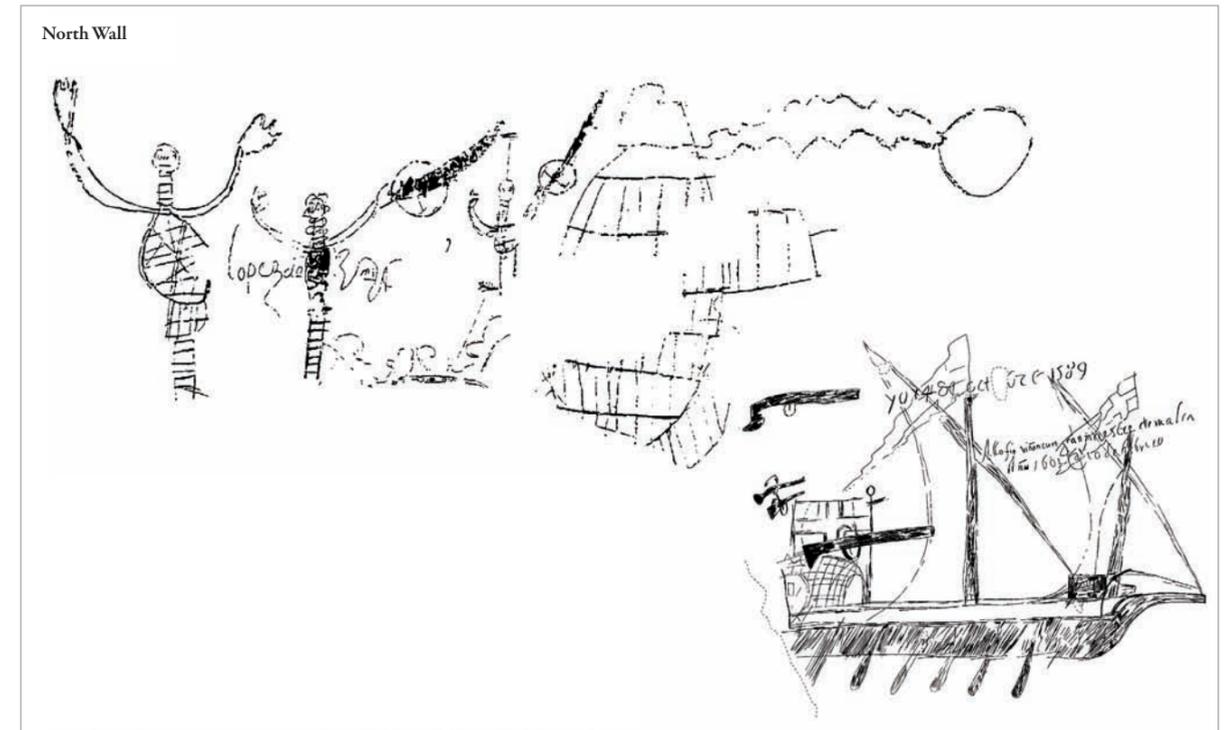
opposite: Fig. 11-12
Some of the graffiti in the Hospitaller house at Ambel may relate to the Siege of Malta, drawings of which are reproduced here.

page 68: Fig. 13
A commemorative reference to Alof de Wignacourt, Grand Master of Malta, year 1601, also at the Hospitaller house in Ambel.

Melchor's role in the infirmary, where presumably the skills existed for amputation and preservation?

Another part of the mystery is the timeline. We do not know the whereabouts of the head for more than half a century after the Siege. Was it kept somewhere in Ambel? Miguel Muñoz seems mildly critical of its previous care, and some of his remarks are capable of further interpretation. He refers to Melchor as 'saint brother' and to 'numerous miracles', which may be related directly to the head relic. Can we assume from this that because of Melchor's role in the siege, his personal sacrifice and the miraculous preservation of his body, that his head was regarded locally with veneration, both as a religious relic and posthumous cult? Is that why the head was relocated in the family chapel?

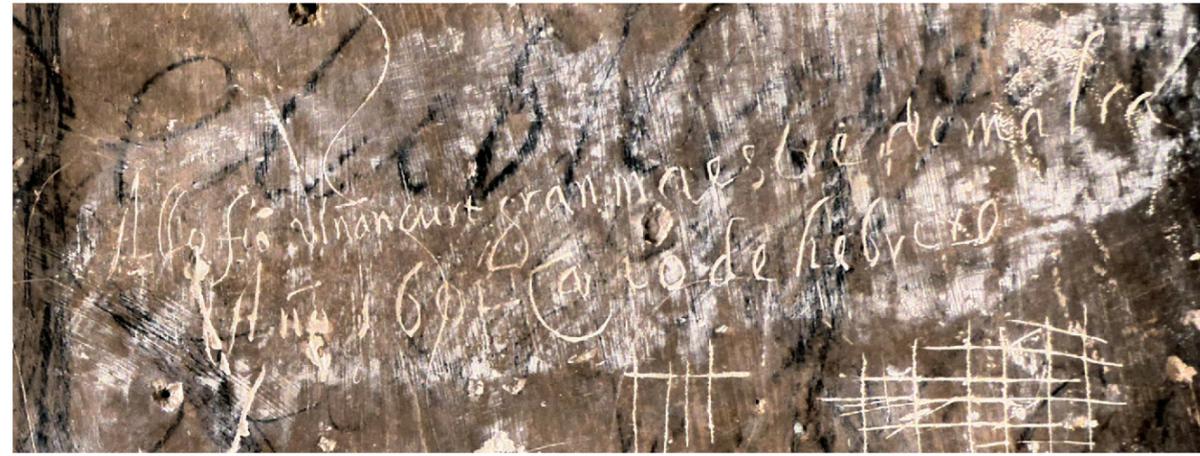
We cannot say for sure, but there are other indications that the head was revered. First, physical and visual access were carefully controlled. Second, the choice of a relic niche suggests embedding the relic into the very building fabric of the church and, in a sense, transforming the entire chapel space into the reliquary. Third, the skin was subjected to some sort of embalming process designed to preserve its uncorrupted appearance. Finally, inside the niche were found fine strands of human hair, probably female, and, entirely hidden from view, two figures of little lambs about 10cm long made out of wool and covered in possible candle wax (Fig. 10). Certainly the head has always been on public display, and it would seem that it was lit by candles on occasion too. But what are we to make of the accompanying lambs? Perhaps this is some additional cross-reference to the iconography of St John the Baptist, the patron saint of Hospitallers. Whatever the case, none of this came to anything, there is no later suggestion that the head was regarded as a religious relic.



The Siege and graffiti from Ambel

Finally, we return to the Siege and yet another Ambel connection. On the walls of a *mirador* or *loggia* on the west side of the preceptory (built c.1540–1589) are a series of graffiti including written messages and drawings that have either been incised into the plaster or sketched in charcoal. Unusual weather events are the most popular topic, but there is also an undated battle scene which is very simply sketched with little artistic skill (Fig. 11). There are figures on ladders, brandishing scimitars of curved blades, perhaps cutting heads off; there is an arquebus together with a range of naval vessels, some of them with the Order's flag.¹⁶ Ambel is 300

km from the sea and yet the artist was familiar enough with the constructional detail of rowing and sailing ships. Could this be a crude depiction of the Siege? Closer observation of overlaps and overwritings indicates that this scene seems to predate the phrase '*Allofto vinancurt gran maestre de Malta / @ An[o] 1601 a 10 de febrero*' (Alof de Wignacourt, Grand Master of Malta, year 1601 on 10th February) (Fig. 13). In 1601 the commander of Ambel was Cristóbal Sanoguera, who had acquired the preceptory in 1596. Documentary evidence shows that he lived in Ambel for a while, and remarkably he too had been present at the Siege of Malta as a young man.¹⁷ Sanoguera not only knew Melchor, he would have been aware that his head was preserved only metres away.



Notes

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| <p>1 Iacomo Bosio, <i>Dell'istoria della sacra religione et Illma militia di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano, Parte Terza</i> (1602), 343, 455.</p> <p>2 Ibid., 508.</p> <p>3 Stephen Spiteri, <i>The Great Siege: Knights vs Turks MDLXV. Anatomy of a Hospitaller Victory</i> (2005), figure on page 197; Bosio, op. cit., 553.</p> <p>4 Francisco Balbi di Correggio, <i>La verdadera relacion de todo lo que este año de MDLXV ha sucedido en la Isla de Malta, dende antes que la armada del gran turco Soliman llegasse sobre ella</i> (Alcalá de Henares: Juan de Villanueva, 1567), 37; John T. Spike, <i>Mattia Preti: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings</i> (Florence: Centro di, 1999), 315; Margaret Morgan Grasselli, <i>Private Treasures: Four Centuries of European Master Drawings</i> (New York, 2007), 109. Preti depicted Melchor in the sixth bay, in his armour with hands clasped.</p> <p>5 Bosio, op. cit., 570-571.</p> <p>6 The other heads were those of the Bailio of Negroponte, Captain Miranda and Captain Maso; Balbi, op. cit., 48.</p> <p>7 Francisco Fernández de Bethencourt, <i>Historia genealógica y heráldica de la monarquía española: casa real y grandes de España</i>, Vol. 3 (Seville, 1897), 78.</p> <p>8 Christopher Gerrard, <i>Paisaje y señorío. La casa conventual de Ambel (Zaragoza): arqueología, arquitectura e historia de las Órdenes Militares del</i></p> | <p><i>Temple y del Hospital</i> (Zaragoza: Institución Fernando el Católico, 2003), 395; Bosio, op. cit., 5; Fernández de Bethencourt, op. cit., 78.</p> <p>9 Bosio, op. cit., 333, 357, 361, 363-364; Gaspar Escolano, <i>Década primera de la historia de la insigne y coronada ciudad y reyno de Valencia</i>, Vol. 1 (Valencia, 1610), 992, 994; José Ignacio Tellechea Idígoras, <i>El Papado y Felipe II. I. (1550-1572)</i> (Madrid, 1999), xviii; Calendar of State Papers, Mary I. (1550-1572)</p> <p>10 Alfredo Mifsud, <i>Knights Hospitallers of the Ven. Tongue of England in Malta</i> (Malta, 1914), 209. Paulo IV's letters were addressed to Queen Mary (6 August 1555), Philip II and Cardinal Pole (6 October 1555); Tellechea Idígoras, op. cit., 49, 54, 55. The restoration would only last during Mary I's life, until 1558.</p> <p>11 Fernández de Bethencourt, op. cit., 78; Bosio, op. cit., 374; Escolano, op. cit., 992-993.</p> <p>12 Gerrard, op. cit., 156-165.</p> <p>13 Ibid., 305.</p> <p>14 Ibid., 303.</p> <p>15 Ibid., 382-383.</p> <p>16 For further detail, Christopher Gerrard and Robert Dauber, 'Building biographies: architecture and people at the Hospitaller preceptory at Ambel (Zaragoza), Spain', in Judi Upton-Ward (ed.), <i>The Military Orders 4: On land and by sea</i> (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 235-250.</p> <p>17 Bosio, op. cit., 508.</p> |
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