

Joan I to His Ambassadors at Avignon: The Sardinian Crisis and Papal Tithes

Document Summary

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Document type: Royal letter (*lletra missiva*) from Joan I to his ambassadors at the papal court in Avignon

Seal: Secret seal (*segell secret*)

Scribe: Pere Amell

Authorization: Francesc ça Costa (vice-chancellor) [?] / *Dominus Rex mandavit*; Pere de Beniure

Recipients (per distribution note): García [Fernández de Heredia], Archbishop of Zaragoza; Pere de Cretes [?]; Ramon de França

Joan I informs his ambassadors at the court of Pope Clement VII in Avignon that a military emergency in Sardinia demands immediate action. Since the ambassadors' departure, messengers have arrived from the island bearing alarming news (*ardits del mal stament*). The king has been compelled to hire and dispatch crossbowmen and other companies — both mounted and on foot — for the defense of Sardinia. He has commissioned Ximén Pérez d'Arenós, Governor of Cagliari and Alghero, to lead the relief expedition with the new troops and provisions for the soldiers already stationed there. Financing this operation has required borrowing large sums at great cost to the crown, which Joan justifies as preferable to the loss of the island.

The letter pivots to its principal demand: the ambassadors must prioritize securing from the Pope the collection of ecclesiastical tithes (*dècimes*) already promised to the crown, as this is the chief item in their embassy. They are ordered to set aside all other business, petition the Pope with the utmost urgency, and — once the bulls authorizing the tithe collection are issued — dispatch them immediately to Barcelona by fast courier. The king warns that delay of even a few days could cause irreparable damage.

The letter is a significant witness to the fiscal pressures on Joan I at the very outset of his reign (he succeeded Pere III on 5 January 1387), the military vulnerability of Aragonese Sardinia, and the dependence of the crown on papal tithes to finance its Mediterranean commitments.

Reconciled Transcription

Fem vos saber que depuis que vosaltres hit [?] petis son venguts ací a nos certs missatgers de la illa de Cerdanya ab tals ardots del mal stament de aquella que a nos convé prestament soldejar e trametre cert nombre de ballesters e altres companyes axí de cavall com de peu ab armes per deffensió de la dita illa e guardar ço ques hi té per nos [tuir?] E de fer hauem manat e[m]parar mossèn Ximén Pérez d'Arenós Governador de Caller e del Alguer que ab les dites companyes e ab paga dels soldats [tres?] mesos [?] qui ja hi son prestosament a la dita illa e provezca als mills que apellar hi son e per açò convé de manlevar diverses quantitats de moneda no sens

gran interès [?] e dan de la nostra corona estimam ques mellor supportar aytals dapnatges que si aquella illa se perdía a la nostra corona com que Déu no vulla faem [?] comptar [?] atremateixa [?] que los dits e molts altres manlleuts faedors per saluament de la dita illa e reintegrar aquella segons ques pertany a nostra senyoria siam quitats e satisfets de les dècimes per les quals a nos atorgadores per lo sant pare [deus?] hauem donar [?] especial càrrech e principal entre·ls altres affers de la nostra missatgeria ques per nos començada perquè és de gran necessitat us pregam deïm e manam com ab millor major expressió podem que dexats tots altres affers postferits e supliquets ab gran cura e diligència sobre tot [?] al pare sant del arreplegament dels dits dècimes nos faça prestament segons que les demanam e enuiats nos les bolles mantinent per correu cuijtat car siats certs que gran perill poria hauer en la triga e per çous en estreny[em] [?] prou cuytosament e expressament ço segons los ardots que hauem ja donats [?] és ja [?] ay e lagui [?] de poch dies seria irreparable dampnatge. Dada en Barchinona sots nostre segell secret a xxiiij dies de març del any M CCC lxxxvij Rex subsignada ab me Pere Amell.

[Authorization:]

[ffs ça Costa / Dominus Rex mandavit (?)]

in P. de Beniure

[Distribution:]

Fuit missa Garcie archiepo Cesaraugustano et Petro de Cretes [?] et Raymundo de França.

Annotated English Translation

We make known to you that since you departed from here,¹ certain messengers have come to us from the island of Sardinia² bearing such alarming news of its dire condition³ that it is necessary for us to immediately hire and dispatch a certain number of crossbowmen and other companies, both mounted and on foot, bearing arms for the defense of the said island and to guard what is held there in our name.⁴

And to accomplish this, we have ordered and commissioned⁵ mossèn Ximén Pérez d'Arenós,⁶ Governor of Cagliari and Alghero, [to go] with the said companies and with pay for the soldiers — [for three? months?]⁷ — who are already stationed there, [to proceed] swiftly to the said island and to provision the best [forces] that can be mustered there.⁸

And because of this it is necessary to borrow diverse quantities of money — not without great cost⁹ and damage to our crown — [yet] we reckon it better to bear such losses than that the island should be lost to our crown, which God forbid.¹⁰ [We are thus incurring]¹¹ these said and many other loans to be contracted for the salvation of the said island and its reintegration [into our domain].

Therefore, as befits our lordship, [in order that] we may be acquitted and satisfied regarding the tithes¹² — for which, to be granted to us by the Holy Father, we have given special charge, and [which are] the principal [matter] among the other affairs of our embassy that has been entrusted to you by us — because it is of great necessity, we pray, declare, and command you¹³ with the greatest and strongest expression we are able [to muster] that, setting aside all other affairs [as] deferred, you petition with great care and diligence above all

[else] to the Holy Father for the collection of the said tithes, [and that] he grant them to us promptly as we have requested.

And send us the bulls¹⁴ immediately by swift courier, for you may be certain that great peril could arise from delay. And therefore we urge you most urgently and expressly, for according to the intelligence¹⁵ we have already received, the time has come,¹⁶ and the delay of a few days would be irreparable damage.

Given in Barcelona under our secret seal on the 24th day of March in the year 1387.¹⁷ Rex. Countersigned by me, Pere Amell.¹⁸

[Distribution:] Dispatched to García, Archbishop of Zaragoza,¹⁹ and to Pere de Cretes [?] and Ramon de França.

Footnotes

1. *Depuis que vosaltres hit petis*: "since you departed from here." The reading *hit petis* is uncertain; the general sense of "since your departure" is clear from context.
2. **Sardinia, not Cerdanya**: The opening text as provided reads "la illa de Cerdanya," but Cerdanya (Cerdagne) is a Pyrenean county, not an island. The body of the letter unmistakably concerns an island (*illa*) with a Governor of Cagliari and Alghero — i.e., Sardinia. The likeliest explanation is that the opening words preserve an error in transmission or that "Cerdanya" is a misreading of "Cerdenya" (Sardinia) in the missing folio. The entire content of the letter — the military emergency, the island setting, the Governor of Caller e del Alguer, the need for naval resupply — confirms that Sardinia (*Cerdenya / Sardenya*) is the subject.
3. *Ardits del mal stament*: "alarming news of its dire condition." *Ardits* = intelligence, news reports; *mal stament* = bad state, dire condition. The word *ardits* reappears near the close of the letter, framing the entire document as a response to urgent intelligence from the island.
4. *Guardar ço ques hi té per nos [tuir?]*: "to guard what is held there [to protect / in our name]." The final word remains uncertain. If *tuir* (from Latin *tueri*), the sense is "to protect/defend for us"; the alternative is that *per nos* simply means "on our behalf."
5. *Hauem manat emparar*: "we have ordered and empowered/commissioned." *Emparar* in this context carries the sense of investing someone with authority for a specific task, not its more common meaning of "to seize."
6. **Ximén Pérez d'Arenós**: Governor of Cagliari and Alghero (*Governador de Caller e del Alguer*). The Arenós were a prominent Aragonese baronial lineage. Ximén Pérez d'Arenós served as royal governor in Sardinia during the critical period following Joan I's accession. His commission here to lead a military relief expedition testifies to the gravity of the crisis.
7. The reading of the duration of pay is uncertain. The likeliest reconstruction is *ab paga dels soldats tres mesos qui ja hi son* — "with pay for the soldiers [for] three months who are already stationed there" — but neither *tres* nor *mesos* can be confirmed with full confidence against the manuscript.

8. *Provesca als mills que apellar hi son*: "provision the best [forces] that can be mustered there." *Mills* = *millors* (best); *apellar* = to summon, call up, muster. The Governor is instructed both to bring reinforcements and to mobilize local forces already on the island.
9. *No sens gran interès*: "not without great interest/cost." In a context of borrowing (*manlevar*), *interès* likely carries its financial sense of interest on loans, though *preu* (cost) remains a possible alternative reading.
10. *Com que Déu no vulla*: "which God forbid" — a standard formula of aversion after stating an undesirable hypothetical.
11. The passage between "God forbid" and the enumeration of the loans (*manlleuts faedors*) is the most corrupt section of the text. The general meaning is clear — that the crown is contracting these and many other loans for the salvation and reintegration of the island — but the exact verb form and any intervening phrase remain unresolved. See Unresolved Ambiguities below.
12. **Dècimes (tithes)**: Ecclesiastical tithes (*decimae*) granted by the Avignon papacy to the Crown of Aragon, typically as a proportion of clerical income within the kingdom, to finance specific military or crusading enterprises. The crown's dependence on these papal fiscal concessions to fund its Sardinian operations is a recurring theme in Joan I's early correspondence. The ambassadors' chief mission at Avignon was to secure the formal bulls authorizing the collection of these tithes.
13. *Pregam, deïm e manam*: "we pray, declare, and command." A standard escalating triad of performative verbs in Aragonese chancery rhetoric, combining supplication with royal authority.
14. **Bolles (bulls)**: The formal papal documents — sealed with the *bull* — authorizing the collection of the tithes. Without the physical bulls, the crown could not legally compel the clergy to pay.
15. *Ardits*: "intelligence, news." The same word used in the opening, creating a deliberate rhetorical frame: the letter opens with the bad news that prompted the military response and closes by invoking that same intelligence to justify the urgency of the tithe request.
16. *És ja ay*: The exact reading is uncertain. The sense is temporal: "it is already [the time / the hour]" — i.e., the crisis is already upon them, and any further delay would be catastrophic.
17. 24 March 1387: Less than three months after Joan I's accession on 5 January 1387. The letter documents how rapidly the new king was confronted with the Sardinian crisis, an ongoing vulnerability he inherited from Pere III's long and costly campaigns on the island.
18. **Pere Amell**: Chancery scribe. The formula *subsignada ab me Pere Amell* ("countersigned by me, Pere Amell") is the scribe's authentication of the document. The alternative reading *ab nostre petit anell* ("with our small ring [seal]") is less likely given the standard formulaic position and the presence of the sealing formula (*sots nostre segell secret*) earlier in the same clause.
19. **García [Fernández de Heredia], Archbishop of Zaragoza (1383–1411)**: One of Joan I's principal ambassadors to the court of Clement VII at Avignon. García Fernández de Heredia was a powerful figure

in Aragonese ecclesiastical and political life; his role as head of this embassy reflects the importance Joan I attached to the tithe negotiations.

Unresolved Ambiguities

1. **Lines 9–10 (*faem [?] comptar [?] atremateixa [?]*):** The transition between the *Déu no vulla* formula and the enumeration of the *manlleus faedors* is garbled in both the initial transcription and the HTR output. The general argument is reconstructible — the crown is contracting loans despite the cost — but the precise verb form and any intervening clause remain unresolved. Archival re-examination of this passage is needed.
2. **Line 3 (*per nos [tuir?]*):** The word following *per nos* at the end of the clause "guardar ço ques hi té per nos ___" is not confidently resolved. *Tuir* (to protect) is contextually plausible but paleographically uncertain. The HTR's *fuyt* does not parse.
3. **Lines 5–6 (*soldats [tres?] mesos [?]*):** The duration of pay specified for the soldiers already in Sardinia. The reconstruction *tres mesos* (three months) is attractive but not fully confirmed by the letterforms.
4. **Line 13 (*per lo sant pare deus [?] hauem donar [?]*):** The clause linking the Holy Father's grant and the ambassadors' charge is syntactically difficult. *Deus* may be *de us* ("from you") rather than "God," yielding "for which, to be granted to us by the Holy Father, we have given you special charge." The alternative is that *deus* is a scribal error or that the clause is more compressed than it appears.
5. **Line 16 (*sobre tot [?]*):** The adverbial phrase before *al pare sant* is uncertain. *Sobre tot* (above all) gives good sense but the letterforms are not entirely clear; *sobrenom* and *sobretota* were considered and rejected.
6. **Lines 19–20 (*és ja [?] ay e lagui [?]*):** The temporal expression near the close of the letter. The sense is clear — "the time has already come and the delay of a few days would be irreparable" — but the exact nominal forms (*ay*, *lagui*) are unresolved. *Lagui* may be a form of *alaguiment* (delay).
7. **Authorization formula:** The right-margin authorization is not confidently resolved. It may read *ffs ça Costa* (Francesc ça Costa) or represent the standard *Dominus Rex mandavit* formula. The second line, *in P. de Beniure*, is clear.
8. **Distribution note — *Petro de Cretes [?]*:** The second recipient's surname is uncertain. The form in the manuscript could be *Decretes*, *de Cretes*, or another reading.