

## **THE KNIGHTS OF MALTA**

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Masonic Templarism in Queensland is administered by a body whose full title is The Great Priory of the United Religious, Military and Masonic Orders of the Temple and of St. John of Jerusalem, Palestine, Rhodes and Malta. This paper seeks to examine the historical roots of the second or appendant of these two united Orders, that of St. John. The original Order of St. John later became popularly known as the Knights of Malta, a shortened name by which it is still widely known, as is the Masonic Order of St. John. It must be stressed though, that as with the Order of the Temple, there is no direct historical link from the original Knights to the Masonic degree or Order of Malta.

The origins of the Order of St. John are of course, in that area of the eastern Mediterranean variously known as Palestine, the Holy Land and Outremer (Lit. "Beyond the sea" Ed.) Since the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine 1 (the Great) there had been a steady stream of pilgrims to the holy shrines of Palestine, mainly from Western Europe. By 603AD, at the behest of Pope Gregory the Great, the Abbot Probus had set up a hospice in Jerusalem, close to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, to cater to the increasing number of pilgrims, and the later Hospital of St. John claimed at least a spiritual continuity with it.

The seventh century also saw the founding of the new religion of Islam by the Prophet Mohammed, and his unification of the Arab peoples. After Mohammed's death in 632AD, the Arabs began to gather for themselves the remains of both the Persian and Byzantine Empires, which included the lands of Palestine. Thus by the end of the 8th century, the Frankish Emperor Charlemagne had to obtain the approval of Haroun al Raschid, the Caliph of Baghdad, to rebuild and enlarge Probus's original hospice in Jerusalem. However these cordial relations between Christians and Moslems were to end with the triumph of a more aggressive Abbasid faction and the emergence of a militant and proselytizing character among the followers of Islam.

So it was, when around 1000 A.D., El Hakim assumed the Egyptian Caliphate and immediately began a fanatical persecution of his Christian subjects. This included razing to the ground many of that faith's most treasured holy shrines, including unfortunately, Charlemagne's rebuilt hospice of Probus. However after El Hakim disappeared mysteriously in 1021 certain Italian city states established commercial relations with the Abbasid Caliphate. These included merchants from the prosperous Republic of Amalfi, on the western side of the Italian peninsula, southeast of Naples. About the middle of the 11th century these Amalfi merchants founded the Benedictine Abbey of St. Mary of the Latins on a site close to the former Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

By 1080 this abbey possessed a house of refuge for poor pilgrims under the shadow of its walls, on a site where traditionally an angel had announced the conception of St. John the Baptist and where a church of that name had once stood. Thus the hospice was dedicated in that saint's name. The former Church of St. John the Baptist had been restored in the sixth century by the Patriarch of Alexandria who became known as St. John the Almsgiver and this has given rise to some confusion as to which St. John, the Amalfi hospice was originally dedicated, but most historians now agree it was St. John the Baptist. The hospice was administered by Benedictines from Amalfi who adopted from the Amalfitan flag the eight pointed white cross which now distinguishes the Order. Although early images of this emblem show the indentations on the ends of the cross as curved, by the 14th century it had become the rectilinear shape familiar to us today.

The head and founder of this hospice is named by Pope Paschal II in his Bull of 1113 as Brother Gerard and he is usually regarded as the first Grand Master of the Order, by then known as the Hospitallers of St. John. By the end of the 11th century the Crusades had begun, in response to Byzantine appeals for help against the onslaughts of Seljuk Turks and perhaps also the memory of the destruction of the Holy Places by Caliph El Hakim earlier in the century. By July 1099, Jerusalem was being besieged by the army of the First Crusade and legend has it that Brother Gerard assisted the besieging Crusaders by throwing loaves of bread at them from the walls, under the pretence of pelting them with stones. After the capture of Jerusalem, Brother Gerard's foundation was of the greatest value to both the army and the pilgrims who thronged the city. The

Hospital of Stelohn (as it had now become known) expanded rapidly and enjoyed great favour from the Christian victors.

Even the first ruler of Latin Jerusalem, Godfrey de Bouillon, made the Hospital a gift of land. Brother Gerard died in 1120 and part of his epitaph read "Here lies Gerard, the humblest man among the dwellers in the East". He was succeeded by Raymond du Puy who changed the direction of the Order to that of a more militaristic nature. This may have been inspired by the founding of the Knights Templar in 1118, but may also have been necessary because shortage of manpower would be a constant problem in the defence of the Crusader States, collectively known as Outremer ('overseas').

By 1126, officers of the Hospital included a Constable and armed brethren rode with the columns of pilgrims. This was the origin of the term 'caravan', which was later used to describe a military, or more particularly, a naval campaign of the Order.

Initially there seems to have been little distinction between fighting laymen and those who chiefly served in the Hospital, known respectively as confreres and freres. However by 1206 knights were constituted as a special class and could describe themselves as 'Knights Hospitaller'. One of the distinguishing features of the Order while in Palestine was the large number of castles they controlled, often largely manned by hired mercenaries. The bulk of these mercenaries were native troops, including light cavalry known as Turcoples, a word derived from the Greek Tourcopoloi meaning 'Turkish horse'. A lot of the castles were gifts, especially from Count Raymond of Tripoli, whose interests were also served by this arrangement. The Knights of St. John had at various times up to fifty castles in Outremer, the best known being Kral; des Chevaliers, which is still an impressive site (and sight!) in modern day Syria.

However it was only a matter of time until the Crusader states of the Eastern Mediterranean would fall. After the loss of Jerusalem to Saladin in 1187, following the battle of the Horns of Hattin, the real end came in 1291 when the coastal city of Acre was taken by the Moslems. Despite a brave defence by the Knights of St. John, they were forced to flee that city by sea to the island of Cyprus, after 192 years of Christian rule in Palestine. The Order of St. John already possessed a number of holdings in Cyprus and after the evacuation of Acre, the town of Limassol became their headquarters and they began construction of a new Hospital near their castle of Colos. The nineteen years between their arrival on Cyprus in 1291 and 1310 marked a change from a military force to that of a more naval character, as they had now become islanders.

They started building more fighting vessels, particularly the oared type known as a galley, and created the title of Admiral of the Order while under the rule of an astute Grand Master called William de Villaret. However Henry, the Latin King of Cyprus, was unwelcoming and suspicious of the Order and constantly curtailed its power on the island. Under the next Grand Master, Fulk de Villaret (nephew of the former), the Order found a home they could truly call their own when they captured, with the help of Genoese allies, the Byzantine island of Rhodes, which finally fell to them at the end of 1310. The Order could now call itself with the blessing of Pope Clement V, Sovereign, and immediately started building a Hospital in the city also called Rhodes. During the two hundred odd years the Order spent on the island of Rhodes they developed the city of Rhodes into the greatest fortress in the Mediterranean and became the master seamen of the East.

Also during this period they perfected the unique form of their Order, establishing seven Langues or 'Tongues', each under a head called a Pilier or 'Pillar', who provided members to an overall body called a Convent. The Piliers, along with other senior officers, including the Knights Grand Cross also formed the advisory Grand Master's Council. The seven 'Tongues' were Provence, Auvergne, France, Spain, Italy, England and Germany with Provence later divided into Greater and Lesser Provence to make eight 'Tongues' in total. The military knights were called Knights of Justice and it was they who elected the Grand Master. Novices of the Order had a probationary period of two years, one of which was served in the Order's galleys. Each 'Tongue' not only provided manpower for the Order in Rhodes but also provided funds raised from their extensive holdings back in Europe.

The lands and properties of each 'Tongue' were administered by the Priory of the particular country, which in turn, oversaw Commanderies at various locations. Their possessions grew when the Order of St. John acquired most of the Knights Templar lands following that Order's suppression in 1307. As an example, in 1350 the 'Tongue' of England had, under the Priory of England based at Clerkenwell in London, around sixty Commanderies, while its Priory of Ireland based at Kilmainham in Dublin had eighteen. Scotland only ever had one Commandery, which was situated at Torphichen and was nominally under the Priory of England. Of

personal interest is the Commandery of Ards, established in 1189. As a child in Northern Ireland I used to play on the beach near the ruins of Castleboy, its principal house, near Cloughev in County Down.

The Ards Commandery, like those in the rest of Ireland and in England, was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1540 and, as in the rest of the British Isles, most of the Knights were expelled from the country. Interestingly, over a century and a half earlier, during the Peasants Revolt of 1381, led by Wat Tyler, Clerkenwell, the Priory of England's principal house was destroyed, along with other Hospitaller property in London and Robert Hales the Prior of England was beheaded by the mob. John Robinson suggests in his book "Born in Blood" that a surviving underground Templar element was responsible in revenge for losing their property to the Order of St. John after the suppression of the Knights Templar. Even before the demise of the Templars there had already been a degree of mutual animosity and enmity between the two Orders.

During the Order of St. John's sojourn on Rhodes they continued to harass Moslem shipping, while protecting that of Christian states. Occasionally they participated, with other Crusaders, in larger battles, such as the capture and unfortunately, sacking of the Egyptian city of Alexandria in 1365. The Knights also took part in what is considered the last Crusade, in which the powerful and expansionist Turks were completely victorious at Nicopolis on the Danube in the year 1396. The Egyptians attempted to lay siege to Rhodes in 1444 but were defeated by the Order's superior naval power. The first real siege of Rhodes came from the Turkish Sultan Mahomet II in 1480 and resulted in an heroic defence under Grand Master Pierre d'Aubusson and the defeat of the Turks. The Order afterwards reached the zenith of its power and fame and used some of their new-found wealth to improve even further, the fortifications on Rhodes.

The second siege of Rhodes took place in 1522 when the Ottoman Sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent, along with an estimated 700 ships and 200,000 men, landed on the island in July of that year. The defenders were vastly outnumbered, but under the aging Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam they fought valiantly and despite the probable treachery of the Pilier of Castile, Andrea d'Amaral, they held out until Christmas. d'Amaral, who was also Grand Chancellor, was tried for treason and executed. On the 26th of December 1522 Grand Master de L'Isle Adam, realizing the situation was hopeless and to avoid further casualties on both sides, was forced to surrender. Suleiman allowed the Grand Master to leave Rhodes for the last time in the Order's fleet with honour, saying that "it saddens me to oblige this brave old man to leave his home".

The expelled fleet sailed westward and landed, in January 1523, on an island, then called Candia by its Venetian rulers and which was later renamed Crete by the Greeks. After a short rest, and replenishment of their stores, they left Candia following some hostility from the natives, although it had never been their intention to remain on Candia for long. Moving on to Sicily they were forced off that island by an outbreak of plague and eventually spent the next few years of swum in the Papal States of Italy. After travelling around Europe seeking help in establishing a new home, Grand Master de L'Isle Adam was granted the use of the Maltese islands by the Spanish Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, in 1530. The payment for this privilege was set as an annual rent of one falcon, to be presented by the Knights of St. John, each year, to the reigning Spanish King.

Again the Order improved the ports and defences of their new home, especially around the area of the Grand Harbour on the main island of Malta.

One of their most impressive fortresses was that of Sant'Angelo. For the first thirty years on Malta they waged constant warfare against Moslem pirates from the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, who were known as Corsairs. During this period the Order became increasingly dominated by Spanish, rather than French, speakers. However it was a French Grand Master called Jean Parisat de La Valette who, in 1565, led the Knights during the famous siege of Malta by Turkish forces, sent from his capital Constantinople (modern Istanbul), by the now elderly Suleiman the Magnificent. The Knights of Malta, as the Order of St. John became known, achieved a splendid victory after a gallant defence and the help of some Spanish reinforcements. The Turks withdrew back to Constantinople, never again to seriously threaten the stronghold of Malta.

A new city was begun by the Knights within the Grand Harbour and named Valetta in honour of the now famous Grand Master. This city would become the capital of Malta and the Knights would remain on Malta and endure the long decline of the Order, until finally the Maltese Islands were captured by Napoleon Bonaparte's forces in 1798. After the expulsion from Malta of the Knights and their defeated Grand Master Ferdinand von Hompesch, the first German to hold that Office, the Tsar of Russia Paul 1, irregularly

proclaimed himself defacto ruler of the Order, even though as a Russian Orthodox he was non-Catholic. Following the defeat of Napoleon, Malta became a British possession in 1814 and the Order was never to return. Instead the Convent of the Order settled in the Italian Papal States, first at Catania, then at Ferrara and finally in Rome itself in 1834, at the invitation of Pope Gregory XVI.

The Order was ruled during most of the 19th century by Lieutenants, until Pope Leo XIII reestablished the Grand Mastership in 1879. It remains in the Palazzo di Malta in Rome to this day as the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John, of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta and as a Catholic sovereign state sanctioned by the Vatican, receives diplomatic representation from nearly sixty countries. The current Most Eminent Highness the Prince and Grand Master is Fra' Andrew Bertie, who is the seventy- eighth Grand Master (excluding the Lieutenancies) since Brother Gerard. Interestingly he became the first and only Englishman to head the Sovereign Order, when he was elected in 1988, following the death of Fra' Angelo de Mojana, and he was instrumental, in 1991, in having the Maltese Government cede the historic fortress of Sant'Angelo to the Sovereign Order.

The Masonic Malta decree has been around since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century but the Sovereign Order only has formal relations with four other Orders of St. John (all of which are Protestant in origin). The best known of these is the Venerable Order of St. John of Jerusalem in the British Realm, which was a revival of the original Order in the British Isles by Queen Victoria, with a specifically Anglican form. From this Order came the St. John's Ambulance Association which provides first aid work in Australia and some thirty-four other countries around the world, in the same tradition as the oriOnal Order, founded so many centuries before in the Holy city of Jerusalem.

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