

PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL.

THE KNIGHTS OF ST. JOHN.

Dating from the earliest centuries men and women from the West had made pilgrimage 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 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 1099 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, was able, after the capture of Jerusalem by the first Crusade, to convert and expand into an Order of Hospitallers dedicated to St. John the Baptist.

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 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 ~~xx~~ sick and waging what was, in effect, a perpetual war on Islam in the Mediterranean.

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.



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The Templars ruled in Cyprus from 1191 to 1192 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 were homeless.

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 Auverge, 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 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 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 of - "John, Bishop of Malta".

Also in the Armoury of Valetta is the Descript of Charles V, complete with great wax seal and the bag of red velvet in which it was despatched to L'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 1551, was the Great Siege of Malta fourteen years later.

The Knights 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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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 the 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 the Governor, and this house became the first Magistral Palace. The Church of S. Lawrence in the Birgu became the first Conventual Church.

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

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 the 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.

The year following the Great Siege witnessed the laying of the foundation stone of that city - Valetta - built to be an impregnable bulwark against the Turks.

When the Knights landed in 1530 they found the principal island an arid, sparsely peopled rock. There was the ancient little walled capital of Mdina in the middle, the small fort at St. Elmo on the tip of the future Valetta, 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



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the Harbour, starting from the left, the Fort Ricasoli which guards the entrance; Fort St. 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 the Turkish invader.

Away from the Grand Harbour a girdle of substantial forts and solid stone watch-towers 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 Valetta 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.

Every stone in Valetta 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 station and the men-at-arms and servitors.

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 Castille 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 originally built to the plans of the Maltese Architect, Girolamo Cassar.



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In the Public Library at Valetta 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 which are a great many Papal Bulls, original rolls of Philip and Mary and of Henry VIII of England, and 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 became gradually 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 de Castlere (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.

In 1797 the last Grand Master in Malta was appointed - a German named Hompesch, but in 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte on his way to the Nile, demanded the surrender of the Order and their withdrawal from Malta. This demand was not opposed either by the Order or the Maltese population. Some of the Bailiffs and older Knights were prepared and anxious to resist, but their intentions were paralysed by lack of leadership.



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On 2nd June 1798 the French were invited to Malta and the Grand Master and all but the oldest and feeblest of the Knights left and scattered, the more mobile coming together again in St. Petersburg under the protection of the Emperor Paul, to whom they offered the Grand Mastership which they felt to have been vacated by Hompesch who had gone to Trieste.

The Maltese soon found that the French Republicans were not so acceptable to them as they had expected, and rose against them and, with the help of the British, cleared them out of the countryside and shut them up inside Valetta. 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 Island, 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.