

Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem

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(Also known as **KNIGHTS OF MALTA**).

The most important of all the military orders, both for the extent of its area and for its duration. It is said to have existed before the Crusades and is not extinct at the present time. During this long career it has not always borne the same name. Known as Hospitallers of Jerusalem until 1309, the members were called Knights of Rhodes from 1309 till 1522, and have been called Knights of Malta since 1530.

The origins of the order have given rise to learned discussions, to fictitious legends and hazardous conjectures. The unquestionable founder was one Gerald or Gerard, whose birthplace and family name it has been vainly sought to ascertain. On the other hand, his title as founder is attested by a contemporary official document, the Bull of Paschal II, dated 1113, addressed to "Geraudo institutori ac praeposito Hirosolimitani Xenodochii". This was certainly not the first establishment of the kind at Jerusalem. even before the crusades, hostelries were indispensable to shelter the pilgrims who flocked to the Holy Places, and in the beginning the *hospitia* or *xenodochia* were nothing more. They belonged to different nations; a Frankish hospice is spoken of in the time of Charlemagne; the Hungarian hospice is said to date from King St. Stephen (year 1000). But the most famous was an Italian hospice about the year 1050 by the merchants of Amalfi, who at that time had commercial relations with the Holy Land. Attempts have been made to trace the origin of the Hospitallers of St. John to this foundation, but it is obvious to remark that the Hospitallers had St. John the Baptist for their patron, while the Italian hospice was dedicated to St. John of Alexandria. Moreover, the former adopted the Rule of St. Augustine, while the latter followed that of the Benedictines. Like most similar houses at that time, the hospice of Amalfi was in fact merely a dependency of a monastery, while Gerard's was autonomous from the beginning. Before the Crusades, the Italian hospital languished, sustained solely by alms gathered in Italy; but Gerard profited by the presence of the crusaders, and by the gratitude felt for his hospitality, to acquire territory and revenues not only in the new Kingdom of Jerusalem, but in Europe -- in Sicily, Italy, and Provence. In the acts of donation which remain to us, there is no mention of the sick, but only of the poor and strangers. In this respect the hospice of Gerard did not differ from other, and his epitaph defines his work:

Pauperibus servus, pius hospitibus
Undique collegit pasceret unde sous.

Thanks to the resources accumulated by Gerard, his successor, Raymond of Provence (1120-60), caused the erection of more spacious buildings near the church of the Holy Sepulchre, and henceforth the hospice became an infirmary served by a community of hospitallers in the modern sense of the word.



Strictly speaking, therefore, the Hospitallers of Jerusalem only began with Raymond of Provence, to whom they owe their rule. This rule deals only with their conduct as religious and infirmarians, there being no mention of knights. It especially sets forth that the hospital shall permanently maintain at its expense five physicians and three surgeons. The brothers were to fulfil the duties of infirmarians. A pilgrim, about the year 1150, places the number of sick persons cared for at 2000, a figure evidently exaggerated, unless we make it include all the persons harboured in a whole year. Raymond continued to receive donations, and this permitted him to complete his foundation by a second innovation. To accompany and defend at need, the arriving and departing pilgrims, he defrayed the cost of an armed escort, which in time became a veritable army, comprising knights recruited from among the crusaders of Europe, and serving as a heavy cavalry (see CHIVALRY), and Turcoples recruited from among the natives of mixed blood, and serving as light cavalry armed in the Turkish fashion. With this innovation originated the most ancient military dignities in the order: the marshal, to command the knights, the turcopolier, for the Turcoples. Later the grand masters themselves went into battle. Gosbert (c. 1177), the fifth successor of Raymond, distinguished himself, and Roger de Moulins perished gloriously on the field of battle (1187). Thus the Order of St. John imperceptibly became military without losing its eleemosynary character. The statutes of Roger de Moulins (1187) deal only with the service of the sick; the first mention of military service is in the statutes of the ninth grand master, Alfonso of Portugal (about 1200). In the latter a marked distinction is made between secular knights, externs to the order, who served only for a time, and the professed knights, attached to the order by a perpetual vow, and who alone enjoyed the same spiritual privileges as the other religious. Henceforth the order numbered two distinct classes of members: the military brothers and the brothers infirmarians. The brothers chaplains, to whom was entrusted the divine service, formed a third class.

While the Order of St. John became a mixed order, that of the Templars was purely military from the beginning, and on this point it can claim priority, despite the contrary assertions of the Hospitallers. The Templars followed a different monastic rule and wore a different habit -- the white habit of the Cistercians, whose rule they followed, with a red cross, while the Hospitallers had the black mantle with a white cross. In war the knightly brothers wore above their armour a red surcoat with the white cross. Mutually emulous from the outset, they soon became rivals, and this rivalry had much to do with the rapid decline of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. In other respects the two orders held the same rank in Church and State, both being recognized as regular orders and endowed by the papacy with most extensive privileges, absolute independence of all spiritual and temporal authority save that of Rome, exemptions from tithes, with the right to have their own chapels, clergy and cemeteries. Both were charged with the military defense of the Holy Land, and the most redoubtable strongholds of the country, the splendid ruins of which still exist, were occupied by on or the other (Rey, "Monument de l'architecture militaire des Croisés", Paris, 1865). On the battlefield they shared between them the most perilous posts, alternately holding the van and rear guard. The history of the Hospitallers of Jerusalem is involved in that of the Latin Kingdom of the same name, with which the order was associated in prosperity and adversity. When the kingdom was at the height of its glory, the Hospitallers possessed no fewer than seven strongholds, some situated on the coast, others in the mountains; of these Margat and Krals, in the territory of Tripoli, are the most famous. They enjoyed the revenues of more than one hundred and forty estates (*casalia*) in the Holy Land. As to their European possessions, a writer of the thirteenth century credits them with about nineteen thousand manses or manors. It was necessary to organize a financial administration in order to assure the regular payment of revenues of these widely scattered possessions. This was the task of Hugh of Ravel, seventeen Grand Master of the Holy Land (c. 1270). The lands attached to a single house were

placed under the command of a knight of the order, who formerly was called a preceptor, but afterwards took the title of commander. This official was charged with collecting the revenues, one portion of which was devoted to the support of his community, formed of a chaplain and some brothers the other portion being destined for the houses of the Holy Land. This latter portion consisted of an annual and invariable impost called "Responsions".

Thanks to these resources, drawn from Europe, the order was able to survive the fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, which involved the loss of all its possessions in Asia. After the capture of Jerusalem by Saladin (1187), the Hospitallers retained only their possessions in the Principality of Tripoli, and these they lost a century later by the fall of Acre (1291). They were obliged to seek refuge, under their grand master, Jean de Villiers, in the Kingdom of Cyprus, where they already had some possessions. King Amaury assigned them as a place of residence the town of Limassol on the coast. Having become islanders, the Hospitallers were obliged to modify their manner of warfare. They equipped fleets to fight the Muslims on the sea and to protect the pilgrims, who had not ceased to visit the Holy Places. But it was chiefly the conquest of the island of Rhodes, under the Grand Master Foulques de Villaret, that brought about a complete transformation of the order.

The Knights of Rhodes (1309-1522)

The Knights of Rhodes, the successors of the Hospitallers of St. John, were distinguished from the latter in many ways. In the first place, the grand master of the order was thenceforward a temporal sovereign in that island, which constituted a true ecclesiastical principality, under the nominal suzerainty of the Emperors of the East. Secondly, although Villaret's first care was to build a new infirmary, the care of the sick took a secondary place, as the members of the order had scarcely occasion to devote themselves to any save the members of the community. The name knights then prevailed over that of hospitallers. This character was accentuated by the fusion of the Hospitallers with the remaining Knights Templar. subsequent to the suppression of the latter (1312). This fusion at the same time increased the wealth of the order, to which the pope assigned the property of the Templars in every country except Aragon and Portugal. In France, where Philip the Fair had sequestered this property, the order obtained restitution only by paying large indemnities to the king. From this time its organization took its definitive form, the whole body being divided into tongues, priories, and commanderies. The tongues, or nations, were eight in number, each having its own bailiff; and one of the eight supreme dignities was reserved to each tongue -- to Provence, that of the grand commander; to Auvergne, that of marshal; to France, grand hospitaller; to Italy, admiral; to Aragon, standard-bearer; to Castile, grand chancellor; to Germany, grand bailiff; to England, turcoplier. (On these dignities see MILITARY ORDERS.) The grand master might be elected from any of the various tongues; he exercised supreme authority, but under control of the grand chapter and with the aid of several councils. Each tongue was subdivided into priories, and the head of each priory had the right to receive new knights and to visit the commanderies. The priories number twenty-four, and the commanderies, which were subdivisions of the priories, 656. All these posts were held according to seniority, the commanderies after three campaigns, which were known as "caravans".

A most important change in the character of the order was the transformation of the knights into corsairs. The piracy practiced by the Muslims was the scourge of the Mediterranean and especially of Christian commerce. The Knights of Rhodes, on their side, armed cruisers not only to give chase to the pirates, but to make reprisals on the Turkish merchantmen. With increasing audacity they made

descents on the coast and pillaged the richest ports of the Orient, such as Smyrna (1341) and Alexandria (1365). However, a new Muslim power arose at this period -- the Ottoman Turks of Iconium -- and took the offensive against Christianity. After the fall of Constantinople, Mahomet II directed his attention to the task of destroying this den of pirates which made Rhodes the terror of the Muslim world. Henceforth the order, thrown on the defensive, lived perpetually on the alert. Once, under its grand master, Pierre d'Aubusson, it repulsed all the forces of Mahomet II in the siege of 1480. In 1522 Solyman II returned to the attack with a fleet of 400 ships and an army of 140,000 men. The knights sustained this great onslaught with their habitual bravery for a period of six months under their grand master, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, and capitulated only when their supplies were completely exhausted. Their lives were spared, and they were permitted to withdraw. Solyman II, in homage to their heroism, lent them his ships to return to Europe. They dispersed to their commanderies and begged Charles V to grant them the island of Malta, which was a dependency of his kingdom of Sicily, and this sovereignty was granted them in 1530, under the suzerainty of the kings of Spain.

The Knights of Malta (1530-1798)

The Knights of Malta at once resumed the manner of life they had already practiced for two centuries at Rhodes. With a fleet which did not number more than seven galleys they resisted the Barbary pirates who infested the western basin of the Mediterranean. They formed a valuable contingent during the great expeditions of Charles V against Tunis and Algiers and at the memorable victory of Lepanto. The Knights of Malta were also permitted to equip galley at their own expense to give chase to the Turkish galleys. These enterprises did not fail to draw upon them fresh attacks from the Ottomans. Solyman II, regretting his generosity, gathered a second time all forces of his empire to dislodge the Christian corsairs from their retreat. The siege of Malta, quite as famous as that of Rhodes, lasted for four months (1565). The Turks had already taken possession of a part of the island, destroying nearly the whole of the old city, slaying half the knights and almost 8000 soldiers, when Malta was delivered by an army of relief from Spain. In retreating the Turks are said to have left 30,000 slain. A new city had to be built -- the present city of Valette, so named in memory of its valiant grand master who had sustained this siege. Malta, however, was not rid of its most dangerous adversary until the battle of Lepanto (1571) which dealt the Ottoman fleet a fatal and final blow.

From this time the history of Malta is reduced to a series of encounters by sea with the Barbary corsairs which have only local interest. The struggle was carried on chiefly by younger knights who were in haste to accomplish their three "caravans" in order to merit some vacant commandery. It was an existence filled with perils of every kind, sudden attacks, adventures, successes and defeats. There was constant risk of life, or of liberty, which could be regained only at the cost of enormous ransoms. But when success came, the undertaking proved lucrative, not only defraying all costs but also enriching the captain. The best result was the deliverance of hundreds of Christian slaves, chained as rowers on the Turkish galleys. In requital the vanquished Turks were in turn reduced to slavery and sold to Christian galleys which had need of rowers. In this respect Malta remained a veritable slave-market until well into the eighteenth century. It required a thousand slaves to equip merely the galleys of the order, which were a hell for those unfortunates. It will be readily understood that the habit of living in the midst of these scenes of violence and brutality exercised a bad influence on the morals of the knights of the order. Discipline became relaxed and the grand mastership became a more and more perilous honour. Revolts were frequent. In 1581 the grand master, Jean de la Cassière, was made

prisoner by his own knights, whose principle grievance was the expulsion of lewd women. The vow of obedience was little better observed than that of celibacy. Once in possession of some commandery situated on the Continent, a knight would become indeed independent of the grand master's authority and maintain only the most remote relations with the order. As to the vow of poverty, the knights were recruited solely from among the nobility, proofs of noble descent being more severely scrutinized than religious dispositions, and naturally, the wealth of the order formed the only motive of these vocations. Its decay began, too, with the confiscation of its possessions. One effect of Protestantism was the alienation of a large group of commanderies, to be thenceforward appropriated to the Protestant nobility, as, for instance, the Bailiwick of Sonnenburg in Prussia. In other Protestant countries the order was simply suppressed. In Catholic countries the sovereigns themselves assumed more and more the right to dispose of the commanderies within their jurisdiction. At last Malta, the very centre of the order, was treacherously surrendered under the grand master, the Count von Hompesch, to General Bonaparte when he made his expedition to Egypt (12 June, 1798).

Present state of the order

The secularization of the property of the order in Protestant countries was extended by the French Revolution to the greater number of Catholic countries. On the other hand, Czar Paul of Russia assigned them considerable property in his domains (1797), and in return was elected grand master, but his election was not recognized by the pope. From that time forward the pope has named the grand master of the bailiff who takes his place. From 1805 to 1879 there was no grand master, but Leo XIII re-established the dignity, bestowing it on an Austrian, Geschi di Sancta Croce. It is now (1910) held by Galeazzo von Thun Hohenstein. The actual conditions for admission to the order are: nobility of sixteen quarterings, the Catholic Faith, attainment of full legal age, integrity of character, and corresponding social position. There are now in existence only four great priories, one in Bohemia, and three in Italy. There are still commanders and several classes of knights, with different insignia, but all wear the same eight-pointed Maltese cross (see PONTIFICAL DECORATIONS).

To the Order of the Knights of Malta belong the Convent of S. Maria del Priorato on the Aventine in Rome, overlooking the Tiber, and commanding from its gardens one of the most delightful views of the city. The walls of the convent are adorned with portraits of the knights, and the archives are rich in records of the order. The tombs of the knights in the convent church are interesting. The order was summoned to attend the Convention of Geneva (1864), on the same footing as the great powers.

The Protestant Baliwick of Sonnenburg in Prussia disappeared after the secularization of its property in 1810. Nevertheless Frederick William IV created a new confraternity of "Evangelical Johannittes" (1852), under the master (*Herrenmeister*) always chosen from the royal family, and with a great number of other dignitaries. Admission to the order is subject to numerous conditions, ancient nobility, corresponding social position, and entrance fee of 900 marks, a probation of at least four years as a knight of honor before admission of the accolade which confers the title of Knight of Justice. Their first obligation is to collect contributions for the support of hospitals. Thus this Protestant branch of the order has returned to the ideal of its first founder in the time of the First Crusade. Moreover, in times of war, since 1870, the order has been devoted to ambulance service on the field of battle.

Sources

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