

27th April 1956.

THE KNIGHTS OF ST. JOHN

MPH/OC.

I have had the pleasant opportunity of spending a week in Malta, and it is simply fascinating to be confronted with such a beautiful, historic reference to the Knights of St. John.

Naturally, it is impossible in such a short time as a week to absorb all that one sees and I had no guide. Therefore I had to find out what I could about things by asking questions and from books I picked up at an old bookshop.

There is one book which gives a lot of information about the Knights and St. John and also the history of Malta: this is "Malta, an Account and Appreciation" by Sir Harry Luke, published by Harrar at a price of 15/-.

When the Knights were given the Island of Malta by Charles V of Spain in the year 1530, they sent a Commission to spy out the land, which reported it as being a mere barren rock without vegetation, with scanty soil and little water; no amenities and scarcely any resources and many perils, and therefore the Knights were not too pleased with their new home. It was only the harbours and creeks with their safe anchorages that induced the Knights to resign themselves to the new venture, for it was a complete contrast to the pleasant hills and valleys of Rhodes.

On the 26th October 1530 the Knights entered their new home, bringing 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. They also brought one of the hands of St. John the Baptist, the silver processional cross still to be seen in the cathedral of Mdina, and other ecclesiastical treasures and vestments. They also brought their archives, which are still preserved in Malta.

It was most interesting to see the Auberges of the various Langues and other historical buildings. As is well known to the Brethren, 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.

There are now 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 and the Auberge de France, one in Kingsway and the other in South Street, were demolished by enemy action during the last War.

Most of these Auberges were built to the plans of the Maltese Architect, Girolamo Cassar.

From the Barracca, the highest part of Valletta, looking across the Harbour, starting to the left one sees 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 the Turkish invader. Fort S. Elmo at the mouth of the Harbour on the Valletta side, has witnessed some of the most heroic and thrilling episodes in the world's history.

Unfortunately, the Museum was closed, but the Public Library houses 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. I did see in the Library a letter from Henry VIII from Hampton Court to the Grand Master L'Isle Adam, and also a letter from King Louis XIV to the Grand Master, Adrian de Wignacourt.

There are also reports of the Knights Hospitallers in England to the Grand Master in 1338; a Book of Receipts of English Knights 1520-1536; a Note of the First Chapter General held in Malta on 9th February 1533; and a letter from Henry VIII constituting himself Protector of the Order on 7th July 1538.

Outside one of the streets of Malta I was fascinated by a plate stating - "On this site stood the house of Sir Richard Shelley, Turcopolier and Grand Prior of England 1513-1589."

The Palace of the Grand Masters is a wonderful place and I could have spent with pleasure a lot more time there. This again was the work of the architect, Girolamo Cassar, who seems to have done a formidable amount of work, not only having designed the Auberges of the Seven Langues but also the Conventual Church of St. John the Baptist and several other Churches.

The entrance corridor of the Palace, which is over 100 ft. long, is lined with figures in armour, trophies of arms and shields bearing the coats of arms of the Langues of the Order - Provence, Auvergne, France, Aragon, Germany, Castille, Leon and Portugal, Italy and Anglo-Bavaria.

Among the portraits on the wall are those representing the four last Grand Masters to rule in Malta, while amongst those in the Armoury is a dramatic rendering of the death of Dragut, the Turkish Commander who was killed by a splinter of rock - painted by the Maltese artist Guiseppe Cali.

An interesting description of the Supreme Council in session was given in 1748 by Count Antonio de Montagnacco, Canon of Aquileia, in which he says -

"The Hall was draped in crimson damask. At one end was the Grand Master's throne. At either side of his seat were six pages, young knights with enamelled crosses on their breast. At the foot of the throne, the Grand Vice-Chancellor of the Order sat at a table with inkstand, papers and the Great Cross; along the sides, on seats covered with crimson velvet and antique brocades, were seated 36 Bailiffs of the Grand Cross, who formed the Council, leaving the centre of the Hall free, nobody being admitted therein but the parties to the suit and their advocates."

In the Tapestry Room there are some wonderful Gobelin Tapestries which were presented to the Palace by Grand Master Perellos who was the same man who enriched the Church of St. John with a unique set of Flemish tapestries of scenes from the life of Our Lord.

Pictures in the West wing include that of Lot and his daughters by Preti, and Cain and Abel by the Neapolitan School, also the Grand Master L'Isle Adam entering Notabile, by Favray and are all magnificent specimens of Art.

The Co-Cathedral of St. John, again by Girolamo Cassar as I have previously explained, is simply magnificent. I went back time after time and even after two or three visits I could only bring away a vague outline of what I had seen. I still cannot just remember whether it was there. I saw the famous picture of St. Paul shaking off the viper, although I think it was.

The painting by Mazzuoli of the Baptism of Christ, also the Banquet of Herod, the Beheading of St. John etc., are wonderful works of art.

There are also Chapels referring to the Langue, for instance there is the Chapel of Castille which contains monuments to two Grand Masters who were Members of the Langue, the Chapel of Aragon, Chapel of Auverge and the Chapel of Provence.

Below the Choir one passes down to the Crypt of the Grand Masters which is a most interesting place. This contains the tombs of those Rulers of the Order who died before it was possible to erect monuments in the Cathedral. Some of the monuments are not of the erect type to which one is accustomed in the upper Church, but are in the form of sarcophagi with a figure of the deceased in high relief lying on the top. One I remember particularly was to the Grand Master, Jean de la Valette.

CC/AJE.
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