

BRIEF NOTES ON

THE KNIGHTS OF ST. JOHN.

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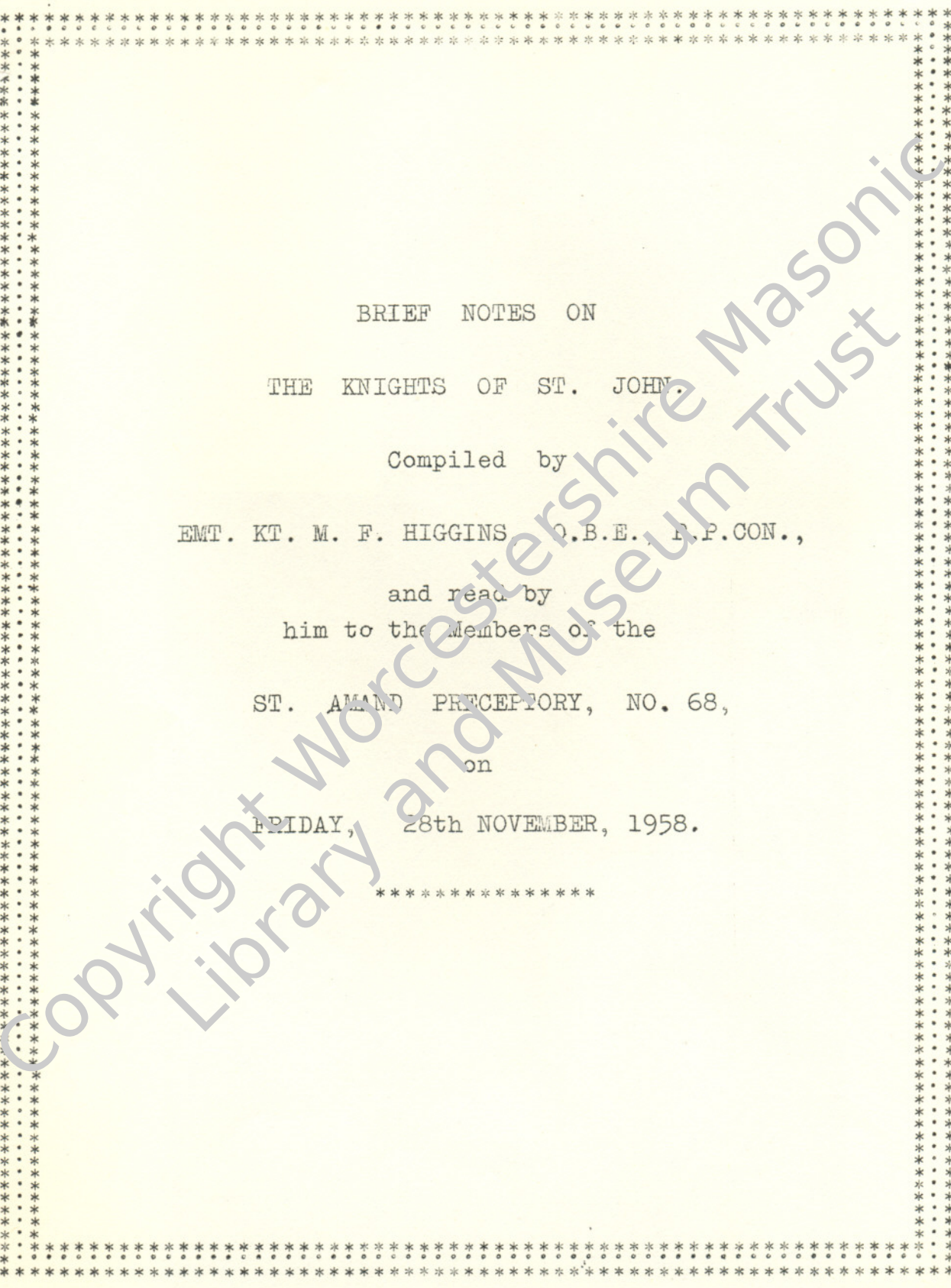
EMT. KT. M. F. HIGGINS O.B.E., P.P.CON.,

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Dating from the earliest centuries, men and women from the West had made pilgrimages to Our Lord's Sepulchre and other Holy Places in Palestine. Before Jerusalem first fell into Moslem hands in the Seventh Century, these pilgrims received a welcome, but times changed, and the Emperor Charles V of Spain founded in Jerusalem a Hospice for the accommodation of pilgrims - the first of many similar establishments with which the Holy City has been endowed through the ages.

In 1009 a fanatical ruler of the Holy Land - Fatimite Khalif Hakim - caused the Holy Sepulchre and the Hospice to be razed to the ground, and it was not until after his death that they were rebuilt.

The task of rebuilding the Hospice was undertaken by certain charitable merchants of Amalfi, and it was this Amalfitan foundation which its Master - Gerard - after the capture of Jerusalem in 1099 by the First Crusade, was able to convert and expand into an Order of Hospitallers dedicated to St. John the Baptist.

The military and religious Order of the Knights Hospitallers of St. John originated in a monastery in Jerusalem by Merchants from Amalfi in 1048, with the idea of caring for the sick and the pilgrims. On the same date as the original foundation of the Knights Templar, 1118, they were regularly instituted as a Military Order. They took vows of chastity, obedience and poverty; also to defend the Church against infidels.

Soon the young Order added to its responsibilities. Grateful Crusading Lords who had been healed of their wounds in the hospital of St. John, bestowed on it portions of their estates - the future "Commanderies" of the Order. Others chose to remain in Palestine to devote their lives, as members of the Institution, to the care of the pilgrims and the Christian poor.

And with the adoption by these aristocratic fighting men of a career of philanthropy on the battleground of the Cross and the Crescent, the Order grew into a powerful and wealthy body of celibate nobles vowed to the oddly associated tasks of tending the poor, healing the sick and waging what was, in effect, a perpetual war on Islam in the Mediterranean.

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With the resumption of fighting between the Franks and Saracens in the Holy Land, the Knights again became soldiers first. Many of the Crusader castles in Palestine and Syria were built by the Hospitallers and the Knights of the Temple, whose origin was similar, and the two Orders were soon the most formidable military instrument of the Crusading States. So speedily did they grow in strength, influence and possessions that they advanced by an almost natural progress to independent status.

The Templars ruled in Cyprus from 1191, and to the same island came the Hospitallers after the fall of the last Christian stronghold in the Holy Land in 1291. From Cyprus the Knights of St. John set out on the expedition which made them masters of the islands of Rhodes in 1309, over which they ruled for 200 years. During this period they were the scourge of Moslem shipping, continuing their Crusading activities from the new island. Meanwhile, the Turks made an unsuccessful attempt to dislodge them in 1480, but in 1522 after a spectacular siege they were driven out by Suleiman the Magnificent.

On the first day of 1523, the Grand Master - Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam - with the surviving Knights sailed out of Rhodes, and for some seven years the Knights had no settled home.

During the period in Rhodes, the Order evolved its characteristic form of grouping its Knights on the basis of nationality, or "Langues", to each of which was entrusted in Rhodes - and later in Malta - the defence of one sector of the fortifications.

While the Order was essentially international, the French with their three "Langues" of Auvergne, Provence and France, were numerically the strongest, and it might have been supposed the King of France would have been the first to provide for the exiles, but he was too concerned trying to win the help of Suleiman against Spain to help them, and it was the Emperor Charles V of Spain who then gave them what was to be the most enduring of their homes - Malta.

The Arabs had held Malta from 870 until, in 1090, Roger the Norman, Count of Sicily, took it from them. The island then passed, by inheritance or war, successively to the dynasties of Anjou and Aragon, who also ruled in Sicily, and from the House of Aragon through the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon to Isabel of Castile, to their grandson, the Emperor Charles V. It was Charles' gift of Malta to the Order of St. John of Jerusalem that prepared these islands of the mighty temples of the Stone Age, for a new period of greatness.

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In the wonderful Armoury of the Knights' Palace at Valetta is to be seen one of the primary original documents of European history. By this tattered piece of parchment, dated 1113, Pope Paschal II granted to his "venerable son Gerard, founder and provost of the Hospital in Jerusalem" a charter of incorporation of the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, placing it under the protection of the Apostolic See. Specially interesting is the fact that, among the eight prelates who signed this Charter, appears the signature - "John, Bishop of Malta."

The Grand Master, who was very rich, was chosen by vote and called Grand Master of the Holy Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, and Guardian of the Army of Jesus Christ".

Also, in the Armoury of Valetta is the rescript of Charles V, complete with great wax seal and the bag of red velvet in which it was despatched to St. Isle Adam, issued in 1530. But, bound up with the gift of these Maltese Islands to the Order, was the gift of Tripoli and the duty to hold that distant dependency as a Christian enclave in the Barbary States of North Africa. The consequence of the Order's inability to hold Tripoli in the year 1531, was the Great Siege of Malta fourteen years later.

The Knights of St. John were not too pleased with their future home. The Commission they had sent to spy out the land reported it as being mere barren rock without vegetation and with scanty soil and little water; no amenities, scarcely any resources and many perils. Only the harbours and creeks with their safe anchorages induced the Knights to resign themselves to the new venture, for it was a complete contrast to the pleasant hills and valleys of Rhodes.

The Maltese also were not at all pleased with the new dispensation giving their Islands to the Knights, and protested to the Viceroy of Sicily.

However, on 26th October 1530 the Knights entered their new home. They brought with them the Great Carrack of Rhodes, the famous flagship of their Fleet, from which is believed to have come the Musicians' Gallery of the Throne Room of the Palace - with its six exquisite panels depicting the story of Adam and Eve. They also brought one of the hands of St. John the Baptist, the silver processional cross to be seen in the cathedral of Mdina, and some other ecclesiastical treasures and vestments. They also brought their archives which are still preserved in Malta, but in other respects they had to begin anew.

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The Knights wore a long black mantle with a gold cross of 8 points enamelled white. In War they wore a red tabard with a white cross on it. They undertook to take the field three times against the pirates of Barbary.

Valletta, of course, at that time did not exist. The Knights settled on the eastern side of the Grand Harbour, in the fishing village of Birgu, and built their Auberges - one for each Langue - in its narrow streets, in imitation of their Rhodian hostels. The Grand Master established himself in the Fort of S. Angelo. Topping the fort was the house of its Governor, and this house became the first Magistral Palace. The Church of S. Lawrence in Birgu became the first Conventual Church.

Malta was raided by the Turks in 1551, and then in 1565 the same Suleiman who drove them from Rhodes tried to drive them from Malta, but even after the Great Siege was unsuccessful.

When at last the Great Siege was over the military power of the Order of St. John was at its last gasp; the fortifications lay in ruins; a large percentage of the defenders had become casualties and the exchequer was practically empty. However, it was not long before money, raw materials and equipment began to pour in from a grateful Europe.

This last effort of the Turks was a cause of great anxiety to the whole Christian world, even Elizabeth of England having prayers said during the time of the Great Siege. At the end of the Siege, the Pope commanded great festivities in Rome, while Philip of Spain sent to Grand Master La Valette a jewelled sword and dagger. These were looted by Bonaparte in 1798 and are now in the Louvre, but until then each year the sword was unsheathed and held aloft by the reigning Grand Master at the Thanksgiving Mass sung annually on September 8th, to commemorate the raising of the Great Siege.

At the insistence of the Grand Master, La Valette, Cosimi de Medici the Duke of Tuscany, with the consent of Pope Pius IV, decided to send his foremost military engineer to review the situation. This engineer was Captain Francesco Laparelli da Cortona, and he soon grasped the state of local affairs, for he presented his first report to the Grand Master on 3rd January 1566, and that year witnessed the laying of the foundation stone of the city of Valletta - with its formidable ramparts totalling more than two miles in length - built to be an impregnable barrier against the Turks. The bastions were built at an enormous rate - within five years of their commencement - and during that time the various Auberges were very far advanced.

Girolamo Cassar had succeeded Laparelli as Chief Engineer of the Order during the rebuilding of the City; he must have been a most remarkable man, and the amount of work done in fifteen years needs to be seen to be believed.

This included the building of the Conventual Church of St. John which was built between 1573 and 1577, although it has been added to since then. By a Decree of Pope Pius VII dated 27th January 1816, St. John's was elevated to the status of Co-Cathedral. It is a magnificent place and bears much evidence of the presence of the Knights of St. John in Malta.

Inside, one finds the Chapels of Castile, Aragon, Auvergne, Provence, France, Italy, Germany and also the Crypt of the Grand Masters. In other words, this Church is wrapped up with the history of the Knights of St. John, and within it are to be found several masterpieces of painting and, throughout, reference after reference to the Order of St. John.

It was the Grand Master Jean de la Cassiere (1572 to 1581) who paid for the building of this church out of his own pocket, and gave great encouragement to Cassar to bring to completion what is surely his greatest building and Malta's foremost work of art.

The Crypt of the Grand Masters is approached by steps leading down from the Chapel of Provence, and there one finds monuments to past great figures in the Order of St. John. Opposite the entrance to the Crypt is the tomb of Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam, the heroic defender of Rhodes and the First Grand Master of the Order in Malta.

The celebrated painter, Mattia Preti, who was influenced by the art of Michelangelo, was responsible for the decoration of the nave of the Church, with such pictures as "The Baptism of Christ" - "The Banquet of Herod" - and "The Beheading of St. John".

Magnificent Belgian tapestries - which have rightly been called the Church's "crowning glory" - are hung on certain days of the year. These were ordered by Grand Master Ramon Perellos on his election in 1697 and were executed by Juducos de Vos, a member of one of the most celebrated families of "tapissiers". The subjects of the fourteen coloured panels are mainly taken from paintings by Peter Paul Rubens, including his "Triumph of Faith" in the Louvre and his celebrated "Crucifixion" in Antwerp Cathedral.

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When the Knights landed in 1530 they found the principal island an arid, sparsely peopled rock. There was the ancient little walled capital of Notabile or Mdina in the middle, the small fort at St. Elmo on the tip of the future Valletta, another fort - S. Angelo - on the other side of the Grand Harbour, but little else except a number of unimportant villages. Yet, 35 years later the Great Siege made Malta celebrated throughout Christendom, and brought to the "bulwark of the Faith" from a relieved and grateful Western Europe, contributions in money and kind which made possible those vast fortifications in the lovely Maltese limestone that were to become world-famous. Christendom could not afford to let Malta remain unprotected.

Almost the whole of the Grand Harbour is protected by mighty defences. From the Barracca one can see across the Harbour, starting from the left, the Fort Ricasoli which guards the entrance; Fort S. Angelo around which raged many a fierce fight of the Great Siege, and Senglea where even the women helped to stem the infidel horde, pouring boiling pitch and a shower of missiles on to the Turkish invader.

Away from the Grand Harbour a girle of substantial forts and solid stone watch-turrets surrounds and connects the three Maltese islands. The object of the ring of watch towers, built by the popular Spanish Grand Master - Martin de Redin - during his short reign from 1657 to 1660, was to guard against sudden raids by the Barbary pirates.

For two and a half centuries Valletta was the home of chivalry. The eyes of the sovereigns of Europe were riveted on it - not only because their scions belonged to the Order but also because it was the centre of a pageant without parallel in any other part of the world. It was described by Disraeli as a "city built by gentlemen for gentlemen".

Every stone in Valletta has its enthralling history and its archives testify to the relations of His Serene Highness the Grand Master with the Emperors and Kings of the great States of Europe.

Under the organisation of the Order each Langue had separate quarters where young Knights were trained and where lived such of the older Knights as did not maintain a high state, and the men-at-arms and servitors.

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There are in Valletta - the Auberge de Provence in Kingsway, now used as the Union Club; the Auberge d'Italie in Merchants Street, temporarily housing the Courts of Law; the Auberge d'Aragon in Queen Adelaide Square, now used as the official residence of the Prime Minister; the Auberge de Castile et Leon, near the Upper Barracca, now used by the Military Authorities; the Auberge d'Angleterre et de Baviere, now used as a Government Primary School. The Auberge d'Auvergne, also in Kingsway, and the Auberge de France in South Street, were demolished by enemy action during the last War.

All the Auberges with the exception of the Auberge d'Angleterre et de Baviere were built to the plans of the Maltese Architect, Girolamo Cassar.

Life in the Auberges was not unlike that in an Oxford or Cambridge College. The Auberge was presided over by the head of the Langue, who bore the title of Pillar and was also one of the principal dignitaries of the Convent, the Pillar of each Langue having a special charge at headquarters. Thus the Pillar of France was the Grand Hospitaller; the Pillar of Provence was the Grand Commander of the Order and had oversight of the Treasury; the Pillar of Italy was the Grand Admiral; he of Castile the Grand Chancellor; the Pillar of England bore the title of Turcopolier.

Within his Auberge the Pillar exercised discipline over the Knights of his Langue and presided at meals in Hall at a separate table, seated on a raised platform with the privilege of a carpet and a cushion for his feet, while the young Knights sat on benches covered only with cloth, velvet being reserved for the Grand Crosses. Below the Knights sat the Chaplains and the Servants-at-Arms.

Each Auberge had its Hall, and the Knights were obliged to dine in on at least four days a week. There were certain other restrictions attached to this collegiate existence, such as that no dogs were allowed in the Auberges, but the Knights dined off silver, and fared well.

Admission to the Order was generally considered a privilege to which a European nobleman or gentleman could aspire. Yet it seems that it could also be a penalty. For, in the Fugger News-letters we read in a despatch from Venice of February 9th, 1590, concerning the discredited alchemist Mamugnano that "the Pope is said to have granted him absolution, but he had to make a donation of five thousand crowns and enter the Order of the Knights of Malta".

A rare little description of Malta of the seventeenth century, written by a Frenchman whose identity is hidden under the designation of "un gentilhomme français" gives an enthusiastic account of their style of living. He writes -

" I never failed to admire the quantity and quality of the viands that are served and to wonder how so dry and barren a rock can produce such refreshment and so much game. Every day the market is full of vegetables and of almost every kind of fruit; the bread is excellent. (Note! To this day Maltese bread ranks among the best breads in the world) Beef and mutton of a marvellous taste. Veal and poultry are eaten at all seasons, notwithstanding the fact that there is little pasture. Partridges, pigeons, rabbits, thrushes and other game are fatter than anywhere else in Europe; and although the island lies on the 34th degree, there is no lack of iced dishes and of snow, thanks to the efforts of a contractor who charges two sols six deniers a pound on the understanding that he supplies it all the year round. He brings it from the mountains of Sicily and pays a fine of nine ecus for every day he fails to deliver it".

It is evident that the Knights, in the parlance of today, did themselves well; notably was this the case in the Auberge of Provence, which had a special endowment for the purpose. The mode of life there can be judged well enough even now from its magnificent Hall, the present Coffee Room of the Union Club, which has retained its essential features with barely a change. And not only did they live well in material respects; they lived, on the whole, in good understanding among themselves. Our "gentilhomme français" particularly commends the manner in which Knights belonging to nations on the worst of terms with one another dwelt in Malta in perfect amity, "listening to news from all parts of the world, Malta being the general rendezvous of shipping from the West and the East" and leaving to their fellow-countrymen at home "the fatigue of sustaining the quarrels of their Masters".

On the consolations afforded them by female society he enlarges with the indulgence of his gallant race and epoch towards the distractions of this sort, making it clear that celibacy and chastity were, so far as the young Knights of his day were concerned, not necessarily identical conditions.

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Not that all Frenchmen shared our traveller's charitable outlook in this respect. A notable example to the contrary was the stern old Provençal Knight Lascaris, who became Grand Master in 1635 at the age of 75, and lived and reigned until he was 97. Lascaris was a hard man, whose grim features have remained a by-word of opprobrium - "wicc Laskri" - to the present day in Malta. But he judged rightly that what these hundreds of lusty young bachelors needed to keep them out of mischief in the intervals between "performing their caravans" against the Barbary States was physical exercise. So he built them the long narrow enclosure for the ball game called Pallamaglio (pall-mall) that now - as the Maglio Gardens - separates the Floriana parade ground from the granaries. And he adorned his Mall with an elegant Latin stanza, in which he enjoined his Knights to play games in order to counteract the demoralising effects of dice, wine and women.

An attempt at a translation of this stanza is -

"Here perish sloth, here perish Cupid's arts,
Knights, where on you this strip I now bestow,
Here play your games and steel your warlike hearts,
Nor let wine, women, dicing bring you low."

In the Public Library at Valletta are housed many priceless examples of the finest illuminated work and of richly bound volumes, and the greater portion of the archives of the Order. Among these are a great many Papal Bulls, original rolls of Philip and Mary, and of Henry VIII of England; the latter include a letter from Henry - written from Hampton Court - to Grand Master L'Isle Adam, in which Henry constituted himself protector of the Order on the 7th July 1538. There is also a mass of correspondence bearing the signatures of the greatest rulers of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.

In the Holy Land during the Rhodian period and during the Siege of Malta, the Knights lived at high tension and always kept themselves in physical training and prepared for emergencies. However, as the foe weakened and finally faded away, the Order gradually became more diplomatic than militant.

From a succession of Spanish Grand Masters came ideas of absolutism which changed the Rulers of the Order from the soldier-saints of the early days to credible imitations of His Catholic or His Most Christian Majesty, and by degrees obliterated, in all but name, the ancient privileges of the Maltese. Life at the Court of the Grand Master became complex and ceremonial.

The Grand Master la Cassiere (1572-1581) introduced into the Island the Inquisition in an endeavour to ensure that his Knights were not being infected by the "pestilential heresies" of the Reformation, but much regretted this before he died, as he found he had provided himself and his successors with another "thorn in the flesh" - the other "thorn" being the Bishop of Malta, whose nomination was in the hands of the Spanish Emperor's representative in Sicily. As the years went by, the Bishop and the Inquisitor made themselves more and more powerful, and gradually weakened the Order although, theoretically, they were supposed to defer to the Grand Master.

There had long existed a saying in the tradition of the Order that it would cease to exist when a German was appointed Grand Master. In 1797, Ferdinand de Hombach (who was a German) was elected to that office, and in 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte - on his way to Egypt - captured Malta, and the prophecy was fulfilled. Napoleon's demand for surrender was not opposed either by the Order or by the Maltese population. Some of the Bishops and older Knights were prepared and anxious to resist, but their intentions were paralysed by lack of leadership. At the same time, their properties in other countries were confiscated.

All but the oldest and feeblest of the Knights left Malta and scattered, the more mobile coming together again in St. Petersburg, where the Emperor Paul was chosen Grand Master and took the Order under his protection - so that nominally it still existed and still does - but after his death the nomination of the head of the Order was vested in the Pope.

The Maltese soon found the French Republicans were not so acceptable to them as they had expected, and they rose against them and, with the help of the British, cleared them out of the countryside and shut them up inside Valletta. From there, after Bonaparte's defeat at the Battle of the Nile, they subsequently departed, but Bonaparte had previously looted many treasures from Malta.

The Maltese, who knew that the return to Malta of the homeless and now penniless and impotent Order would inevitably mean the return of the French, had been growing increasingly eager to place themselves permanently under Great Britain. However, the Treaty of Amiens provided - under the protection of Great Britain, France, Austria, Spain and Russia, with a Neapolitan garrison - for the restoration of the Maltese Islands to the Order and for the establishment of a Maltese "Langue". The Maltese protested, but events had to take their course, and the new Grand Master - Tommasi - was

negotiating for his return to the Islands, but the British Civil Commissioners had to temporise as it was becoming clear to the British Government that Bonaparte did not intend to abide by the Treaty - and so Tommasi did not rule in Malta. But the reward for which the Maltese looked - for the gallant and effective part they had played in the operation against the French - was not the creation of a Maltese "Langue" in the Order of St. John, it was security under the British Flag.

And there I am afraid I must conclude my very sketchy notes on the Knights of St. John - so irrevocably wrapped up in the history of Malta.

MFH/OC
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