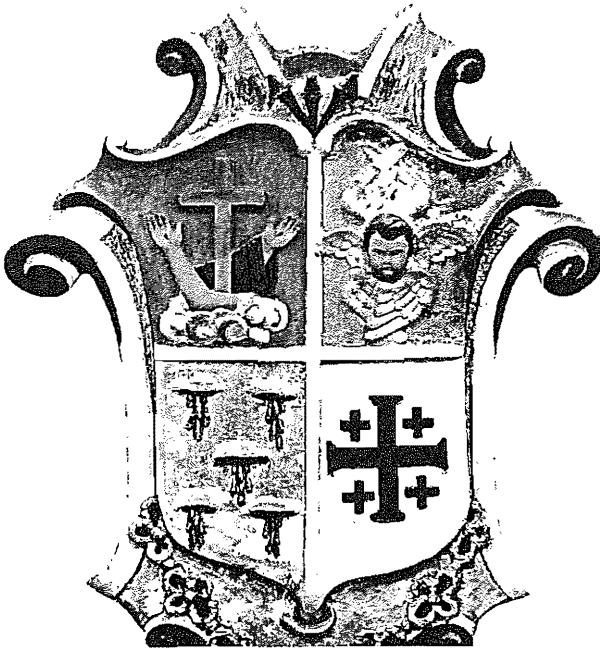


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FEUDAL OR SOVEREIGN RULERS?
THE GRAND MASTERS OF THE ORDER OF
ST JOHN IN EARLY MODERN MALTA

Abstract:

In 1530 the Hospitaller Order of St John accepted Malta and its dependencies as a fief of the Kingdom of Sicily thus freeing Emperor Charles V from direct responsibility of these two southern-most and more exposed of his vast possessions. At first the Grand Master exercised very limited authority and ruled Malta very much as a feudal lord. However within a few decades his power over the Maltese grew so much that the area which remained free of his control was indeed very narrow. In fact, the more intensively the Grand Master dominated the local administration, the more energetically he exercised his power, the more he seemed to rule like a sovereign. This authority was enforced and fully exercised by later Grand Masters who found themselves free to dictate matters on their authority as princes of Malta.

The late eighteenth century English traveller Patrick Brydon wrote an interesting description of the ageing ruling Grand Master the Portuguese Pinto De Fonseca (1741-1773).

He has now been at the head of this singular little state for upwards of thirty years... He is a clear-headed, sensible little old man; which at so advanced a period of life, is very uncommon.... and as grand master of Malta, he is more absolute, and possesses more power than most sovereign princes. His titles are Serene Highness and Eminence; and as he has the disposal of all lucrative offices, he makes his councils what he pleases...¹

The above description of Grand Master Pinto suggests that Brydon, and probably many of his contemporaries were either unaware, or perhaps they ignored the fact that despite their pretensions, the Grand Masters of Malta only ruled Malta as feudal lords and officially, at least, they owed allegiance to whoever ruled Sicily as king.

The islands of Malta and Gozo, together with the Spanish fortress of Tripoli

¹ P. Brydon, *A Trip Through Malta and Sicily*, (London, 1773), vol.2 pp.327-28. Letter xvi written on 7 June 1772.

in North Africa, had originally been offered to the Order of St John by Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, in 1523 immediately after their expulsion from Rhodes by the Ottoman Turks. However the Order was reluctant to accept Malta and its dependencies and spent the next seven years wandering in search of a temporary base in the Mediterranean from which it could stage the re-conquest of Rhodes. During all these years Grand Master L'Isle Adam and his Council vainly hoped for a better turn of events and it was only in 1530 that the Order accepted, albeit reluctantly, Malta and its dependencies. With this agreement Spain, and its dependent Kingdom of Sicily, were freed from direct responsibility of maintaining the security of these two southernmost and more exposed of its vast possessions. The territories thus became the major objectives of the Ottoman offensive to seize control of the central Mediterranean. But the Order soon realized that money wise Malta was a bad bargain – a negative aspect which was compensated by political considerations, for the terms were so generous that the Grand Masters of the Order of St John soon discovered that they could act as de facto sovereigns rather than as feudal tributaries according to requirements of the terms in Charles V's charter.

Until the advent of the Order in 1530, Malta was considered as one of the many communes of Sicily, a state of affairs which was not altered in the first part of the sixteenth century. This explains why in 1536, Jean Quintin d'Autun, a priest and a French member of the Order of St. John, described Malta as,

*...part of Sicily and has its same customs, Malta became Roman along with Sicily, and since that time it has always had the same rights and the same government.*²

The first step towards sovereign rule over Malta came about with the urbanization process of the Malta harbour enclave. The Magisterial Law Courts were set up in 1533 under Grand Master L'Isle Adam, and by the time of the Spanish Grand Master Juan d'Homedes (1536-1553) the Order was allowed to enjoy the sovereign prerogative of coining money. But the most important aspect of the urbanization process resulted in a drastic improvement of the island's fortifications. Even before the Order set foot on Malta, in the summer of 1530, before the arrival of the main body of Knights, the Order had dispatched in advance a number of masons and craftsmen to carry out urgent repairs to Malta's dilapidated bastions, especially to Fort St Angelo sited in the Grand Harbour.

L'Isle Adam chose the latter fort for his headquarters, a decision motivated by

² J. Quintin D'Autun, *Insulae Melitae Descriptio*. Lyons, 1536. Transl. and notes by HCR Vella, *The Earliest Description of Malta.*, (Malta, 1980), p.19.

the paramount maritime interests of the Order. But there was another reason which exerted some weight. L'Isle Adam had been solemnly compelled by Charles V to respect the customary 'privileges' of the Maltese. For this reason too, the old town of Mdina at the centre of the Island together with urgent repairs to its fortifications was left under the jurisdiction of the Maltese municipality or Università, as the municipality was called.³

Prior to the advent of the Order of St John, the decision to erect fortifications lay with the Spanish Viceroy of Sicily and his council, although the responsibility for their maintenance rested with the local municipalities – in this case with the Malta and Gozo Università councils. Funds for their maintenance had to be raised locally too, either through direct imposts, or through indirect taxation, or through the fines collected by the law courts. In addition every male adult residing within the municipality's jurisdiction had to give four days forced-duty annually for the maintenance of the fortifications – an unpopular rule that successive Grand Masters inherited and continued to exact as the defensive projects became grander and grander.⁴

However the Grand Masters continued to exercise very limited authority at first and it was only with the passage of time that they became conscious of their dual position. On the one hand, as head of the Order of St. John, a Grand Master was subject to the Order's statutes and was considered a *primus inter pares* by the other members of the Order. In such circumstances, a Grand Master was expected to lead according to the advice of the Grand Council. At the same time, the Grand Master ruled Malta as feudal overlord.⁵

From Grand Master La Valette (1558-1568) to Grand Master Verdalle (1582-1595)

Within a mere 30 years from the advent of the Order in Malta the Maltese had become so dependent on their feudal lord that by the time of Grand Master La Valette (1558-1568), the area that remained free of his control was indeed very narrow. In fact, the more intensively the Grand Master dominated the local administration, the more the Maltese shifted their allegiance from their Università to the Grand Master. The more energetically the Grand Master's sovereign rights were exercised, the more restricted were all sorts of common customary rights.

Little heed was paid to the ancient privileges and liberties of the Maltese. In

³ G. Wettinger, 'Early Maltese popular attitudes to the government of the Order of St John', *Melita Historica*, vol.vi (1974), pp.255-78, esp. p.261.

⁴ C. Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta*, (Malta, 2000), esp chap. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*

exercising its functions, the Università continually appealed for justification of its position. This argument was often based on antiquity, custom and traditions as a source of authority, and intended to limit the encroaching demands of the Grand Masters. By the late sixteenth century, the Università had become so weak and enfeebled, that it busied itself with small measures, particularly the distribution of grain, and generally played the tune of the ruling Grand Master. Yet it remained the organ which vested the Maltese élite with oligarchic pretensions, surviving as a symbol of Maltese traditions of liberty until the early years of British rule.⁶

In order to survive and grow, the Università had to depend on its usefulness as instrument of the Grand Master's government. As such, the Order did not wish to get rid of the 'people's representatives', but expected its representatives to be cooperative and acquiescent, consenting to money grants when asked, offering constructive counsel, and not directing their energies to criticism or obstruction. Yet in the long run, opposition was inevitable, particularly when Grand Master La Valette tried to take over uncontrolled authority to tax the Università. This was the most serious accusation brought forward against the Grand Master who attempted to impose burdens in the form of taxes on the people, mainly extracted from customs duties, the selling of wine, the sale and transfer of property, and on loans. This business was originally run by the Università, but it was appropriated by the Grand Master who managed to raise a sum of approximately 11,000 scudi annually. La Valette even arrested and later hanged a respectable Maltese doctor, Giuseppe Callus, for having written a letter of protest to the King of Spain, which had unfortunately been intercepted by the Grand Master. La Valette's ability to impose taxes and to make laws, without consultation or assent of his subjects, demonstrates that by the 1560s the Grand Master was already abrogating to himself powers as an acknowledged right.⁷ La Valette's heroic leadership during the Ottoman Siege of 1565 further strengthened the Grand Master's role so that by his death in 1568, La Valette behaved more like a sovereign and less like a feudal lord.

In spite of this, the ever increasing supreme overlordship of the Grand Master did not pass uncontested. Confusions of jurisdiction, rivalries and government institutions abounded. The Grand Master had in fact

⁶ In 1814, the Governor of Malta Sir Thomas Maitland (1813-1824) complained with Lord Bathurst at the Colonial Office that 'the [Maltese] people have come to depend on government for all their wants'. The introduction of the laissez-faire economic policy led to the disruption of government intervention in the importation of grain and by 1836 this was controlled by a few British merchants. P. Bartolo, *Il-Hobz tal-Maltin... u l-kummerċ hieles li riedu l-Ingliżi* (1812-38), in H. Frendo (ed), *Storja '78* (Malta, 1978), pp.78-79.

⁷ E. Bartolo (ed), *Min kien Callus? Analizi storjka taz-zmienijiet li fihom ghex Guzeppi Mattew Callus*, (Malta, 2003), esp. Pp.7-14, 27-32, 55-62.

successfully managed to tackle the Università of Mdina, but there was still the authority of the Bishop. Furthermore, the establishment of a separate Inquisition Tribunal in 1574 aggravated the situation. All three authorities - the Grand Master, the Bishop and the Inquisitor - looked to the Pope as their final font of authority. The Grand Master's actual power was more like an intricate mosaic of particular prerogatives, rights and powers, than a homogeneous, all-inclusive authority. The new state of Malta was therefore a fusion of temporal and spiritual power.

In order to consolidate and extend their power, successive Grand Masters had to meddle with parts of the old system of authority and risk facing furious resistance and criticism in doing so. Perhaps one of the most dramatic rebellions took place during the rule of Grand Master La Cassière (1572-1581) which caused upheaval among most rank and file of the Order. The charges brought in Rome against the Grand Master indicate that it was his disposition to act without consultation which aroused most hostility, namely his very conception of political power. But La Cassiere's troubles were an internal affair of the Order which arouse as the Grand Master tried to exact 'absolute authority' within the Order itself. Indeed it was charged that 'he wanted to do things absolutely in his own way', and that 'in the end no one liked a command so absolute'.⁸ At a special meeting of the Order's Council - from which La Cassiere foolishly absented himself - the knights staged a coup. They replaced La Cassiere by Romegas, a hero of the Ottoman Siege and a daring corsair, and placed La Cassiere under arrest at Fort St Angelo. But La Cassiere's 'restraint and great gift of moderation' in dealing with his antagonists not only managed to avoid blood shed, but also managed to turn the tables. Both La Cassiere and Romegas appealed to Rome. But while la Cassiere was met with full honours and great pomp, Romegas was forced to ask pardon from the Grand Master, a humiliation that proved too much for the gallant Romegas who unexpectedly died the following November. Soon after, the rebellious knights were reprimanded by the Pope but La Cassiere too passed away on 21 December 1581.⁹

The suppression of the coup strengthened the position of the Grand Mastership and its prestige was increased after the conferment of the Cardinalate on the successor of La Cassiere - Verdalle - in December 1587. Every Grand Master after Verdalle enjoyed the status equal in rank to that of Cardinal, and therefore the title of 'Most Eminent Highness'.

⁸ B. Dal Pozzo, *Historia della sacra religione militare di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano, detta di Malta*, vol.I. Verona, 1703, vol.I., pp.180,187; C. Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity*, pp.20-23.

⁹ Dal Pozzo, *Historia della sacra religione militare*, pp.188-89.

The state of Malta was to enter the seventeenth century with a more 'modern' executive, one vested with greater power and authority. The Grand Master could now act not only as feudal overlord, but also as a Prince along the lines of the increasingly absolute monarchies of sixteenth century Europe. However this form of absolutism was tempered by increasing Papal powers over the island. Whilst conferment of the Cardinalate on the Grand Master may have strengthened his power vis-à-vis his often insubordinate knights, it weakened the former's independence with respect to the Pope. This problem was doubled when in 1574 "with imprudent piety Grand Master La Cassière requested from the Pope the appointment of an Inquisitor to guard against Protestant contagion. This official combined his commission with that of papal ambassador, and lost no opportunity to interfere in the Order's government, making Roman supervision a minute and therefore a pettier influence than it had been at Rhodes".¹⁰ An attempt to shore-up the authority of the Grand Master by one Grand Master was to result in a thorn in the side of the Grand Master's elected successors.

Concluding Remarks

In order to consolidate and extend their power, the Grand Masters had to appropriate parts of the old system of authority and risk facing furious resistance as they did so. In the act of strengthening their position further, successive Grand Masters did not sweep the stage clean, with the result that, older and outmoded institutions survived throughout their 268 years of rule over Malta right up to the capitulation to the French in 1798.

The Università proved a weak institution and had already been neutralized by the mid-sixteenth century. The shock of battle and a collective solidarity through the activation of comradeship, team-work, and *esprit de corps* in the face of an Ottoman Siege in 1565 had helped to transform the role of Grand Master La Valette into a hero and a de facto prince of Malta. The grandmastership further emerged strengthened from the traumatic experience that followed the coup against Grand Master La Cassière in 1581 and it managed to increase its prestige particularly after the conferment of the cardinalate on Grand Master Verdalle in December 1587.

This new authority was fully exercised by later Grand Masters who found themselves free to dictate matters on their authority as princes of Malta - a designation duly adopted by Grand Master Pinto (1741-1773). By then the sovereignty of the King of Spain over Malta was exercised in name only, recognized particularly as it facilitated the

¹⁰ H.J.A Sire, *The Knights of Malta*. New Haven 1994, p.76.

importation of duty free grain and other commodities from Sicily.¹¹ The establishment of the Roman Inquisition in Malta led to two competing spheres of influence: the Grand Master and the Order's territorially-based power structure based on the Absolutist State on the one hand, and the trans-territorial system of surveillance of the Inquisition, concerned often with practices but also clearly an extension of Roman power at the very heart of this small European state. But this sword proved to be double-edged. It could be used as an appeal against manifestations of local prepotency of the Order's hierarchy, as much as to appeal against Rome's representatives.

¹¹ In NLM Libr. 1220 esp. p.196, Notary Grisetti attempts to show that Malta was still loyal to its overlord the king of Sicily. Grisetti argues that the old medieval privileges regarding the duty-free grain quota should not only continue to be honoured, but they should be extended to include all other basic commodities including meat supplies.