

## **THE KNIGHTS OF MALTA**

### **The Order Of St. John Of Jerusalem, Rhodes And Malta**

Gordon Vincent P.M.

The history of the Military Order of the Knights Templar from its inception to its demise, at the hands of Philip the Fair, is well documented. Indeed, I recommend ' The New Knighthood ' by Professor Malcolm Barbour of Reading University as a first book on the subject. During the past two decades, the profusion of writings about these brave men borders on the incredible. This volume of material tends to overshadow the achievements and deeds of that other great Order, the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, latterly known as the Knights of Malta.

Around 1080 a number of Traders from the town of Amalfi, situated on the Gulf of Salerno in Italy, obtained permission from the Caliph of Egypt to establish the Monastery of St. Mary of the Latins in Jerusalem. The monastery was staffed by Benedictine Monks. The Amalfians then built a convent and a hospice, for the care of sick Christian pilgrims. This hospice became known as the Hospital of St. John and was staffed by the aforementioned Monks. The leader of the Monks, or Hospitallers as they became known, was the Blessed Gerard a most saintly man. It is to him that the foundation of the Order is attributed.

Raymond Dupay, the second Master, and the first to be addressed as such, organised the Hospitallers into three classes. Those of noble birth and military ability were Knights. The second grade was that of Chaplain, and the third Serving Brother or Sergeant. The Sergeants assisted the Knights when called to fight and also served the Chaplains, in tending the sick. In caring for the ill and infirm they made many friends in the nobility and consequently many lords, who had been well served and healed, by the Hospitallers, granted them tracts of land and buildings enabling them to amass great wealth. The badge of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem is the, now well known, white Maltese or eight pointed Cross. The earliest example of this is on a seal dated 1207.

It is difficult at this point in their history to ascertain who really fought where. Crusaders, Templars, Teutonic Knights and Hospitallers were all fighting the Saracens. Sometimes they fought together, sometimes separately and sometimes against each other. The Templars had retreated from the Holy land by 1190. The Hospitallers, true to their obligations, continued the fight. Jerusalem and Ascalon fell in 1247, followed by the great

fortress of Krak in 1271 and Margat in 1281. In the end they were all driven out. The final blow came with the fall of Acre in 1291 to Saladin and his forces. The Hospitallers, decimated, but unbowed, and with their Grand Master badly wounded, retreated to Cyprus.

The Cyprus years were an unhappy period but in 1306 they entered into an agreement with the liege lord of Rhodes to the effect that if they could capture Rhodes he would cede them two thirds of that island and include the islands of Leros and Kos.

It was at this time that the demise of the Templars occurred. This event alone increased the power of the Hospitallers. They not only received many properties that had belonged to the Templars but also the pick of the manpower that became available. Those scions of noble families who would formerly have joined the Templars now joined the Hospitallers.

In 1308 they decided to move on the Byzantine Island of Rhodes and on completion of its capture, they named themselves "The Knights of Rhodes". The Turks took a dim view of having the Knights camped on their doorstep. They laid siege to the island but were successfully opposed. In 1310 the Order became the Sovereign Lords of Rhodes albeit under constant attack by the Turks. In 1317 the Knights rebelled against the then Grand Master and replaced him. The Pope, however, had other ideas and in 1319 he appointed Helion de Villeneuve Grand Master.

May I digress for a moment to explain the complex government of the Knights. They were ruled by a **Grand Master**. They were also divided by nationality into groups known as **Langues** each of which had at its head a **Senior Knight**.

First, there was **Provence**, whose head was the **Grand Commander** of the Order an early version of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Under him were the **Sub-Commander** responsible for the supply of soap, meat, etc. and the **Granary Inspector** who managed the supply of wheat and other cereals, both were normally Senior Sergeants.

Second, **Auvergne**, at its head, the **Marshal**, responsible for the supply of armaments, ammunition and horse tackle etc. Under him was the **Grand Groom**, a Sergeant in charge of grooms and stables and the **Constable**, a Knight in charge of the Cavalry.

Third, **France**, whose Senior Knight was the **Grand Hospitaller**.

Fourth, **Italy**, whose Senior Knight was the **Admiral**.

Fifth, **Aragon**, the **Drapier**, who was responsible for uniforms.

Sixth, **England**, the **Grand Turcopolier**, who commanded the Light Cavalry.

Seventh, **Germany**, who was the **Treasurer**,

Eight, **Castile**, who was the **Grand Chancellor**, in charge of the Grand Master's secretariat.

The "Lower House" of the Order was the **Chapter General** which was the source of supreme authority and to which every Knight belonged. The Chapter General elected the **Council** which advised the Grand Master. Locally, in their countries of origin, the Knights were organised into Preceptories headed by a **Grand Prior**, under him were the Commanderies each headed by a **Commander**.

Their presence, at Rhodes, provided a stabilising influence in the eastern part of the Mediterranean. The economy of the area improved considerably and the wealth of the Order increased accordingly. Militarily they attempted to establish a bridgehead into Asia Minor. They started their campaign in 1334. By 1344 they had captured Smyrna. In 1347 they fought a naval engagement near the island of Imbros, defeating the Turks. In the same year the Sultan of Egypt attacked the Kingdom of Armenia and the Knights rushed to its aid, helping to repel the invasion.

The second half of the 14th century saw the Order take part in every battle against the Muslims. Rhodes appeared, to the Turks, to be the rallying point of all Christian forces ranged against them so they kept the island under continuous attack. As the history of this period would fill a book, I will leave it there.

Suffice it to say, after a prolonged campaign by the Turks in 1522, with massive losses on both sides, the Hospitallers capitulated. Sultan Suleiman II allowed the Knights to leave under an honourable truce, taking with them all their arms and artillery and any of the inhabitants who wished to accompany them.

Their next port of call was Sicily where Emperor Charles V of Spain gave permission for the Order to temporarily make it's Headquarters at the Convent of Syracuse. It was here that a significant historical event took place. Whilst at Rhodes the Order had commissioned the building of the carrack, St. Anne. This was delivered to the order at Syracuse in 1523. The St. Anne was a heavily armed auxiliary, 132 feet long with a forty feet beam. Her superstructure stood seventy five feet above the waterline. She carried four thousand tons of stores, victuals for six months. She had a

Blacksmith's shop, Bakery, luxurious Saloons and Cabins, and a Chapel. She had fifty long range guns and a number of lesser guns. Her armoury carried personal weapons for five hundred men. She had a crew of three hundred and was equipped to carry four hundred light cavalry. The most significant attribute, however, was that the ship was sheathed with metal, making it cannon proof. She was the first armoured warship, a long way ahead for her time.

After many trials and tribulations Emperor Charles V ceded to the Order the Islands of Malta and Gozo along with that most troublesome part of his Empire, Tripoli, which was at that time a Christian enclave. On the 26th October 1530, the carrack St. Anne sailed into the Grand Harbour at Malta. The most important item they carried amongst their treasures was the complete set of their archives, which are to this day preserved in Malta.

The history of the Order in Malta alone would fill more than one volume. I shall only endeavour therefore to provide you with some of the more important points.

After formally accepting the island at the capital Mdina, Grand Master Lisle Adams made his headquarters at the village of Birgu, at the entrance of the Grand Harbour in the shadow of Fort St. Angelo. Building works commenced immediately, strengthening the fortifications of Mdina, St. Angelo and in building Auberges, one for each Langue. The building works brought much needed employment to the Maltese people. At the same time as accommodation became available men-at arms, serving brothers, clerics, sea captains, seamen, artificers, and military engineers were transferred from Sicily.

Shortly after this, five galleys of the Order together with two Genoese galleys under the command of Admiral Bernardo Salviati, attacked the Turkish fleet at Modon destroying it and sacked the city. They returned with much booty and 800 slaves.

Building went on apace. The fortifications increased and in 1545 a bakery was built. I mention this because the Royal Navy during the Second World War were still using this building as a bakery.

Disaster struck in 1551; Tripoli fell to the Moslems, this came as no surprise as fighting had been continuous, since the takeover of Malta.

In July 1551, Dragut Ruis, one of Barbarossa's corsair Captains, landed on Malta with 10,000 men. The Turcopolier, Sir Nicholas Upton, with 30 Knights and 400

mounted Maltese auxiliaries, attacked with such fervour, that the Corsairs retreated. Upton died in the battle. This was the first battle of the Order on Maltese soil. Dragut re-embarked his force, attacked and overran Gozo, carrying off the entire population into slavery.

Sensibly the Order had employed the Maltese right from the start, training them as tradesmen, store men, and clerks. The reward for this was that it provided them with excellent artificers and administrators. They now began to recruit seamen, gunners, and sailing masters for the galleys.

In 1557 they elected the 63 year old Jean Parisot de La Vallette as Grand Master. A pious and brave Knight, born in Provence, he had joined the order at 20 years of age. After becoming a Knight he never returned to France; serving at Rhodes, Vitembo, Naples and Malta. He rose steadily through all grades of office in the convent. Prior to being unanimously elected Grand Master, he had served as Governor of Tripoli, Bailiff of Lango, Grand Prior of St. Gilles, and Lieutenant General of the forces at the siege of Zoara. He was a wise experienced Soldier. The right man placed in command at the right time, considering the conflict that was not too far into the future. For a number of years some members of the Order had begun to indulge in dissolute behaviour. He immediately issued a decree that the Order had to revert to its original monastic vows. He then set about improving the defences of Birgu, and reinforced Fort St. Elmo, using the 1500 or so slaves to supplement the Maltese workforce.

This was a wise precaution. It was Suleiman the Magnificent, the Ottoman Emperor's intention to use Malta as a base to attack Europe. Turkish spies were working on Malta, they informed him that he had better attack sooner than later. Spies of the Order, were placed on ships trading with the Turks, they kept the Grand Master up to date with reports on the Turkish Navy. The Grand Master was a man of great foresight; he was convinced that an attack would come soon, and that they would not be treated with the same respect that they had been afforded at Rhodes.

Withstanding a siege required specialist training. La Vallette set about training the 700 or so members of the Order, along with approximately 4000 Maltese irregulars and 7500 Spanish and Italian volunteers. He also set up a system of watchtowers around the coast and improved the fortifications of Mdina, and the Citadel on Gozo. Every able-bodied man on the islands was to rally to the Order in the event of an attack. All the population were to take refuge immediately in Birgu, Mdina, and the Citadel. These

places had been provisioned in advance. All the elderly and infirm were evacuated to Spain.

They didn't have long to wait, on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> May 1565 the huge Turkish Armada was sighted. It consisted of 181 ships. Aboard were an army of 40,000 men, amongst them 6,300 Janissaries, 9,000 Spahis, 4,000 Layalars, (religious fanatics who welcomed death in battle). The force commander, General Mustapha Pasha was a veteran of the Persian and Hungarian Wars. He also had taken part in the defeat of the Order at Rhodes. On first sighting of the Turkish Armada the alarm was raised and the prepared plans put into effect. So started the Great Siege!

To do the Order and the Maltese people justice, regarding their conduct during the Great Siege, would require another talk at least as long as this one, if not longer. Suffice it to say at this point, that it was a magnificent triumph for La Vallette and his defenders. They were hailed, and rightly so, as the saviours of Christian Europe. This was a high point of the Order. La Vallette, however, did not rest on his laurels. He immediately began repairing the defences even though lacking in funds. He despatched emissaries to all the heads of Europe requesting assistance. This was successful with France, Spain, Portugal, and the Vatican all making a contribution. The Pope also sent the civil engineer Francesco Laparelli with plans to improve the defences and to build the city that is now known as Valetta.

In mid 1566 the Order's spies reported a build up of ships and armament at the arsenal in Constantinople. Fearing the worst La Vallette ordered the arsenal set on fire.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> August 1568 La Vallette died of sunstroke. This ended the most illustrious era of the Order. On the 9<sup>th</sup> October 1571 the Order's Galleys along with Italian and Austrian ships defeated the Turkish Navy at the Battle of Lepanto ensuring forever the prestige and proving the striking power of the Order's navy.

The Order continued policing the Mediterranean, fighting small battles and skirmishes and resisting various further Turkish attempts to dislodge them. In 1798 the Knights elected Ferdinand von Hompesch as Grand Master. He was the first German, and the first Grand Master who could speak Maltese.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> June 1798 the French fleet of 472 ships appeared off Valetta, under the command of Napoleon Bonaparte. Because of traitors amongst the Knights, the French

landings were unopposed, except on Gozo but only for a short time! By the 11<sup>th</sup> all the Knights had surrendered. After 268 years Malta was lost.

Von Hompesch was given a pension of 300,000 Francs, and ordered to leave. With a retinue of about 20 of the Order he departed for Trieste. Bonaparte stripped the island of its treasures and departed for Egypt, 53 French Knights accompanied him. The treasure was stored on the flagship L'Orient which was to be sunk in battle. This was the subject of a recent TV documentary.

This effectively ended the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta as a fighting power in the Mediterranean. It has continued in various guises up to the present day, the most prominent example being the St John's Ambulance Brigade. It now has an embassy in Malta and in 55 other states and it has hospitals world wide. It has a representative on the Council of Europe and in several departments of the United Nations. It is restoring Fort St Angelo, which will be used by Novices of the Order and visiting dignitaries .

Without doubt the Order has left its mark. Still standing are its great fortress of Krak in Palestine, the magnificent architecture of Rhodes and Malta and, even here in Scotland, the Preceptory of Torphichen.

All are fitting tributes to a great Order. It has existed, in one form or another, for over 800 years and I have no doubt that this remarkable Order will continue for many years to come. I thank you for your attention.

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