

# Decorated Great Siege Armours for the Hospitaller Knights at the Palace Armoury Museum, Valletta

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## Abstract

The collection of arms and Armour at the Palace Armoury Museum in Valletta represents the Hospitallers' military adaptations during the path of warfare in history and their artistic tastes. Particularly interesting are the mid-sixteenth century Armours, frequently termed the "Great Siege Armours". The latter bear intricate designs of decorations that speak a Mannerist artistic language, inherited by the Italian Renaissance. This language, one may perhaps add, was international and spread from Northern Italy and Southern Germany throughout Europe, manifesting itself in the emergence of different schools of armourers and decorators.

The present collection was first catalogued by Sir G. F. Laking in 1903. Laking categorised and attributed several pieces and harnesses, and he was to remain the only scholar to research these valuable items until 1969. In 1969 the UNESCO sent two Polish experts to study and inventory the arms and armours within the collection. Z. Zygulsky and A. Czerwinsky worked on an extensive and very important inventory between 25 January and 7 February 1969. Unfortunately, the work carried out by the Polish experts lost much of its validity in 1975 when the armoury was moved to what were once the Palace's stables. The UNESCO experts had organised and catalogued each item, inventorizing portions, measurements and case numbers. Hence, the items had to be re-ordered. For a more academic study on the collection of arms and armour, and Hospitaller military organisation, the most recent study was that carried out by S. C. Spiteri in 2003. As for the decorations and methods of identification of Hospitaller Great Siege Armours, the most important work was recently carried out by K. Watts. The latter is the curator of Art and Armour at the Royal Armouries of Leeds.

**KEYWORDS:** *militia, Hospitaller armour, knightly caste armour, Mannerist decorations, the armour of Christ*

## Introduction

The Magistral Palace Armoury Museum in Valletta is one of the most frequently-visited museums in Malta and can be significantly regarded as one of the most important sites on the island. The main reason for its significance is the fact that it once belonged to the Hospitaller Knights of St. John. It was the final arsenal established by the last of the three military Orders.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the collection of arms and Armour within the armoury is very representative of both the Hospitallers' military prowess and their capability for adaptation and military innovations. Moreover, the armoury was originally created to house the Order's militia and mercenaries' weapons. Similar to the other (few) remaining arsenals such as, for example, the Armeria del Doge in Venice, the Tower of London and the Landeszeughaus of Graz in Austria, the Magistral Palace Armoury still retains the Hospitallers' and part of the conscripted troops' arms and Armour within its walls, even though not in the same precise location.<sup>2</sup> The Hospitallers had originated in the military milieu of the crusades, and hence they were armed with personal arms and armour. This was their chivalric inheritance. A fraction was made up of the paid troops, frequently referred to as *stipendiati*, and the arsenal was supervised by the commander of artillery. This was very important throughout the Hospitallers' military activity, since the armoury had to be ready for immediate employment in order to meet unexpected assaults.

This paper is chiefly concerned with the decoration of the mid-sixteenth century knightly caste Armours. Yet, a brief explanation is necessary for a better understanding of the collection. The term *knightly caste armour* refers to a harness meant for a Hospitaller knight. As noted earlier, the armoury was originally intended for the storage and maintenance of the Order's paid troops. Several of these types of armours were used as trophies of arms. Furthermore, others are scattered in other historical buildings in Valletta. Holistically, very little remains of the Order's original arms and Armour. The latter constituted the Hospitallers' armed forces and what one finds today are several knightly caste Armours which originally belonged to individual knights and were most probably stored in the respective Langues in separate Auberges.<sup>3</sup> This also explains why the Order's documents do not reveal purchasing of Armour, since it was acquired by individual knights. The Hospitallers had to own their arms and Armour and were not supplied, like modern armies, by the Order.

The arsenal is now a museum and houses a variety of weapons, including a small number of Ottoman Armour and Rhodian portions. Amongst the latter, one can also find a cavalry helmet incised with the mark of the celebrated

<sup>1</sup> S. C. Spiteri, *Armoury of the Knights*, a study of the Palace Armoury, its collection and the military storehouses of the Hospitaller Knights of the Order of St. John. Midsea Books in association with Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna, Malta, 2003, pp.17-28.

<sup>2</sup> Czerwinsky and Zygulsky, *UNESCO Report* 'Palace Armoury, Malta, 1969, pp. 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> S. C. Spiteri, *The Great Siege, Knights vs Turks, MDLXV*, anatomy of the Hospitaller victory, printed by Gutenberg Press and published by S. C. Spiteri, Malta, 2005 pp. 91-95.

Negroli family.<sup>4</sup> The latter were the most famous armourers of the sixteenth century in Milan. Filippo Negroli was the only armourer mentioned by Giorgio Vasari in *Le Vite* and was described as the Michelangelo of steel. The fact that this cavalry piece bears the mark of the Negroli family, that is, the crossed keys flanked by the initials of the armourer, gives this particular item an elite importance within the collection. Unfortunately, unlike the armet helmet by Domenico Negroli, uncovered with several other Armours during the nineteenth-century by Baron de Belabre, now in Leeds, the Maltese *elmetto da cavallo* does not bear the initials of its maker.<sup>5</sup> However, the crossed-keys certify it is a Negroli.

The museum's Armour collection can be divided in three groups. The mid-sixteenth century ones, those commonly called Great Siege Armours, the late sixteenth century Armours, usually decorated with military paraphernalia, and Hospitaller Armours. The latter share a common feature – they all have a Hospitaller-related insignia or coat of arms.

Although several of the pieces mentioned above are highly decorated with mercury gilding and bear intricate and well-executed designs, one should still consider them as weapons, and not works of art. The Great Siege Armours are typical of Mannerist decorations, or applied arts. This typology of decoration spread all over Europe and was also very much liked by Europe's most admired and feared rival, Süleyman the Magnificent, known as the Lawgiver (1494-1566).<sup>6</sup> By the late fifteenth century the new innovation, fully exploited by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528),<sup>7</sup> was print-making. In fact, printing made possible the divulgation of patterned designs amongst the various botteghe. The most important centres for print-making were Southern Germany and Northern Italy. The typology of the designs present on the mid-sixteenth century Armours is Italian, or more correctly, of Italianate patterned design origin. For a more holistic understanding of this typology of designs and their origins, one has to take a look at the first-century Roman decorations, more precisely, Emperor Nero's Domus Aurea. Part of the Domus Aurea was accidentally discovered in 1480 and might be regarded as the main inspiration for grotesque foliated decorations. Hand in hand with the more delicate and floriate type of decorations produced in Southern Germany, this newly-discovered style married the German typology, and already by the early sixteenth century the two styles become fused to form an international taste. What one has to bear in mind before attempting any study on the decorative designs that enhance

<sup>4</sup> W. S Phyr. and A. J Godoy, 'Heroic Armour of the Italian Renaissance, Filippo Negroli and his Contemporaries'. The Metropolitan Museum of Art with essays and compilations by Silvio Leydi, distributed by Harry .N. Abrams, Inc, New York, exhibition catalogue October 8 1998, January 17 1999, Published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1999, pp. 37-61.

<sup>5</sup> W. J. Karcheski and T. Richardson, 'The Medieval Armour of Rhodes', Co-Published by Higgins Museum and the Royal Armouries, Armouries Drive, Leeds, 2000, pp. 71-73.

<sup>6</sup> J. M Rodgers and R. M. Word, 'Süleyman the Magnificent', Published for the Trustees of the British Museum, British Museum Publications, London, 1988, pp. 28-35.

<sup>7</sup> K. Watts et al, 'Between the Battle and the Sword', Masterpieces from the Armoury of Malta, exhibition catalogue *Les Invalides, Musée d l'Armée* Paris, 21 October 2008 to 11 January 2009. *Musée de l'Armée* and Heritage Malta, Malta, Gutenberg Press Ltd, 2008, pp. 167-168.

the mid-sixteenth century pieces at the Palace Armoury Museum, is that although the grotesque typology was born in 1480, it was incorporated into pre-existing styles, that is, those inherited from the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup>

With the exception of the late sixteenth-century Armours present in the Valletta collection, there was no such thing as Armour decoration. This means that the decorative typologies one finds on late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth century Armours was the same one applied in contemporary decorative arts. Armour symbolises prowess on the battlefield, yet, in the medieval milieu it meant authority and power. Thus, when the Hospitaller Knights arrived on the Maltese islands in 1530, projectile weapons and firearms were already re-shaping warfare. This is very important simply because the role of the fully armoured knight on horseback, and his chivalric codes of honour and martial combat tactics, were reduced drastically. In essence, the sixteenth century Hospitaller Knight was a derivative of the medieval knight. However, his fighting methods followed modern warfare tactics. This is made clearer when observing the fortifications of the Grand Harbour. In fact, the Knights wore half-armour, which was more suitable for infantry purposes and siege warfare. The frescoes by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio (1547-1616) at the Magistral Palace in Valletta clearly convey the Hospitallers' fighting methods and formations which followed the dawn of modern warfare. During the Middle Ages the knight had a defined role in the theatre of war. In fact a knight fought only his equivalent, and his presence was well-understood through feudal banners and Armour enhancement. For a better understanding of the decoration of Armour and its function, one needs to outline, however briefly, medieval Armour decoration and its development.

The most important feature during the Middle Ages was the crest. The latter crowned the helmet, even though it seems that the crest was not applied on the great helm.<sup>9</sup> As aforesaid, the crest manifested the predominance of the armoured knight on the battlefield.<sup>10</sup> With the fourteenth century the great helm was slowly being replaced by another more practical headpiece, the bascinet. The latter was also used by the Hospitaller Knights and was usually gilt either with gold, silver, latten or copper.<sup>11</sup> As mentioned earlier, the Hospitallers owned their arms and Armour; this was a medieval or crusading custom.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the Armour was part of one's personal and chivalric inheritance.

As the fourteenth century wore on, Armour was ornamented with enamels and jewels, and plate Armour made its appearance.<sup>13</sup> Hence Fleurs-de

<sup>8</sup> D. Landau and P. Parshall, *The Renaissance Print, 1470-1550*, Yale University Press New Haven and London, 1994, pp. 252-259.

<sup>9</sup> C. Blair, *European Armour*, circa 1066 to circa 1700, made and printed in Great Britain by W. Clowes and sons Ltd. London and Baccles and Colchester B.T. Batsford Ltd, London, 1972, pp. 171-179.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> S. C. Spiteri, 2003, pp. 17-28.

<sup>13</sup> F. R. Tylecote, *A History of Metallurgy*, Second edition, the Institute of Materials, PicA publishing services, Drayton, Nr Abingdon, Great Briton, 1992, pp. 95-99.

Lys, gothic-type monster-head terminations, intricate floriate and floral bud designs and biblical texts, that is, stoggsebete inscriptions, decorated plate Armour.<sup>14</sup> It is within these already existing styles that the grotesque, or a grottesce, style was incorporated. By the fifteenth century the industry of arms and Armour was divided between Northern Italy and Southern Germany. The various botteghe in Milan, and later on in Brescia, and the workshops of Nuremberg, which were the same places where printing was expanding knowledge and applied Arts patterned decorations, became the centres of Armour production.<sup>15</sup> With the advent of modern warfare during the early sixteenth century, these centres produced parade Armours for the most powerful monarchs of the time. Later on, Southern German and Northern Italian *armaioli* would distribute their knowledge around Europe, particularly in Spain, France and England. With the onset of the sixteenth century Filippo Negroli, Bartolommeo Campi, and Pompeo della Cesa, evolved into the leading armourers of the time.<sup>16</sup> Rather than armourers they were *stilisti di armatura*, as brilliantly described by Lionello Boccia.<sup>17</sup> In Germany, amongst the most renowned armourers were Koloman Helmschmid, his son Desiderius, the engraver Matthias Fraunpreiss the Elder, Jörg Sorg the Younger, Daniel Hopfer, who coined the Hopfer style, Peter Von Speyer, and Anton Peffenhauser of Augsburg. In Nuremberg there was Kunz Lochner the Younger and Wolfgang Groszchedel of Landshut.<sup>18</sup> The latter was also active in Spain. Wolf of Landshut, as he is also known, is particularly interesting when discussing the collection of the Palace Armoury Museum. When Sir Guy Francis Laking inventoried the armoury during the early twentieth century, he attributed a cap-à-pie harness to Wolf of Landshut. Yet, even though this garniture bears German influences, the style differs from that of Wolf of Landshut.<sup>19</sup>

### The Great Siege Armours

The mid-sixteenth-century Armours, that is, the Great Siege Armours, are largely Italian in fashion and method of decoration. However, few examples bear German influences with traces of Italian patterned designs. Although the decoration can help in dating Armour, the form and shape of the harness are also very helpful. Several of the Armours that will be described in this paper are mere portions usually comprising a breastplate, backplate, por-

<sup>14</sup> C. Blair, 1972, pp. 179-180.

<sup>15</sup> W. S. Phyr, and A. J. Godoy, 1999, pp. 25-36

The most famous armourers in Milan during the fifteenth century were the Negroni da Ello, also known as the Missaglia of Milan.

<sup>16</sup> L. G. Boccia, '*L'Armeria del Museo Civico Medievale di Bologna*', cataloghi della collezione del Museo Civico Medievale di Bologna. Bramante Editrice, Italia, 1991, pp. 3-5. For more information see, F. Navarro, 'A Study of the Decorative Designs on the Suits of Armour of the Hospitaller Knights (1550-1798), In the Valletta Palace Armoury', unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Malta, 2010, Cat. No. 4A. pp. 113-121.

<sup>17</sup> L. G. Boccia, 1991, pp. 3-5.

<sup>18</sup> J. G. Mann, '*The Etched Decoration of Armour*', a study in classification by J. G. Mann, M.A., F. S. A, Annual lecture on aspects of Art. British Academy, 1940, pp. 22-23.

<sup>19</sup> F. Navarro, 2010, Cat. No. 2. pp. 99-104.

tions of vambrace, helmets and tassets. The portions of Armour of Grand Master Jean de Valette belong to this typology of decorations. In fact, the motifs present on the de Valette portions of Armour are similar, in some cases almost identical to the other mid-sixteenth century knightly caste portions. The form of the Great Siege Armours varies from globose and proto-peascod to peascod-type breastplates. By the 1580s the bellied breastplate made space for the more pronounced fine peascod breastplate. Hence, each breastplate has a medial ridge, or bend, which protected the wearer and reinforced the plate of the Armour. Late sixteenth-century examples have a very low medial ridge (a pointed-bellied type of Armour),<sup>20</sup> whereas the Great Siege components have a higher ridge. Still, the latter vary according to their dates. That is, early-sixteenth-century Armours have a flatter medial bend, the globose type, whereas the ones dating circa 1560-65 bear a rounder form and a lower bend, the peascod type. It is not surprising, therefore, that the medial ridge was highly decorated simply because the decoration was done in etching, and this did not diminish the defensive qualities of the weapon.<sup>21</sup>

The designs can be divided in two or three groups of importance. With infrequent exceptions, the Great Siege Armours bear three bands of decorations; these are ornamented with inner and outer border motifs. The inner borders are usually decorated with growing foliage, floriate and grotesque head terminations, with scattered inclusions of sixteenth-century interpretations of Roman soldiers, German mercenaries and allegories. The most important feature is the outer border, commonly adorned with foliated motifs such as an engrailed-like trefoil motif, undulating leaves, trefoil leaves, linear Fleur-de-Lys, or cusped leaves. Following the outer borders, one can match various pieces. However, were there is no outer border one has to rely on the inner band decorations. The Armours selected for this paper were termed according to their outer border motif. The most recurrent inner border motif is the foliated squatting winged female figure. The latter is represented on nearly all the 1565 Armours and it is usually encapsulated within rinceaux foliage and floriated, grotesque head terminations, stylised harpies, humanoids, trumpet blowing cherubs, urns, animal head terminations, and cross-surmounting. As aforesaid, this typology of decoration was not exclusively meant for the embellishing of Armour. In fact one can compare these motifs with Alessandro Araldi's (1460-1529) fresco painting at the Camera di San Paolo in Parma, executed in 1514, and several other works by Italian print makers and artists.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> L. G. Boccia, *Italia*, 1991, pp. 3-5.

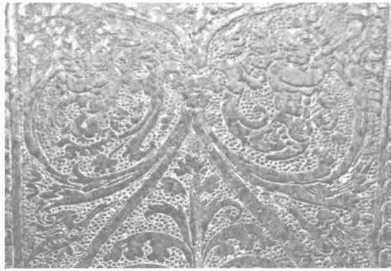
<sup>21</sup> J. Truscott, '*Hair Spray and the Maltese Armour*', *Royal Armouries Year Book*, Vol, V, Leeds, 2000, pp. 19-26

The word etch is related to German and Dutch words and literally means to eat away, or to corrode. This is the process that led to etching both in print-making and Armour. The drawing is eaten onto the surface of the steel with the use of acid and leaves an incised pattern on the metal that would later on be gold gilt, usually using fire gilding, or mercury gilding.

<sup>22</sup> K. Watts et al, 2008, p. 181.



**FIG 1:** Probably Italian, circa . Central Band, Breastplate with Linear Fleur-de-Lys Borders. Inv. P.A. 270/L.A. 442 Heavy/Medium Cavalry



**FIG 2:** Italian or German, circa . Central Band, Breastplate with Engrailed Concave Trefoil Borders. Inv. P.A. 278/L.A. 164 Heavy/Medium Cavalry

### A descriptive assortment of the Great Siege Armours

Adorned by three bands of decorations, this cavalry piece (Figure 1) has a linear Fleur-de-Lys outer border motif. The central rim is adorned with two embossed volutes that contain delicately-incised winged dragons, whilst the flanking bands are adorned with rinceaux foliage and head terminations. This example is a cavalry piece because it has two lance-rest perforations on the right hand side. The other matching piece, except for the adjoining back-plate, is now housed at the Royal Armoury of Leeds.<sup>23</sup> The identification of these pieces, the two pauldrons, right vambrace, upper and lower cannon, and the left upper cannon, was possible by comparing the outer border motif that is the linear Fleur-de-Lys.

The engrailed concave trefoil border Armour (Figure 2) is another richly decorated portion that belongs to the mid-sixteenth century. Unlike other contemporary examples it is decorated with a single central band adorned with floral scrolls, foliage which terminates in cornucopias – a symbol of abundance – and adorsed Pegasus. The cornucopias are crowned with a medallion, once more portraying the Virgin and Child and held by flanking putti. Rather particular are the profiled foliated masks at the lower section of the band, which recall the faces of Giuseppe Arcimboldi (1527-1593). Still Italian in style, this Armour has also some affinities with the German typology of decoration. In fact, there is a similar three-quarter harness attributed to Jörg Sorg the Younger at the Royal Armouries of Leeds that can be compared to the Maltese example. The Valletta piece portrays similar running foliage. Yet less delicate when compared to the one at Leeds, which has a more slender, more mechanical, type of growing foliage.

When the Armour is not embellished with an outer border, one will therefore have to rely on the inner decorations for its identification. There are a few

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



**FIG 3:** [left] Italian or German, circa 1565-1570. Central Band, Breastplate with Landsknecht or Swiss Mercenary Fifer Decoration. Inv. P.A. 121/L.A. 255. Medium/Light Cavalry

**FIG 4:** [above] probably Italian, circa 1565 - 1570, Upper Medial ridge, central Band, Breastplate with Chain and Engrailed Armour Inv. P.A. 120a/L.A. 346. Medium/Light cavalry

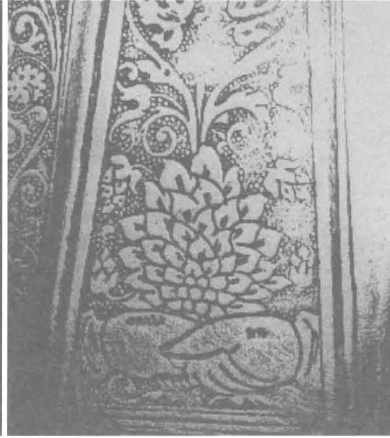
examples of mid-sixteenth century Armours that are not adorned by an outer border, like the Landsknecht, or Swiss Mercenary Fifer breastplate (Figure 3). The Armour is made up of just a breastplate and a left tasset. Unlike the other Great Siege portions, the three decorative bands are decorated with two running ribbons. Of peascod form, the most representative decorative feature on this cuirass is the central warrior. The latter, either a German Landsknecht or Swiss Reislauffer, is crowned at the top, that is, close to the neck's rim, by an elegant and classical winged female figure holding the surrounding foliage. The latter is very similar to Niklaus Manuel's drawing of Military Fortuna, circa 1513. However, the etched decoration lacks the iconographical attributes of the deity. The attribution to Military Fortuna can be encouraging if seen in the context of German graphical Art. In fact, both the German mercenaries and Military Fortuna were frequently represented alongside each other. It seems that the central military figure is armed with a short sword and wearing puffed hose, thus the Swiss Reislauffer is more in line with the central military figure. On the other hand, German Landsknechts were usually armed with two-handed long swords and wore puffed sleeves and were represented playing various instruments, as, for example, in Daniel Hopfer's etching of Five Landsknechts, circa 1530. The fifer, like the figure etched on the Valletta Armour, resembles the typology present in Hopfer's etching, and therefore, in the absence of an outer border, this Armour was termed Landsknecht, or Swiss Mercenary Fifer Armour.

Of particular interest is the Armour with the chain and engrailed border motif (Figure 4). This cuirass includes a matching backplate adorned with





**FIG 5:** Italian, circa 1560 – 1570. Breastplate with Clasped Hands Decorations. Inv. P.A. 112a/L.A. 189 Light Field Armour

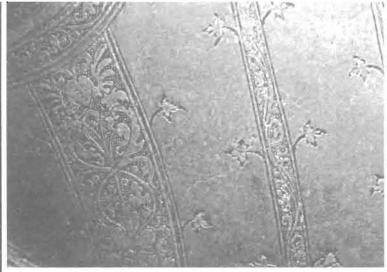


**FIG 6:** Detail of Backplate.

the same pattern. The latter bears some minor variations as, for example, the inclusion of flying birds. Thus, the same patterned design was used for the enhancement of this Armour. Most likely this cuirass formed part of a light cavalry harness of the type fashioned during the time of the Great Siege. The matching tassets are conserved at the Royal Armouries of Leeds, whereas other matching portions might be recognised if one compares the engrailed outer border motif.<sup>24</sup> Of peascod form, this Armour also includes another prominent motif, that of an etched running chain flanking the central band. This motif is present on all the identified components of the Armour which facilitate its matching components' identification. The inner borders, on both the breast and backplate, are adorned with a series of growing foliage that are reminiscent of contemporary botanical studies. The latter was very popular amongst artists and printmakers in Southern Germany. Later on these studies would establish the basis for modern botanical studies.<sup>25</sup> The bands are all adorned by double running laced ribbons that imitate at turns the chain motif, whereas the inner motifs bear a variety of rinceaux ornamentations. Yet, the most striking amongst the foliage are the terminations that recall acanthus spirals, in heraldry sometimes termed boxing-glove acanthus or conch-shell acanthus. Rich in its decoration, the central band of the chain and

<sup>24</sup> K. Watts et al, 2008, pp. 180-181.

<sup>25</sup> J. R. Hale, *Artists and Warfare in the Renaissance*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1990, pp. 253-254.



**FIG. 7:** [left] Probably Italian, circa 1560-1565. Portions of Armour, Spiky Leaf Armour, .P.A. 114A, 172cb, 20, 131/L.A. 251, 252, 280, 279. Medium light Cavalry

**FIG. 8:** [above] Detail, Breastplate left band decorations.

engraved Armour is also adorned by two addorsed chimere, or harpies.<sup>26</sup> The latter are encircled with growing stems and crown another winged and foliated female figure. The last is in turn crowning a candelabrum adorned with confronted head terminations. This pattern is repeated all over the three bands and includes delicately incised head terminations.

One of the most interesting pieces in the Palace Armoury collection is the Armour termed clasped hand Armour (Figure 5). This cuirass is accompanied by a left pauldron (shoulder defence) and a backplate, and differs from the other Great Siege Armours for a variety of reasons.<sup>27</sup> Of globose form, the clasped hand Armour is adorned by five radiating bands and it is extremely rich in symbolism. The Armour does not have a bordering motif. However, the clasped hands were noted both by Laking in the early twentieth century and by the Polish UNESCO experts in 1969.<sup>28</sup> The clasped hands (Figure 6) were identified as the *impresa* of the Manfredi of Faenza. In reality the clasped hands motif is not given any particular prominence when compared to the rest of the decoration. Yet, one should say that as the sixteenth century wore on, the *impresa*, or insignia on Armour was gaining popularity,<sup>29</sup> and since the Hospitaller Knights belonged to Europe's most illustrious families, this attribution cannot be discarded.

<sup>26</sup> L. N. Valentine, 'Ornaments in Medieval Manuscripts', a glossary by L. N. Valentine, Faber and Faber, 14 Russel Square London, 1996, p. 56.

<sup>27</sup> K. Watts et al, 2008, pp. 182-184.

<sup>28</sup> Czerwinsky and Zygulsky, 'UNESCO Palace Armoury Inventory,' Palace Armoury Museum, Valletta 1969, p 15

<sup>29</sup> S. W. Phyr, D.J. La Rocca, M. Ogawa, 'Arms and Armour', Notable Acquisitions 1991-2002, The Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition catalogue, September 2002 to June 29 2003. Publication made possible by the Evelyn Sharp Foundation, New York 2002, pp. 18-19. By the late sixteenth century the *impresa* of the wearer was incised, and decorated, on the upper section of the medial ridge. During the same period, when an armorer gained popularity it was a common custom to find his own *impresa*, as for example with Pompeo della Cesa.

As aforesaid, this Armour is rich in symbolism, and perhaps a better reading of the bands' ornamentation would help in the contextualisation of the clasped hands. Unlike the lateral radiating bands, the central bands do not contain the clasped hand motif. Usually the insignia would be placed beneath the collar, or goletta. The upper section of the central band is adorned by a rising phoenix flanked by the sun and the moon. The moon rests on an apparent burning bush, which recalls heraldic rayonné lines. The bush is held by three putti, or more likely, pans or satyrs. The lower section of the band contains a winged cherub surrounded by foliage and surmounting two opposed pelicans. The latter crowns in turn a basket of fruit, and this is held by two rampant and stylised bulls. This is a complex repetitive composition that differs from the rest of the mid-sixteenth century Armours, whereas the decoration is charged with early Christian symbolism.

Most mid-sixteenth century Armours are usually made up of few remaining portions. In fact it is rare at the Palace Armoury to find a full knightly caste harness that belongs to the Great Siege period. A remarkable example is the Armour known as Spiky Leaf Armour (Figure 7). Mercury gilt, of peascod form and accompanied by a backplate, buffe, or bevor (face guard), right and left pauldrons, and portions of both the right and left arm pieces, the Spiky leaf Armour is decorated by three radiating bands and two narrower bands flanking the central panel.

The outer borders of these radiating bands are adorned with a growing spiky leaf that denotes this Armour's identifying name. The breastplate's inner bands' decorations contain confronted pelicans whereas the remaining growing foliage evolves in profiled birds (Figure 8). The side panels bear minimal variations, such as the inclusion of growing foliage terminating in winged masks, similar to cherubs, and elegantly interlaced cornucopias. Like other contemporary examples at the Grand Masters' Magistral Palace Armoury, the Spiky Leaf Armour's neck protection, the gorget, does not match the remaining portions. This is very important to note, simply because this non-matching part of the Armour was identified by comparing the outer borders of each component. The gorget is decorated with stylised dolphins and arm trophies. As aforesaid, this typology of decorations pertains to a later stage of the sixteenth century. Military paraphernalia, stylised animals and intricate interlacing belong to the second group of Armours present in the Palace Armoury collection. As modern warfare wore on, Renaissance typologies of Armour embellishment made way for arm trophies, ironically when the utility of Armour was approaching its final scene on the theatre of war.

The armoury's original function was to store and maintain the arms and Armour of the paid troops. With the dawn of modern warfare the fully armoured knight on horse back, the chevalier, was rendered obsolete. During the first decade of the sixteenth century Christian armies slowly resembled modern or centralised armies. Thus, organised lines of formations, ammunition projectile fire weapons and gunpowder were used to confront the gradually fading but still dangerous Ottoman invader.<sup>30</sup> As defenders of Malta and Christendom, the Hospitallers followed contemporary warfare. Already dur-

<sup>30</sup> J. M. Rodgers and R.M. Word, 1988, pp. 28-35.

ing the early sixteenth century, the closest example of the chivalric knight on horseback was the mounted knight wearing war armours. The latter was very popular in Europe and several examples came down to us. Within the Hospitaller context the most famous war armour is the one painted by Caravaggio in his celebrated portrait of Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt, now housed at the Louvre.<sup>31</sup> By the first decade of the seventeenth century the cavalry-armoured knight was equipped with firearms. The latter was the cuirassier. In order to withstand fire-arms, therefore, Armour was heavily reinforced with removable components. Thus, early seventeenth century Armour decorations, particularly for the cuirassier, included studs framing the border of the Armour. The decoration of the breastplate still retained its original decorative composition. However, instead of having the inner and outer borders intricately adorned and gilt like the 1565 examples, the only decorated part was the framing border. The latter was decorated either by pale incisions, etched or engraved in steel, or sometimes simply gold-gilt and usually damascened. This type of reinforced, bullet proof Armour represented the last scene of applied art on Armour. Starting with the seventeenth century, artistically decorated Armours were mostly parade Armours. As an arsenal, the armoury had to adapt itself to these rapid changes and several of the militia Armours were used as trophies of arms onto the walls of the armoury. Such weapons were inspiring mainly for the decoration of Baroque funerary monuments at St. John's Co-Cathedral, which recall the military oeuvre of the Hospitallers, their faith and vow to defend Christianity.

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<sup>31</sup> K. Sciberras and D.M. Stone, 'Caravaggio, Art, Knighthood and Malta', Midsea Books for the History of Art Programme, Malta, 2006, pp. 70-79.