

Decline and Fall?

The Order of the Hospital and its Surrender of Malta, 1798

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Abstract: Traditional history claims that by the end of the eighteenth century, the Order of the Hospital had reached the end of a long-drawn-out process of secularization and decline. It also asserts that in 1798 the Hospitallers surrendered Malta as a direct result of this debilitating process. The paper argues against both misconceptions. First, at no stage in the eighteenth century, or indeed earlier, may the Order be said to have experienced decline. Secondly, within the current state of Hospitaller scholarship, its surrender of Malta may only be attributed to the devitalizing and crippling influence the French Revolution had on the institution.

Keywords: misconceptions, decline, Hospitallers, Bastille, French Revolution, surrender of Malta, secularization, Ferdinand von Hompesch

Notwithstanding the great strides Maltese historiography has made over the past fifty years or so, there are still a handful of myths surrounding our island's early modern history, propagated from one generation to another. I can think of the original idea of the choice of Malta for the Order's conventual headquarters after the loss of Rhodes, one that in fact belonged to L'Isle Adam himself rather than to Charles V or his viceroy in Sicily as traditionally assumed.¹ Others include the popular perception of de Valette,² woven almost entirely on knowledge of the man immediately before and during the Ottoman siege

1 See V. Mallia-Milanes, *Venice and Hospitaller Malta 1530–1798: Aspects of a Relationship* (Malta, 1992), 2. For the traditional view, R. Valentini, 'I Cavalieri di S. Giovanni da Rodi a Malta: Trattative diplomatiche', *Archivum Melitense*, ix, 4 (1935), 6–7; A.P. Vella, *Storja ta' Malta*, i (Malta, 1974), 184–5.

2 See V. Mallia-Milanes, 'Fra Jean de la Valette 1495–1568: A Reappraisal', in *The Maltese Cross*, ed. T. Cortis (Malta, 1995), 117–29.

of Malta as well as the long-term historical significance of that episode.³ This paper will deal with two other misconceptions — the idea of the decline of the Order and the attribution of the fall of Hospitaller Malta to this alleged decline. The concept of secularization and the much-maligned Hompesch, both closely related aspects of the decline theory, will form the tail-end of the paper.

It has been traditionally claimed that the military-religious Order of St John lost Malta in June 1798 because of two major determining forces: in the first place, the institution had reached the extreme limit of its long-drawn-out process of decline; and, in the second place, its increasingly secularized magistracy had grown so weak that it could hardly offer the invading French forces any modicum of resistance. By the time Napoleon appeared on the horizon, the Order, originally set up over 700 years earlier, had become a pure anachronism. By the end of the eighteenth century, so runs the claim, the population of Malta and Gozo, some 91,000 in all, tired of the Order's absolutist and paternalist style of government, had for years been seeking to overthrow the regime. My research indicates that this was not the case. In 1775, the year of the futile uprising of the priests which had miserably failed to stir up any popular support,⁴ Massimiliano Buzzaccarini Gonzaga, a high-ranking Hospitaller diplomat,⁵ observed that during the whole 245 years the Order had been on the island, it had always felt safe and serene among the local population whom it considered 'loyal and affectionate'.⁶ An accurate observer of manners and a sharp critic of whatever was happening around him and of developments in and outside Malta, he was not a man to be easily deluded. Nor could he fail to read clearly the signs of the times.

3 Id., 'The Birgu Phase of Hospitaller History', in *Birgu: A Maltese Maritime City*, ed. L. Bugeja et al (Malta, 1994), i, 73–96.

4 For the event, F. Laferla, *Una giustizia storica: Don Gaetano Mannarino nella luce dei documenti* (Rome, 1926) and P. Callus, *The Rising of the Priests: Its Implications and Repercussions on Ecclesiastical Immunity* (Malta, 1961).

5 V. Mallia-Milanes, 'A Man with a Mission: A Venetian Hospitaller on Eighteenth-Century Malta', in *The Military Orders, Volume 4: On Land and By Sea*, ed. Judi Upton Ward (Aldershot, 2008).

6 Id., *Al servizio della Repubblica di Venezia: Le Lettere di Massimiliano Buzzaccarini Gonzaga, Commendatore di Malta, inviate alla Magistratura dei Cinque Savii alla Mercanzia 1754–1776* (Vatican City, 2014), Letter CCXII, 562. See also F. Ciappara, 'The "Great Fear" of the French Revolution in Malta', *Proceedings of History Week 1999* (Malta, 2002), 137–57, 145.

In 1929, in her influential *Malta of the Knights*, Elizabeth Schermerhorn claimed that the Hospitaller magistracy no longer enjoyed divine creative inspiration: 'its faith burned low'. She describes 'the brilliancy of Valletta's court' as 'a gilded shell, ready to collapse under the first determined fingers that grasped it'.⁷ Then she resorts to Patrick Brydone's equally influential account of his visit to Malta⁸ in support of her second claim – the widespread immorality among the Order's younger generation.⁹ This delicate issue demands a thorough exploration and understanding through extensive analytical research. I am not aware that this has ever been done. Numbers are vital in this field too, because one or two of the proverbial swallows do not a summer make. Until then, such an unfounded damaging vision does not deserve an uncritical acceptance. A third claim by the same historian – the Hospital 'could not weather the shock of the French Revolution ... because its Treasury was bankrupt';¹⁰ in fact, the reverse is correct. The Common Treasury went bankrupt as a direct outcome of the Revolution and its wars.

The historical narrative is a truth-seeking exercise but the above judgements distort, perhaps unwittingly, our vision of the past. There is an inherent flaw in the traditional argument. The brutal truth is that the attribution of the fall of Malta to Hospitaller decline is intrinsically faulty because the 'decline' of the Order is not a historical reality. No sufficiently convincing supporting empirical evidence has ever been brought forward,

The traditional vision of the fall of Malta demands a redefinition. It is the evidence which dictates the historical narrative, the reconstruction of the form and content of the realities of the past – the dynamism of the Hospitaller institution. To be plausible, this reconstruction, indeed any reconstruction of any aspect of the past, should be the product of an empirical and rationally analytical methodology. The present paper challenges both views, the two misconceived concepts – first, the decline of the Order and, secondly, the attribution of the fall of Hospitaller Malta to that alleged process.

7 E. Schermerhorn, *Malta of the Knights* (Surrey, 1929), 277.

8 Patrick Brydone, *A Tour through Sicily and Malta in a series of letters to William Beckford*, 2 volumes (London, 1773). For Malta, i, 305–45.

9 Schermerhorn, 277.

10 Ibid.

The process of change and the ageing process are two distinct and unrelated phenomena. If they weren't, the whole story of humanity would have been an unbroken history of decline, from creation to the present day. It is change for the worse which may be considered synonymous with decline. The difficulty lies in distinguishing the different stages of change, in determining whether the latest stage was worse than its predecessor or simply different, whether the whole process was worsening or simply taking a different direction.

The Order of the Hospital

Through its astonishing powers of resilience, its constant ability to adapt to new conditions, the Hospital, much unlike Venice, for example, allowed itself to evolve and adjust in its own way in response to changes that had been thrust upon it, often forcibly – like those of 1187, 1291, and 1522. Although the past had always been the Order's source of strength, the institution never looked backward or seriously tried, as Braudel would say,¹¹ to move backward. The real crisis the Order faced towards the end of the eighteenth century emerged with the fall of the Bastille on 14 July 1789. In France, now engulfed in civil war, lay the Order's three richest *langues*: Provence, Auvergne, and France. This social and economic reality allowed the French to enjoy enormous power within the Hospital. For all intents and purposes, the institution was French-dominated. The major military and naval positions, and the principal administrative and judicial organs of the State — like the finances, the arsenal, the artillery, the hospices on the European priories, and the hospital in Malta — were either occupied or controlled by members of the French *langues*. Jacques Godechot defines Grand Master de Rohan himself as 'a truly French sovereign'. In brief, the fate of the Order lay exclusively in French hands. The Hospital was far too aristocratic, far too wealthy, far too loyal to the now discredited French monarchy, its principal patron, 'to avoid the antagonism of the *sans culottes*'.¹²

On 4 August 1789, the title was abolished. Land and feudal rights were the Hospital's main sources of wealth, providing its Common

11 F. Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, trans. Richard Mayne (New York, 1993), 363.

12 Whitworth Porter, *Malta and its Knights* (London, 1871), 270.

Treasury with a regular flow of revenue that financed all its activities. In July 1791 it was decreed that every Frenchman belonging to any Order of chivalry which demanded proofs of nobility as an essential requirement for admission would lose his citizenship.¹³ In 1792 the revolutionary armies exported the civil war to their continental neighbours; what had hitherto been confined to within the republic's borders was now extended to the rest of old Europe. Four short days, from 19 to 22 September 1792, defined the nature of the Hospitaller crisis. On 19 September the Legislative Assembly decreed, among its last acts, the *loi spoliateur* which confiscated the Order's estates in France and declared them national property. On 21 September France was declared a republic. The next day, the monarchy was abolished. Exactly within a month, on 22 October, the Convention decreed the sale of all moveable property within Hospitaller houses. The Order was being treated like all the other religious houses and those of the *émigrés*.

So, between 1792 and 1798, the Order found itself overnight a net loser:

- It lost most of its European property. The Order's landed estates, its main source of revenue, were among the spoils forged by the revolutionary wars of conquest and territorial aggrandizement in Northern Italy, Belgium, and Luxembourg, the territory on the west bank of the Rhine from Basel to Andernach, and Spain. The Treaty of Campo Formio (October 1797), which reshaped the map of Europe, marked definitively the collapse of the First Coalition against France and confirmed the Revolution's achievements.
- It lost the patronage of the French monarchy and of its other traditional European protectors. To its patrons it owed its political relevance and its distinct privileged Europe-wide position. To them it owed its liberty to enjoy the fruit of its estates in Europe. To them, indeed, it owed the independence it had gained after 1310 in Rhodes and then in Malta.
- It lost its otherwise impregnable central Mediterranean fortress of Malta, which had accommodated its Convent for over two-and-a-half centuries.

13 Ibid., 271; also Alain Blondy, 'Malta and France 1789–1798: The Art of Communicating a Crisis', in *Hospitaller Malta 1530–1798: Studies on Early Modern Malta and the Order of St John of Jerusalem*, ed. V. Mallia-Milanes (Malta, 1993), 666–7.

- It lost the right to territorial sovereignty.
- Worst of all, it lost its ability to defend itself.

The Revolution shattered the Order. What the eyewitness Hospitaller Antonio Miari, the Venetian resident representative in Malta, observed in 1793 applied also to the subsequent five years: the amount of work needed and the enormous expenses required to put up a solid defence against any possible aggression would produce ‘consequences of an evil by far greater than those of a war which the French could ever hope to wage by their arms’.¹⁴

The irreversible change for the worse the Order began to experience after the fall of the Bastille had been dictated by revolutionary forces from outside the institution – pressing, unnatural, debilitating. Bastille was not a single isolated event. Historians tend to accord it a symbolic value. It was more significant than that. It marked the culmination of a whole century of intellectual revolution and the beginning of a radical turmoil that permanently transformed the political, social, and cultural structures of Europe and eventually the rest of the world. The enlightened doctrine of equality, which the *philosophes* had been preaching for the entire eighteenth century, a philosophy which the Order had practised with the inmates of its hospitals and hospices since its foundation, now transformed itself into a war against the principle of privilege, which lay at the very heart of the *Ancien Régime* and against the Order of which it formed an intimate part. The Order as an exempt institution of the Church had been based on privilege since 1113.¹⁵ The staggering revolutionary tsunami left a trail of destruction of the old. The civil war in France marked a complete break with the centuries-old cultural tradition of Europe. The abolition of the principle of privilege spelled the collapse of old Europe and consequently the near extinction of the Hospital. In no way was this destabilizing crisis a symptom of a cancerous tumour, growing and virulently spreading its malignant

14 For Miari’s observations, V. Mallia-Milanes, ‘Towards the End of the Order of the Hospital: Reflections on the Views of Two Venetian Brethren – Antonio Miari and Ottavio Benvenuti’, in *The Military Orders, Volume 5: Politics and Power*, ed. Peter W. Edbury (Surrey, 2012), 165–85; 167–77.

15 See Anthony T. Luttrell, ‘The Hospitaller Privilege of 1113: Text and Context’, forthcoming in *The Military Orders, Volume 6.1: Culture and Conflict in the Mediterranean World*, ed. Jochen Schenk & Mike Carr (Aldershot, 2017).

tentacles within the institution. The traditional vision simply does not reflect historical reality. On the eve of the fall of the Bastille, as will be shown, the state of the Hospital in its various functions, according to objective surviving evidence, was perfectly healthy.

I have scanned with great care and caution the massive correspondence carried out between Venetian resident ministers in Malta and the Adriatic Republic and between the Order's receivers in Venice and the lords of the Common Treasury in Valletta. Collectively these letters span almost the entire second half of the eighteenth century, from 1754 to 1797. It was only in the 1790s that these representatives, high-ranking members of the Hospital, brought up the issue of the contemporary threat seriously challenging their Order's existence. There is no allusion to any conceptual or visual symptoms of decline, for example, in Massimiliano Buzzaccarini Gonzaga's detailed and analytical letters from Malta between 1754 and 1776.¹⁶ On the contrary, in one of his later letters he claimed he could still perceive the Hospitaller principality as fulfilling its professed and accomplished commitments – the spiritual and physical rehabilitation of the sick poor and the extension of their naval and military establishments and of their medical knowledge and expertise to defend Christian Europe as much against Islam as against the plague and other natural calamities. The Order's immediate response to the dreadful earthquake that devastated Sicily and Calabria in 1783 is a classic example.¹⁷ Nowhere is there in these Venetian letters, at times fairly critical of the Order and the magistracy, the vaguest suggestion that the Hospitaller institution was growing somehow visibly weaker and weaker. Symptoms of decline could not have been hidden from the subtle Venetian observers.

There is no such intimation either in Alviero Zacco's equally thorough and exhaustive correspondence written from Malta when Buzzaccarini Gonzaga was on extended leave of absence to visit his native Padua and again after he had passed away in 1776.¹⁸ It was not the myth of the ageing process that struck almost fatally at the Order in the

16 See Mallia-Milanes, *Al servizio della Repubblica di Venezia*.

17 See R. Cavaliero, *The Last of the Crusaders: The Knights of St John and Malta in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1960), 69–70; F. Ryan, *The House of the Temple: A Study of Malta and its Knights in the French Revolution* (London, 1930), 120–4.

18 Mallia-Milanes, *Al servizio della Repubblica di Venezia*, 16–17 and n. 2; 19–20; 95–6, n. 289; Letter XXXVII, 219–20.

1790s. Nor ironically was the blow delivered by the Ottoman Empire, its traditional enemy. Indeed the progressive Sultan Selim III had even tried to reach a peace settlement and trade agreement with the Order in 1796, an invitation to reach some form of a truce which De Rohan declined.¹⁹ As two other Venetian brethren, Antonio Miari and Ottavio Benvenuti, so eloquently acknowledged in their correspondence, the swipe came from Revolutionary France.²⁰

Miari's letters, addressed to the Doge in Venice, provide profound insight into the state of the Order in the mid- and late-1790s and into the prevailing situation on Malta. He refers to the Order's revenues, shrunk considerably since the Bastille episode, and the Treasury's persistent endeavour to curtail expenses. Negotiating loans was not enough. The only solution, he envisaged, was to raise the value of responsions, the annual net income the Treasury received from all the priories in Europe, admitting that to resort to such drastic measures would be too insensitive to the currently pressing material and psychological needs of the brethren. Such extreme measures, he confessed, necessary though they were, would signal 'the final stages of our existence'.²¹

The situation grew worse with the certain prospect of war. In Malta, in 1796, talk of a military conflict was widespread, 'now perhaps more than ever', he pointed out. In fact, he reiterated, not only were there no sufficient funds to finance a long and hugely expensive war, there were hardly any to sustain the Order's own existence.²² Fredrick Ryan²³ highlights the discord that pervaded the Order and attributes it partly to the novel spirit of nationalism, partly to jealousy, and partly to the 'provocative conduct of individual members of the Order'.²⁴ So does Miari in his letters who blames the French knights for most of this discordance. Having lost practically everything, he points out, members of the three French *langues* were sunk in a spirit of despair, resigned to the oncoming tide of total destruction. Within such a disconcerting framework, tension, fear, and apprehension were perhaps unavoidable, natural, and understandable. What is not as understandable is to qualify

19 See id., *Venice and Hospitaller Malta*, 291–5.

20 See id., 'Towards the End of the Order of the Hospital', 165–85.

21 Ibid., 167–8, and n. 9.

22 Ibid., 170.

23 Ryan, 112.

24 Mallia-Milanes, 'Towards the End of the Order', 170.

the dissension, conflicts, and friction prevailing within the Order, as Ryan does, as symptoms of decline. Difference of opinion and lack of perfect harmony inside large multinational communities are not unnatural or abnormal qualities, then as now. The state of the European Union today is a classic example. In the context of the first revolutionary decade, the reverse would have been an astonishing surprise.

The Hospital's Vitality

Within a decade or so of the urgent reform measures introduced by the general chapter of 1776, the Hospital and its conventual principality began to show clear signs of vitality again. With the responsions raised to half-a-million *scudi* a year, the general finances 'reached a high degree of prosperity'. De Rohan succeeded, reports William Thornton, 'in procuring a large available fund to the Treasury, after the outlay of very considerable sums to promote the future income of the Order'.²⁵ Between 1762 and 1771, the Treasury's annual income had fallen from over 1,900,000 *scudi* to slightly over 800,000. Then, between 1778 and 1788, its average annual income rose again to over 1,300,000 *scudi*, most of which came from outside Malta. During these years, the total population of Malta and Gozo stood at c.91,000 — healthy, well-fed, and secure. The traditional privateering activity in the Levant was revived.²⁶ 'The 1790s,' it has been recently claimed,²⁷ 'at least for the *corso*, was a decade of success.' The average annual revenue, for instance, earned from prizes in the Levant between 1787 and 1798 amounted to 65,629 *scudi*. The amount earned from the same source in 1796 alone was 117,000 *scudi*.²⁸ Trade developed, with Valletta's conversion into a flourishing entrepôt centre between East and West reconfirmed.²⁹ With the profound social, economic, and cultural transformation which the entire principality had experienced over the

25 W.H. Thornton, *Memoir on the Finances of the Order* (Malta, 1836). The Maltese silver *scudo* was equivalent to c.2 shillings sterling.

26 Mallia-Milanes, 'Towards the End of the Order', 168–9.

27 Liam Gauci, *In the Name of the Prince: Maltese Corsairs 1760–1798* (Malta, 2016), 27.

28 A.T. Luttrell, 'Eighteenth-Century Malta: Prosperity and Problems', *Hyphen* [Malta], iii, 2 (1982), 45.

29 *Ibid.*

previous 240 years, late medieval Malta as portrayed in the 1524 eight commissioners' report³⁰ and in Jean Quintin's account of 1536,³¹ had become almost unrecognizable.

Until 1789 any scrupulous contemporary political observer would have had ample evidence of this renewed vitality in all the Hospital's major manifestations and of its positive response to that development. First, the number of admissions into the Order was rising. It was 2,128 knights-strong on the eve of the Bastille episode, 373 higher than the 1631 figure. Of these, if Henry Sire's recent claim is anything to go by, 900 were under 25.³²

Secondly, viewed holistically from above, the Order, a massive land-owning institution, in the later eighteenth century experienced physical territorial expansion. In 1776 it acquired *circa* 40 new commanderies by amalgamating the Order of Canons of St Anthony of Vienne. Another 14 commanderies came from the setting up in 1774 of the Grand Priory of Poland with its 28 commanderies. Two years later this priory was incorporated into the dormant Grand Priory of England to form part of the newly established Anglo-Bavarian Langue. Moreover, as happened on several other earlier occasions, a number of the Order's traditional commanderies were divided to form new ones and meet the pressing needs of new recruits.³³ These were the Hospitaller estates, immediately recognizable through the eight-pointed cross chiselled prominently on their façades, cultivated urban and rural spaces, different in size and heterogeneous, but similar in essential structures. Here most of the brethren conducted their everyday private and public lives, sustaining long-established networks of Europe-wide social interactions. Through them, the Hospital exercised continuing influence. The Revolution failed to destroy the Order, but it succeeded in uprooting this uninterrupted force of continuity in Europe's historical development.

Thirdly, till the very end of its stay on Malta, the Order remained as active in its naval and military role as it had always been. The serious

30 For the report, Iacomo Bosio, *Dell'Istoria della Sacra Religione et Ill.ma Militia di S. Gio. Gerosolimitano*, Part iii (Rome, 1602), 30–1; L. de Boisgelin, *Ancient and Modern Malta* (London, 1804), ii, 15–17.

31 See H.C.R. Vella, *The Earliest Description of Malta (Lyons 1536) by Jean Quintin d'Autun* (Malta 1980).

32 H.J.A. Sire, *The Knights of Malta: A Modern Resurrection* (London, 2016), 11.

33 See *ibid.*, 12–14.

threat of an Ottoman invasion in 1760, in retaliation for the *Ottoman Crown* episode,³⁴ indicated that the knights had not changed their ways. In 1775 and 1784, the Order participated in Spain's punitive expeditions against Algiers.³⁵ In the latter year and again in 1791, it helped Venice in her war against Tunis.³⁶ If the Order's role in formal war against Islam appeared to be diminishing, compared to its performance in earlier centuries, it was because such wars were no longer as frequent as they had been in the past. By the mid-eighteenth century the Ottoman threat did not remain as impressive as it had traditionally been in the sixteenth century and certain European powers, like France and Spain, were subtly promoting a growing cordiality with the Empire in the hope of reaching trade agreements with the Porte. This, however, did not erode the Order's military role because it continued to police as efficiently as before the central Mediterranean against the widespread piracy based on the Barbary Coast; naval historians of the Order, like Ettore Rossi³⁷ and Ubaldino Mori Ubaldini,³⁸ provide a fair picture of these activities. Moreover, archival records show that in 1796–97 the arsenal was busy constructing, among other works, two *mezzegalere* (the *San Pietro* and the *San Andrea*) for the papal navy³⁹ and refitting other war vessels.⁴⁰

Nor did this development insidiously weaken the institution's political relevance. The brethren's training, military qualities, and naval expertise were still highly esteemed throughout Europe, evidenced by the brilliant careers and rapid promotions which certain Hospitallers occupied in various royal courts and European armies, navies, and

34 See, for example, Cavaliero, 142–3.

35 See U. Mori Ubaldini, *La marina del Sovrano Militare Ordine di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme di Rodi e di Malta* (Rome, 1971), 508–9.

36 Ibid., 510–11. Also V. Mallia-Milanes, 'The *Buona Unione*: An Episode in Veneto-Maltese Relations in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Journal of the Faculty of Arts* [University of Malta], iv, 4 (1971), 309–26.

37 E. Rossi, *Storia della marina dell'Ordine di S. Giovanni di Gerusalemme di Rodi e di Malta* (Rome-Milan, 1926).

38 Cited in note 35 above.

39 See N[ational] L[ibrary of] M[alta], A[rchives of the] O[rder of St John,] M[alta], Arch. 1923, 'Conto che rende il Cav. Nicola Buzi come commissario per la costruzione delle due mezzegalere di Sua Santità, cominciata il 10 ottobre 1795 e terminata il 26 agosto 1796'.

40 See ibid., Arch. 1907, *Libro Maestranze dell'Arsenale, dal primo maggio 1796 a tutto aprile del 1797*. This archive has been described as a register containing 'l'annotazione dei salari dati ... alle maestranze impiegate nel riattamento, concia e spalmatura delle galere, galeotte di guardia, caracche e altre imbarcazioni.' *Catalogue of the Records of the Order of St John of Jerusalem in the Royal Malta Library*, comp. Rev. J. Mizzi, xii (Malta, 1968), 162.

colonial enterprises – particularly in those of France, Spain, Naples, Sardinia, and the Papal States. In 1789, to instance one, Catherine the Great sought the services of an experienced knight of Malta to help her set up a galley squadron for her Russian fleet in the Baltic. De Rohan dispatched the young Count Giulio Litta, from Milan, aged 22. By the time he left Russia in 1790, he had already been promoted to the rank of counter-admiral.⁴¹

The Order remained dutifully firm and unwavering in its statutory attitude towards the Turk. On the other hand, if the Hospitaller galley squadron was reduced from 5 to 4, the ship-of-the-line squadron was raised from 4 to 5. These were changes made in response partly to technological developments, partly to contemporary demands, especially in response to the fact that the Muslim threat was gradually receding. The knights' war against Islam was not an 'optional' naval activity. Nor, claims John Taaffe, was it 'aggressive'. It was, he explains, 'simply defensive'.⁴²

There is a fourth feature – the role the Order played as a religious and as a hospitalling institution. From the religious and spiritual dimension, by the time Napoleon reached Malta, 'the Offices of the day and the calendar of the liturgical year', it has been shown,⁴³ 'shaped' the regular life of the brotherhood, as they had done in the eleventh century. On the other hand, in 1964, referring to what he termed 'the decadence of the Order,' and basing himself solely on John Howard's 1789 negative account on the Holy Infirmary,⁴⁴ Paul Cassar wrote that '[i]t was inevitable that the infirmary should share in this deterioration'.⁴⁵ This is one other misconception taken as fact. On Rhodes, as on Malta, the conventual hospitals 'retained their importance', explains Anthony Luttrell, 'precisely because they conspicuously maintained the ancient tradition of service

41 Cavaliero, 205–6. For a short bibliography, [Rev.] Joseph Mizzi, 'A Bibliography of the Order of St John of Jerusalem (1925–1969)' in Council of Europe, *The Order of St John in Malta, with an exhibition of paintings by Mattia Preti Painter and Knight* (Malta, 1970), 108–204, entries 1480–6.

42 J. Taaffe, *The History of the Holy, Military, Sovereign Order of St John of Jerusalem* (London, 1832), bk. iv, 193.

43 A. Williams, 'The Constitutional Development of the Order of St John in Malta, 1530–1798', in Mallia-Milanes, *Hospitaller Malta*, 285.

44 John Howard, *An Account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe* (London, 1789). Howard spent some three weeks in Malta in the winter of 1786. For his account on Malta's lazarettos, *ibid.*, 8–9; for his account on the island's hospitals; *ibid.*, 58–61.

45 P. Cassar, *A Medical History of Malta* (London, 1964), 49.

to the poor and the sick'.⁴⁶ Indeed, it was the hospital in Rhodes and later in Malta, he points out, that 'effectively defined the Convent'.⁴⁷ In 1930, the vision put forward by Frederick Ryan is anchored by the view of several other observers, like Henry Teonge,⁴⁸ George Sandys,⁴⁹ and Edward Brown,⁵⁰ and of 'a vast amount of evidence', notwithstanding his familiarity with Howard.⁵¹ In Ryan's view, the Order 'was faithful to the duties of "Hospitality" to the end of its days in Malta'.⁵² Between 1779 and 1788 the average annual expenditure on the hospital amounted to £8,000. In 1796, continues Ryan, 'the Treasury still was able to find £6,000 for its upkeep'.⁵³ There is 'a vast amount of evidence', he asserts, to show that the hospital in Malta 'was well abreast of its time from the scientific point of view, and that from the religious standpoint this great hospital was ably fulfilling, with a multitude of other activities in Malta, the great function of a centre for corporal works of mercy'.⁵⁴

There are two other issues that need to be discussed. One is the concept of secularization. The other concerns the criticism levelled at Grand Master Ferdinand Hompesch.

Secularization

Secularization is defined as the slow conversion of an ecclesiastical or religious state to a lay one, the process of laicization, of depriving an institution of its religious character, dissociating it from religious or spiritual concerns, turning it from a religious or spiritual state to one of worldliness.⁵⁵ Within the historical context of the Order's evolution,

46 A.T. Luttrell, 'The Hospitallers' Medical Tradition: 1291–1530', in *The Military Orders, Volume I: Fighting for the Faith and Caring for the Sick*, ed. Malcolm Barber (Aldershot, 1994), 80.

47 Ibid.

48 H. Teonge, *The diary of Henry Teonge ... 1675–1679*, ed. G.E. Manuring (London, 1927). Section on Malta: 121–2, 264–5.

49 G. Sandys, *Travels ...*, 6th edn. (London, 1670). Section on Malta, 177–83.

50 J. Campbell, *The travels and adventures of Edward Brown ... containing his account of the Isle of Malta* (London, 1739). Section on Malta, 174–91.

51 Ryan, 117.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, ed. Lesley Brown, *sub voce*.

from the latter's humble origins, the Hospital's was not a process of conversion, of turning from one state into another; it was a process, necessary and inevitable, of assuming a new and related dimension, while simultaneously retaining the original ones. Secularization evolved naturally from the Order's military role.

The first hundred years of the Order's existence in Jerusalem, from about the 1080s to the 1180s, were years of deep, formative, and lasting influence. They thrust upon the nascent institution its shape, its form, its character, which it uninterruptedly absorbed, unbroken and unshaken, till its last days in Malta. During its years in Latin Syria, observes the late Jonathan Riley-Smith,⁵⁶ the Hospital, through its 'privileged, international position as a great Order of the Church',⁵⁷ cultivated a profound sense of independence, it grew wealthier, it gained considerable experience in efficient administration, skilful negotiation, and good government, and turned into a significant force of political influence. From these early years, in the sole interests of its self-preservation, this 'multilingual and supranational religious corporation', began to excel in the delicate art of diplomacy,⁵⁸ the Hospital's forte, we are told,⁵⁹ both in defence of its own zealously shielded privileges and 'for interacting with the respective foreign policies of its principal protectors'. In disputes between Christian princes, its 'ideal of neutrality', so ably upheld by its skilful diplomats and experienced ambassadors accredited to the major sovereign courts of Europe, was a very useful and valuable asset. In the twelfth century too, the Hospital is known to have already owned ships. By the end of the following century, when it transferred its Convent to Cyprus, 'it permanently sustained a fleet, commanded by its own brethren' and which it employed for the transport of troops and supplies, defence, and for its participation in warlike activities.⁶⁰ Within this formative context, it consolidated its commitment to the care of the sick and the poor and to the military defence of the Holy Land. It

56 J. Riley-Smith, *The Knights of St John in Jerusalem and Cyprus c.1050–1310* (London, 1967), 78.

57 Ibid., 79.

58 Ibid., 367.

59 D. Allen, 'The Order of St John as a "School for Ambassadors" in Counter-Reformation Europe', in *The Military Orders, Volume 2: Welfare and Warfare*, ed. Helen Nicholson (Aldershot, 1998), 363.

60 See Jürgen Sarnowsky, 'The Military Orders and their Navies', *The Military Orders, Volume 4: On Land and by Sea*, ed. Judy Upton-Ward (Aldershot, 2008), 45.

was the powerful spirit of nationalism in the nineteenth century and the gradual extinction of the threat of Islam to Europe that transformed the institution into the one we know today.

There were three distinct stages that moulded the Order's evolution. First, the institution came into existence in response to two developments; the treacherous conditions prevailing in the Near East prompted the need for its creation, while the profound and lasting influence of the great reform movement within the Church determined the form it would assume – from a lay confraternity it evolved into a religious and charitable institution to serve pilgrims and the needy. By 1156 a medical hospital had already existed in the Convent. That was the first stage. This act of charity was later extended to reach the pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land, marking the initial move in the direction of the institution's second stage – the process of militarization. Shortly after the First Crusade, from the 1130s, the Order, which two decades earlier Paschal II had formally recognized through his *Pie postulatio voluntatis*⁶¹ as an exempt Order of the Church, began gradually to be assigned the custody of a number of newly constructed castles, the task of fighting for the Faith. Innocent II's brief *Quam amabilis Deo* of 20 February 1131 is one of the earliest surviving documents which refers to the Order's dual character.⁶² By 1180 the Order owned 25 such castles. That was the second pronounced stage in the natural evolution of the Hospital which dictated its logical development – the defence of the Holy Land along with the other military orders.

Then the Hospitallers' 'increasing participation in military affairs' led to the third stage in this process of transformation – the Hospital's unavoidable direct involvement in the power politics of the Latin Kingdom. 'By the end of the twelfth century,' writes Riley-Smith,⁶³ 'the Hospitallers had become an essential element in the defence of the Latin settlement.' This defining character, dictated by the social reality in which the Order was evolving, composed of these three constituent qualities – religious, military, and secular – remained with the Hospitallers even after they had been evicted from the Holy Land in 1291: in Limassol on Cyprus, in Rhodes, and in Malta. On Rhodes,

61 See note 15 above.

62 See, for example, J. Riley-Smith, *The Knights Hospitaller in the Levant, c.1070–1309* (UK, 2012), 36.

63 Id., *The Knights of St John*, 77.

freed from the feudal ties of Syria's 'Crusader overlords',⁶⁴ the Order gained independence and sovereignty and continued to evolve at a faster rhythm into a small but efficient naval power. Of both Rhodes and Malta, the Hospitallers created island-states; on both, the grand master ruled as a sovereign head of state, with Antoine De Paule drawing a clear distinction between affairs of state, to be recorded from the 1620s in the *Libri Conciliorum Status*, and matters pertaining to the Order as a religious corporation, minuted as they had always been in the *Libri Conciliorum*. Malta was turned into a principality, under the rule of a prince grand master – enlightened, benevolent, absolute.

Viewed within this dimension of secularization, the grant of special powers to L'Isle Adam and de Valette to manage the finances, defined as 'dangerous precedents',⁶⁵ were rather necessary measures prompted by the prevailing crisis or current war conditions. But it also reflected the process of consolidating magistral authority, becoming more and more pronounced, as Emanuel Buttigieg convincingly demonstrates,⁶⁶ under Grand Master Verdalle, until it reaches its peak under Pinto. It was a natural evolution of the Hospitaller constitution in perfect harmony with contemporary political developments in Europe. The Order's statutes and ordinances bear witness to the institution's continuous process of adaptation to meet emerging new needs.

Secularization was a strong formative force which distinguished the Hospitaller institution from the purely contemplative and monastic Orders of the Church. The Hospitallers' place was in the wider secular world. John Milton's definition of the 'true wayfaring Christian' fits the Hospitallers to near-perfection: 'He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better.'⁶⁷ Theirs was not 'a fugitive and cloistered virtue'.⁶⁸ True temperance is the ability 'to see and know, and yet abstain'.⁶⁹ The long and chequered history of the

64 Williams, 287.

65 Ibid., 288.

66 E. Buttigieg, 'Politics and Power in Grand Master Verdalle's *Statute Hospitalis Hierusalem* (1588)', in *The Military Orders, Volume 5: Politics and Power*, ed. Peter W. Edbury (Surrey, 2012), 153–64.

67 John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in *Milton's Prose*, selected and ed. Malcolm W. Wallace, in *The World's Classics* (London, 1925), 290.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., 291.

Hospital was a purifying trial of strength, ‘and trial is’, says Milton, ‘by what is contrary’.⁷⁰ Secularization does not appear to have distracted from the institution’s other functions – the care of the sick and the poor and the defence first of the Holy Land and then of Christian Europe. In no way can that process, given the present state of historical scholarship, be therefore considered to have been a symptom of decadence or decline.

Grand Master Ferdinand von Hompesch

About two decades ago, in a conference on the military orders at Palmela in Portugal, I had pointed out that, in the political history of Europe, few personalities seem to have been more maligned than Ferdinand Hompesch.⁷¹ Historians, basing their views on the judgements of contemporary observers, have lavished a wide range of bitter accusations on the man. He has been depicted as having had little grasp of the hard political and economic problems facing Malta and little capacity for seeking advice to enable him and his Council to come to grips with them. By far the most outstanding difficulty in analysing the validity of this record of the grand master’s performance derives from the character of the sources at the disposal of the historian.

This is what Elisabeth Schermerhorn had to say on this issue:⁷²

In the heat of the dispute that followed the surrender and departure of the knights – as to whether the Order or the Maltese had been the cowards, whether Grandmaster Hompesch had been a martyr or a traitor, or a mere dummy, whether every possible preparations for resistance had been made in advance, or nothing done at all – all sorts of horrible recriminations and sensational stories were passed about in pamphlets and memorials and petitions, on which small reliance can be placed.

This archival documentation is biased. It is the product of dissent, and what is worse is that it has remained the source of inspiration of so

70 Ibid., 290.

71 V. Mallia-Milanes, ‘Grandmaster Ferdinand von Hompesch and the end of the Order in Malta: A Reassessment’, in *Ordens Militares: Guerra, religião, poder e cultura: Actas do III Encontro sober Ordens Militares. Palmela, 22 a 25 de Janeiro de 1998*, ed. Isabel Cristina F. Fernandes (Palmela, 1998), i, 93–9.

72 Schermerhorn, 300.

many traditional historians and their work. In the preface to his *History of Malta during the period of the French and British Occupations*, published in 1909, William Hardman observes that ‘owing to the want of such official information in the past, authors have in many instances wandered from the truth’. But complete reliance on official documentation alone may itself prove dangerous as it too may contribute to bias and distortion.

Today, over two centuries later, this perception of Hompesch has not changed. A recent study of the Order in modern times reaffirms this view, although no new supporting archival evidence has been produced.⁷³ In brief, the traditional portrait of Malta’s last grand master is questionable. The foundation is too weak to sustain any further arguments, like holding the man, even in part, responsible for the fall of Hospitaller Malta. Nor would it be fair to compare and contrast, as has been done, Hompesch with L’Isle Adam and de Valette. It is not fair because the contexts they lived in were distinctly different.

By the end of the eighteenth century [I wrote in 1998]⁷⁴ the nature of medieval warfare, the medieval concept of chivalry, and the idea of the fighting crusader had long been forgotten; their living image, as Henry Kamen claims of Philip II, ‘languished in the realm of uninformed mythology’.⁷⁵ The uninterrupted process of change constitutes the quintessence of history. The eighteenth century, with its cool rationalism, its enlightened notions of government, its Physiocratic theories of commerce, and its vigorously growing trend of secularism and anticlericalism, bears no semblance to the fifteenth or sixteenth century. After all, it was during L’Isle Adam’s magistracy that the island of Rhodes was lost permanently to the Ottoman Turks. On the other hand, contrary to what traditional history has always ascertained, credit for the outcome of the Turkish siege of Malta can only in part be attributed to de Valette’s leadership and military strategy.

‘There are some myths’, observes Fernand Braudel, ‘that historians persist in perpetuating, come what may’.⁷⁶ It was not my purpose at Palmela twenty years ago and it is not my purpose today,

nor has it ever been my intention, either to exonerate and rehabilitate Hompesch, or

73 H.J.A. Sire, *The Knights of Malta: A Modern Resurrection* (London, 2016).

74 Mallia-Milanes, ‘Grandmaster Ferdinand von Hompesch’, 95.

75 H. Kamen, *Philip of Spain* (London, 1997).

76 F. Braudel, *The Identity of France*, trans. Siân Reynolds (London, 1991), ii, 168.

in any way belittle his highly esteemed predecessors. Rather, what I would like to underscore is that it is a sacred duty of historical research to promote a courageous reassessment of past interpretations, to revisit fearlessly the past which our predecessors had reconstructed, and re-evaluate with academic rigour their methods, their approach, their conclusions.⁷⁷

There is another side to these recriminations against Hompesch. February 1797 marks the end of Napoleon's first Italian campaign when he drove the Austro-Russian armies out of the whole peninsula. By then Napoleon had already proved himself to be the foremost military and political genius in Europe. By implication, Hompesch, with no supporting funds to strengthen his stand, had been

expected by his critics to display an indomitable spirit, an over-powerful dynamism, and a frigid determination. These form an intricate set of extraordinary qualities that would have collectively succeeded (or so his political foes must have thought) in containing the tide which the French Revolution had unleashed and was sweeping all over Europe; in withholding the radically wide-ranging social and political transformation which it had set in motion; indeed, in 'deforming' the entire revolutionary achievement⁷⁸

permanently, something which no one else in Europe had ever succeeded in doing.

This approach towards Hompesch demonstrates the quintessence of traditional history *par excellence*, the 'great man' approach, attributing to man qualities which do not in fact belong to him. Man does not enjoy the powers to bring about long-term structural change. It is the context in which he lives that determines change. The economic, social, cultural forces, war, the weather: these are the elements which can generate the process of permanent change, forces that are far more powerful than man. No grand master, or any other great man, could hope to annihilate the revolutionary movement. No grand master or any other man could hope to change the course of history.

The unfavourable image of Hompesch which his detractors so diligently drew to denigrate him in his own day may perhaps be best countered by a value judgement which, of all commentators, Napoleon

77 Mallia-Milanes, 'Grandmaster Ferdinand von Hompesch', 95.

78 Ibid., 6.

himself made in his later years, not without an extremely fine sense of cynicism: ‘The Knights did nothing shameful,’ he said. ‘No one is obliged to perform impossibilities.’⁷⁹

To conclude

Lest I’ll be misunderstood or misinterpreted, I wish to make a small confession by way of conclusion. I have always believed, and I have always taught several generations of young historians accordingly, that nobody can ever claim the last word in history. History is reconstruction on surviving authentic evidence; history too is interpretation. The present paper has set out explicitly to direct attention to a twofold traditional misconception concerning the Order of the Hospital in the later eighteenth century. This is the attribution of the surrender of Malta in 1798 to the alleged decline of the institution. I hope to have made my view clear – that the fall of Hospitaller Malta had been the sole direct impact of the French Revolution. On the other hand, it has not been the purpose of the present paper to claim that the Order did not suffer any form or degree of internal crisis. My position today is that the theory of decline has not yet been definitively proven. I am prepared to change my position tomorrow, to retract my claim hurriedly, if historians, instead of repeatedly turning myths into facts, instead of spreading and promoting traditional misconceptions, albeit unwittingly, come up with sufficiently valid empirical evidence to show that, by the time of the fall of the Bastille, there were clear visible signs of disintegration within the entire Hospitaller edifice, that the institution was coming to pieces, that it had indeed reached a stage of no return. The extraordinary faculty of resilience, the remarkable capacity to spring back into shape, to recover quickly from extremely difficult situations, has consistently been the hallmark of the Hospital throughout its history. Every crisis of radical displacement, far-reaching and thorough though it was, from Jerusalem through Acre, Rhodes, to Malta, and indeed that of the early decades of the nineteenth century, constituted a threshold of transformation. There

79 L. Butler, ‘The Order of St John in Malta: An Historical Sketch’, in Council of Europe, *The Order of St John in Malta, with an exhibition of paintings by Mattia Preti, Painter and Knight* (Malta, 1970), 44.

is a great irony in all this. Not only is historical reality curiously averse to the idea or vision of decline, the Hospital, after almost a millennium since its inception, is still a living organism today – a phenomenon that in the early nineteenth century was designated as enjoying an innate quality not only of resilience, but indeed of immortality.⁸⁰

80 Sire, pp. viii, xi, 68.