

The Influence of the Knights of the Order of St. John on Malta

Due to its geographical position at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, Malta has witnessed many different influences. In Ancient times, it attracted the Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginian and the Romans, then other conquerors including the Arabs, Normans, Aragonese and the Crusaders, the French and the British. But one of the most fascinating periods of Maltese history remains to this very day the period governed by the Knights Hospitaller, better known as the Order of St. John, who governed the islands from 1530 to the end of the 18th century, when the French under Commander Napoleon Bonaparte took over Malta.

Prehistoric Temples and Majestic Palaces from different periods are unique landmarks. The Knights in particular left their marks on various aspects of Maltese culture, in particular the language, buildings and literature. Their period is often referred to as Malta's Golden Age, as a result of the architectural and artistic embellishment and as a result of advances in the overall health, education and prosperity of the local population. Music, literature, theatre as well as visual arts all flourished in this period, which also saw the foundation and development of many of the Renaissance and Baroque towns and villages, palaces and gardens, the most notable being the capital city, Valletta, one of several built and fortified by the Knights.

Maltese education, in particular, took a significant leap forward under the Knights, with the foundation in 1530 of the Collegium Melitensæ, precursor to today's University of Malta, through the intercession of Pope Clement VIII. As a result, the University of Malta is one of the oldest extant universities in Europe, and the oldest Commonwealth University outside of the United Kingdom. The School of Ana-



tomy and Surgery was established by Grand Master Fra Nicolau Cotoner I d'Olesa at the Sacra Infermeria in Valletta, in 1676. The Sacra Infermeria itself was known as one of the finest and most advanced hospitals in Europe.

Malta was governed by not less than 29 Grand Masters. The first Grand Master was Philippe de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, who was a prominent member of the Knights Hospitaller at Rhodes. In 1530 de L'Isle-Adam obtained the islands of Malta and Gozo and the North African port city of Tripoli as fief for the Order from Emperor Charles V and established the



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Order, henceforth known as the Maltese Knights, in their new base. The last Grand Master was Grand Master Ferdinand von Hompesch zu Bolheim who readily capitulated to Napoleon, arguing that the order's charter prohibited fighting against Christians.

The Knights stayed in Malta for 268 years, transforming what they called "merely a rock of soft sandstone" into a flourishing island with mighty defences and a capital city (Valletta). The official name given by the Order of Saint John was Humilissima Civitas Valletta - The Most Humble City of Valletta, or Città

Umilissima in Italian. The bastions, curtains and ravelins along with the beauty of its Baroque palaces, gardens and churches, led the ruling houses of Europe to give the city its nickname Superbissima "Most Proud". When Benjamin Disraeli, future British Prime Minister, visited the city in 1830, he described it as "a city of palaces built by gentlemen for gentlemen", and remarked that "Valletta equals in its noble architecture, if it does not excel, any capital in Europe".

The building and fortification of Valletta, named after Grand Master Jean Parisot de la Valette, was begun in 1566, soon becoming the home port of one of the Mediterranean's most powerful navies. Valletta was designed by Francesco Laparelli, a military engineer, and his work was then taken up by Glormu Cassar (1520-1592). The city was completed in 1571. Valletta boasts of buildings from the 16th century onwards and is essentially Baroque in character. It is officially recognised as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

In Rhodes, the knights had been housed in auberges (inns) segregated by Langues. This structure was maintained in Birgu (1530-1571) and then Valletta (from 1571). The auberges in Birgu remain mostly undistinguished 16th c. buildings. Valletta still has the auberges of Castile-Leon (1574; renovated 1741 by GM de Vilhena, now the Prime Minister's offices), Italia (renovated 1683 by GM Caraffa, now shared between the Malta Tourism Authority and the Parliamentary Secretariat for Tourism), Aragon (1571, now Ministry of Economic Services), Bavaria (former palazzo Carnerio, purchased in 1784 for the newly formed Langue now hosting the Department of Lands), Provence (now National Museum of Archaeology). The auberge of Auvergne was damaged in World War II and replaced with

Southeast part of Valletta fortifications. Picture by Piotr Kozurno

Law Courts. The auberge of France was also destroyed in World War II.

The artistic heritage of Malta blossomed under the Knights, who brought in Italian and Flemish Mannerist painters to decorate their palaces and the churches of these islands, most notably, Matteo Perez d'Aleccio, whose works appear in the Magisterial Palace and in the Conventual Church of St. John in Valetta, and Filippo Paladini, who was active in Malta from 1590 to 1595. For many years, Mannerism continued to inform the tastes and ideals of local Maltese artists. The arrival in Malta of Caravaggio, who painted at least seven works during his 15-month stay on these islands, further revolutionized local art. Two of Caravaggio's most notable works, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* and *Saint Jerome Writing*, are on display in the Oratory of the Conventual Church of St. John. His legacy is evident in the works of local artists Giulio Casarino (1582-1637) and Stefano Erardi (1630-1716). However, the Baroque movement that followed was destined to have the most enduring impact on Maltese art and architecture. The glorious vault paintings of the celebrated Calabrese artist, Mattia Preti (1613-1699) transformed the severe, Mannerist interior of the Conventual Church St. John into a Baroque masterpiece. Preti spent the last 40 years of his life in Malta, where he created many of his finest works, now on display in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta. During this period, local sculptor Melchior Gafa (1639-1667) emerged as one of the top Baroque sculptors of the Roman School. During the 17th and 18th century, Neapolitan and Rococo influences emerged in the works of the Italian painters Luca Giordano (1632-1705) and Francesco Solimena (1657-1747), and these developments can be seen in the work of their Maltese contemporaries such as

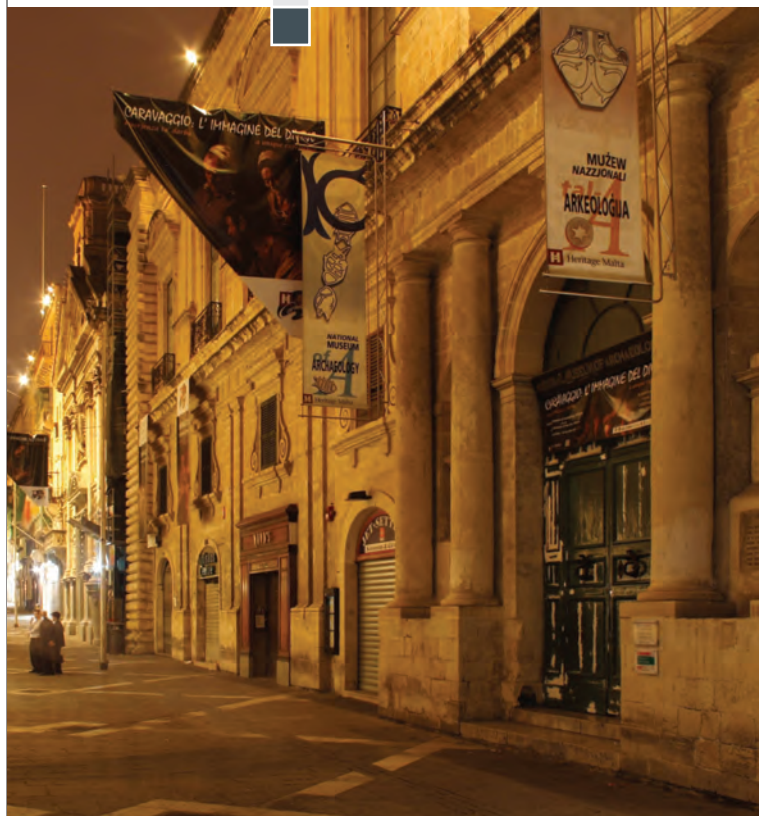
Giovanni Nicola Buhagiar (1698-1752) and Francesco Zahra (1710-1773). The Rococo movement was greatly enhanced by the relocation to Malta of Antoine de Favray (1706-1798), who assumed the position of court painter to Grand Master Pinto in 1744.

Apart from the different auberges, some of the most prominent buildings in Valletta and its surroundings are: the Grand Masters' Palace (designed by Glormu Cassar in 1571, the Palace contains some fine examples of medieval Armour and weapons used by the Knights of St. John and their adversaries); St John's Co-Cathedral (a gem of Baroque art and architecture, it was built as the conventual church for the Knights of St John); the Sacra Infermeria, (used as a hospital during the Knights' period and also considered one of the most attractive tourist attractions in the city due to its historical importance) and last but not least the recently renovated Pinto Stores (now better known as the Valletta Waterfront, these stores were constructed in the mid 18th century in connection with the expansion of port services along the Valletta and Floriana waterfront of the Grand Harbour). Other monumental buildings outside Valletta which left a mark can be found all over Malta and it would be a sin if not mentioned.

When the new city of Valletta was built in the late 16th century, the Knights realised that it lacked natural sources of water. With the ever-growing population, the problem grew more serious by the day. Soon after his election in 1601, Grand Master Aloff de Wignacourt began to take the matter seriously. A project was undertaken whereby water was to be brought to the city from natural springs and sources in the hilly region behind Mdina - a distance of 16 km. The impressive stretch of solid arches presents a pleasing sight on the Rabat Road



Republic Street
(Triq Ir-Repubblika)
in Valletta. On the right
Auberge de Provence of
Knights of Malta,
built in 1571. Now
National Archeological
Museum.
Picture by Piotr Kozurno.



from Hamrun to Attard. The Wignacourt Aqueduct is a living memorial to the Grand Master who conceived it, and whose name it bears to this day.

Manoel Island in Gżira's Marsamxett Harbour was originally known as l'Isola del Vescovo or il-Gżira tal-Isqof in Maltese (literally translated as "the Bishop's Island"). In 1643 Jean Paul Lascaris, Grandmaster of the Knights of Malta, constructed a quarantine hospital (lazzaretto) on the island, in an attempt to control the periodic influx of plague and cholera on board visiting ships. The island was renamed after António Manoel de Vilhena, a Portuguese Grandmaster of the gue



Knights of Malta under whose leadership Fort Manoel was built in 1726. Fort Manoel is considered a marvel of 18th century military engineering. The original plans for the Fort are attributed to Louis d'Aubigne Tigné, and are said to have been modified by his friend and colleague Charles F. de Mondion, who is buried in a crypt beneath Fort Manoel. The Fort has a magnificent quadrangle, parade ground and arcade, and once housed a baroque chapel dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua, under the direct command of the Order.

Military architecture is also reflected in the bastions, curtains and ravelins. The Cottonera Lines are a massive line of fortifications surrounding the Three Cities of Vittoriosa, Senglea, and Cospicua, in Malta. They are entirely built on four of the Bormla (Cospicua) hills. Grand Master Cottoner is still linked to Bormla with his surname's coat-of-arms now depicted in the emblem of the Bormla Local Council. They were designed by Italian engineer Antonio Maurizio Valperga in the 17th century, and named after Grand Master Nicolau Cotoner I d'Olesa. The Floriana Lines are a line of fortification outside the capital city of Malta, Valletta. They were built in the 17th Century during the reign of Grand Master Antoine de Paule, who asked to bring over Italian military engineer Pietro Paolo Floriani for advice on the improvement of the defences of Malta. He designed a new line of fortification outside Valletta, today the town of Floriana. The Porte des Bombes (Bieb il-Bombi) is an ornamental gate in the Floriana Lines, which formed the outer defensive walls of Valletta. It is situated between Pietà Creek and Marsa to the west and southeast, and the suburb of Floriana to the east. It was constructed in Baroque style between 1697 and 1720, during the reign of Fra Ramon Perellos y Roccaful, 64th Grandmaster of the Knights of

Malta. Perellos' Coat of Arms appears above the gate.

A great number of Towers were also built around Malta and Gozo which served as watch towers. One example is the tall, rocky outcrop crowned by Lippia Tower (also known as Ta' Lippia or Gnejna Watch Tower), which dominates Gnejna bay, built in 1637 upon orders by Grand Master Juan de Lascaris-Castellar. Lippia Tower formed part of the intricate coastal defence network constructed by the Knights of St. John. Watchguards housed in Lippia Tower and a nearby tower at Ghajn Tuffieha would communicate with the inland Bingemma Tower by means of flags by day and bonfires by night, which would, in turn, raise the alarm in the walled city of Mdina when corsairs were sighted off the western coast of Malta.

The Knights introduced as well a number of crafts and traditions which are still part of everyday life in Malta. A craft that particularly flourished under the Knights is gold and silverware. Malta's most precious production is filigree and jewellery. This is still a thriving tradition, the work of which is often exported to major cities abroad. Cities like our capital, Valletta, are bursting with local jewellers, all of which provide a range of traditional as well as modern Maltese creations.

From the time of the Knights, life in Gozo as well as the rural areas of Malta was relatively harsh, and so craft industries such as embroidery, weaving and lace-making became a main source of income for rural families. The traditional lace is known as 'bizzilla' and this craft was introduced to Malta by the Knights. It was called bobbin lace and was very popular for ruffs and collars in the 16th and 17th centuries. Maltese bobbin lace is made with a number of

threads which are wound upon an elongated wooden bobbin or spool. A special long cushion called "trajbu" is used as a base for making the lace. All aforementioned craft products are easily obtainable in most souvenir shops around the island, but a visit to the Ta' Qali Crafts Village will ensure an excellent understanding of all the Maltese craft traditions, including live demonstrations!

Folk music is very strong in many Mediterranean countries and Malta is no exception. The "Ghanja", meaning "song", is the traditional music of Malta and sounds like something between a Sicilian ballad and rhythmic Arabian wailing. The first known form dates back to 1792 during the final years of the rule of the Knights of St John. It was initiated by peasants but the music has now become an all-round form of popular entertainment in Malta. Romance is a popular theme in these ballads, but perhaps one of the most popular forms of "ghanja" is the style called "Spirtu pront" ("on the spur of the moment"), where two or more "ghannejja" (singers) perform a duet, often a rhyming war of words, in typical Mediterranean style.

The Maltese carnival dates back hundreds of years. Il-Karnival ta' Malta (or Malta Carnival in English) is very much part of the Maltese cultural calendar. Introduced to the Maltese Islands by Grand Master De Ponte in 1535, the Maltese carnival is held during the week leading up to Ash Wednesday. Originally, carnival was celebrated in Birgu with just a few Knights organising pageants and tournaments.

The knights also embellished Malta with a number of gardens. Amongst others, the most popular are San Anton Gardens, Buskett Gardens (the only extensive woodland on the Maltese Islands planted by the Knights of



Auberge de Castille of
Knights of Malta
in Valletta. Since 1972 used
as the seat
of the Prime Minister.
Picture by Piotr Kozurno



Malta to be used as a hunting ground), Upper Barrakka Gardens (planted in 1661 and said to be one of the best points from which to savour the Grand Harbour in its full glory), and Argotti Botanical Gardens (planted in 1774, the Knights of Malta used the Argotti Gardens for medical purposes). These gardens offer fantastic views of the fortifications of Floriana.

Jean Parisot de la Valette, the Grand Master who defended Malta and defeated the Ottoman Empire in the Great Siege of 1565, is still a living personality and the Knights' influence can still be touched and felt till this very day through the various monumental buildings that one can find in this baroque city named after his name. The period of the Knights is revived through the various activities and re-enactments which take place during the year in various places. This living heritage left by the Knights of Malta is endless and it would require volumes and volumes of different media to describe all its richness in more detail. The Knights' Heritage and their influence on the Maltese Islands still provide a living today to its inhabitants, where 35% of the gross domestic product is generated through its tourism industry.

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