

The Magistral *Possesso* of Mdina through Favray's Lens

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Anyone with an interest in Maltese history is no doubt familiar with Antoine Favray's painting *Grand Master Philippe Villiers de l'Isle Adam Taking Possession of Mdina*. This seminal piece of Hospitaller iconography sought to visually portray the start of the Order of St. John's rule on the Maltese islands. It provides a snapshot of an event that in effect ushered the archipelago into a new era. It was a very public ceremony which underscored the power politics at play between the various authorities present on the island. One cannot underestimate how important these celebratory public occasions displaying wealth and power were for early modern Europeans. The use of grand public spectacles was possibly the most effective method to get messages across, to a wide array of people of varying backgrounds and literacy. Ceremonial entries into cities were exploited by municipalities and overlords alike across early modern Europe and Malta was no exception. The ceremonial entry, or *possesso*, of Mdina first staged by L'Isle Adam in 1530 and masterfully depicted by Favray was the first of a long series of *possessi* that were held during the Maltese Hospitaller period.

The principle actors in the ceremonial entry were the Grand Master and the members of the *Università* or the Mdina municipal council. As part of this ritual, the Grand Master would take an oath to safeguard the customs and privileges accorded to the Maltese by the

Aragonese crown, while the *Università* would formally present to their overlord the keys to Mdina. The Grand Master would then enter the city and take ‘possession’ of it and by extension the Maltese islands. This civic ritual was staged using specific elements which helped create a ‘fixed’ backdrop for this manifestation of power and splendour, which made the ceremony instantly recognisable. Favray sought to capture some of these very elements in his painting. This article will seek to consider the context of the *possesso* and the commissioning of the painting whilst also deconstructing these same elements. This will be done primarily through an analysis of the *Libri Conciliorum* (containing the records of the government of the Order) and the *Libri Conciliorum Status* (containing the records of state from 1620 onwards) as well as the records of the *Università* mainly the *Mandati* (orders to pay). It is only through an analysis of both the written word and Favray’s work that one can truly appreciate the civic ritual for what it was – an event that was designed to be a feast to the senses but also an exercise in subtle political manipulation.

The background to this civic ritual

Before one can fully delve into the individual elements found in the painting, an analysis of the background and context of the subject matter of Favray’s work is needed. The arrival of the Order of St John and their permanent establishment in Malta was anything but straightforward. The Maltese islands at the time formed part of the Habsburg empire and fell under the direct jurisdiction of the crown. In addition, the islands were granted a further privilege by way of a royal charter (known as the *Magna Carta Libertatis*): Malta would always form part of the royal demesne¹ - in essence, this translated into ‘protection’ from cessation as a fiefdom to any foreign magnate. In practice, this meant that the *Università*, whose members belonged to

1 Charles Dalli, *Malta the Medieval Millennium*. (Malta: Midsea Books, 2006), 211,215.

the leading families of the island,² ran and controlled the island semi-autonomously.³ By 1530 this happy state of affairs (at least for the *Università*), had lasted for over a hundred years.

In 1530 the Order had been homeless for almost eight years after having been expelled from Rhodes. The Hospitallers were in desperate need of a permanent home from which to carry out their twofold mission, the caring of the sick and defence of the faith. Indeed, Malta was considered as a potential home as early as 1523.⁴ The Hospitallers, however, hesitated. The islands were no Rhodes and in the eyes of the Order were riddled with various problems such as the poor soil quality and their resultant dependence on Sicily for victuals, as well as the very poor state of the fortifications present on the islands.⁵ The fortress of Tripoli was also included in the package which would stretch the already strained resources of the Order to unsustainable levels.⁶ Furthermore, it would have had to deal with an entrenched nobility that could have possibly challenged the Order's authority. The Maltese islands were on the other hand, strategically placed to continue their war against Islam, be they Ottomans or Barbary corsairs as the islands were a frontier post for Sicily.⁷ Moreover, it was far enough from mainland Europe for the Order not to be embroiled by the warring factions and, thus, maintain its independence and neutrality.⁸ Despite the Order's initial hesitation, Malta was eventually ceded on 23 March 1530 by Charles V to the Order 'in perpetual noble, full and free enfeoffment'.⁹

Needless to say, the *Università* was not too happy with this

2 Charles Dalli, *Medieval Communal Organization in an Insular Context: Approaching the Maltese Universitas*. In, 'The Making and Unmaking of the Maltese Universitas- A supplement of Heritage' (1993), 9.

3 *Ibid.*, 10.

4 Victor Mallia-Milanes, *Charles Vs Donation of Malta to the Order of St. John*. In 'Peregrinationes Acta et Documenta', ii (2001), no pagination.

5 *Ibid.*, No pagination.

6 *Ibid.*, No pagination.

7 *Ibid.*, No pagination.

8 *Ibid.*, No pagination.

9 Victor Mallia-Milanes, *Introduction to Hospitaller Malta*. In Victor Mallia-Milanes ed., *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798 Studies on Early Modern Malta and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem* (Malta: Mireva Publications, 1993), 3.

development as this was a blatant breach of the *Magna Carta Libertatis* and effectively curbed their sphere of power and influence considerably. In a bid to make the best out of a 'bad' situation, the *Università* invited the Grand Master to stage a ceremonial entry into the *Città Notabile* (the title sometimes used to describe Mdina).¹⁰ This was a means through which the *Università* could exert its own agency. The Hospitallers, on the other hand, were conscious of the fact that this donation had undoubtedly ruffled some local feathers. The *possesso*, therefore, was the perfect opportunity for the Order to lay the foundations for a smooth transition and develop good relations with the local population.

Arguably the event was an elaborate exercise in damage control, with two further aims. The first was to show that the *Università* was up to the task of organising a ceremony with all the pomp and circumstance that warranted the occasion (despite the meagre resources) and was therefore equal to other municipal organisations across Europe. The *Mandati* tell of the expenses incurred by the *Università* for the Grand Master's visit which included amongst other things food (for a banquet¹¹ and as a gift¹²) and clothes for the members of the *Università* themselves.¹³ Their dress was key to convey the appropriate message to the Grand Master and his retinue as well as the spectators. Rich and fine garments as carefully depicted by Favray give the impression of affluence which, in turn, is the result of power and influence. The second aim centred on the premise that gifts generate an expectation of reciprocity. It is possible that the *Università* hoped that by inviting the Grand Master to make a solemn entrance and presenting him with gifts which included the keys to the city; this would result in a measure of

10 Giacomo Bosio, *Dell' Istoria Della Sacra Religione et Illustrissima Militia di San Giovanni Gerosolomitano*, (Venice: 1695), 89.

11 Vicki Ann Cremona, *Spectacle and 'Civil Liturgies' in Malta During the time of the Knights of St John*. In Christopher Cairns ed, *The Renaissance Theatre, Texts, Performance, Design Volume II Design, Image and Acting* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 45.

12 Stanley Fiorni, *The 'Mandati' Documents at the Archive of the Mdina Cathedral, Malta 1473-1539*, (Malta, The Hill Monastic Manuscript Library & Cathedral Museum, 1992), xxxii.

13 *Ibid.*, xxxii.

goodwill towards the municipal government.

The *possesso* was also a tool through which the Order's overlordship of the island was legitimised in the eyes of the populace. The ceremonial pomp, the processional *entrata* into the city, the ensuing festivities were meant to leave no doubt in the mind of the participants and to all those present, who was in charge. The first *possesso* of Mdina was a political 'give and take' which laid the foundations of the Order's relationship with the islanders for the years to come. It was considered of such great importance that it was repeated in later years to reiterate this relationship of lord and faithful subject.

Chronicling the *possesso* through pen and art

The importance of the first *possesso* cannot be denied, but given that this event was staged with a measure of regularity with at least one held during an individual's lifetime (by the time the painting was commissioned), the question inevitably arises why choose this subject matter for a painting. The answer may lie in the way these events were chronicled in the rest of early modern Europe and what treatment these received locally.

Chronicles of ceremonial and triumphant entries into major cities in Europe were often documented in pamphlets or festival books for public consumption.¹⁴ These were often commissioned by municipalities themselves as an elaborate image fostering exercise. The publication of festival books in the Low Countries was, for example, a common occurrence. These books described the festival in every detail

14 Margit, Thöfner, *A Common Art: Urban Ceremonial in Antwerp and Brussels during and after the Dutch Revolt*, (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 2007) 117, Teofilo F. Ruiz, *The King Travels. Festive Traditions in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012) 92 and Georgia Clarke, *The Emperor's Hat: City, Space and Identity in Contemporary Accounts of Charles V's Entry into Bologna in 1529*. In 'I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance', Vol. 16, (2013), 200.

and included various pictorial representations of the event,¹⁵ making them accessible to the illiterate too. Not only did they ensure that the festival would be recorded for posterity but its message would also reach as wide an audience as possible. The use of published material for propaganda purposes was not alien to the Order. Conscious of the fact that it had to constantly justify its existence by demonstrating its relevance, the Order commissioned as well as encouraged the publication of accounts (which were meant for public international consumption) regaling deeds and feats carried out by its members in furtherance of its mission – the defence of the faith. The publication of an eye-witness account of the siege of Rhodes of 1480 went on to become a fifteenth century best seller and was translated in a number of languages.¹⁶ This is in marked contrast to the chronicling of important civic events, which were of national rather than international importance. Even the official records themselves, which were not meant for public consumption, are sometimes devoid of descriptions of politically significant *possessi*.

No mention was, for example, made in the *Libri Conciliorum* of L'Isle Adam's *possesso*. It was eventually given the importance it deserved in the Order's official history as written by Giacomo Bosio.¹⁷ This account was unfortunately published almost a lifetime after the event. It was Grand Master Verdalle who commissioned Bosio to write the Order's history (up to 1571) in 1589.¹⁸ So one has to question the accuracy of the account. It is possible, bearing in mind European early modern sensitivities, that the description may have been somewhat exaggerated and was probably coloured by an element of bias towards the Order. Bosio based his history on works and notes of previous Hospitaller chroniclers such as Frà Jean Quintin and Frà Antoine

15 Thöfner, *A Common Art*, 117.

16 Donald Kagay and Theresa Vann, *Hospitaller Piety and Crusader Propaganda. Guillaume Caorsin's Description of The Ottoman Siege of Rhodes, 1480* (England and USA, Ashgate, 2015), ix.

17 Bosio, *Dell'Istoria Della Sacra Religione*, 89-90.

18 Emanuel Buttigieg, 'Politics and Power in Grand Master Verdalle's *Statuta Hospitalis Hierusalem*' in *The Military Orders. Volume 5: Power and Politics*, (Aldershot, Variorum 2012), 158.

Geoffroi.¹⁹ It is highly probable that Bosio's description of L'Isle Adam's entry was based on these notes. An alternative contemporaneous source – the *Università* records – do tell us that the municipal council went to great lengths to ensure that the event was decorous and worthy of the illustrious visitor.²⁰ However, these records give the researcher mere snippets of what occurred. Scholars have to rely, therefore, on Bosio for a cohesive retelling of that event, bearing in mind of course, its limitations.

Between 1530 and 1623 (ending with the Vasconcellos' magistracy) there is a very conspicuous absence of descriptions relating to Grand Masters taking possession of Mdina. Between 1534 (the death of L'Isle Adam) and 1623, eleven Grand Masters were elected and yet no detailed accounts seem to exist. As time progressed and the records became more detailed and voluminous, the need was felt to alter the way things were recorded. It was decided with the election of Antoine De Paule to split the records in two with the *Libri Conciliorum* dealing with the internal affairs of the Order and the *Libri Conciliorum Status* dealing with the affairs of the state (recording political, military and diplomatic matters). With the creation of the *Libri Conciliorum Status*, there were new opportunities created to record spectacular ceremonial events which were primarily concerned with statehood and not internal Hospitaller affairs. One can find numerous accounts of ceremonial entries staged by Grand Masters in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the *Libri Conciliorum Status*.

The chronicling of these ceremonial entries was not standardised. Some are very concise almost to a fault, being only one or two pages long,²¹ such as is the case for the *possessi* of Adrien de Wignacourt, Raphael Cotoner and Nicolas Cotoner. Whilst, on the other hand, the one describing Pinto's entry was twenty nine pages long – by far the lengthiest description. It can be argued that during Pinto's

19 Paul George Pisani, 'The Battle of Lepanto, 7 October 1571: a critical annotated edition of Luca Cenni's Account', unpublished M.A. Dissertation, Department of History (University of Malta, 2010), 20-21.

20 Fiorini, *The 'Mandati' Documents*, xxxiii.

21 For the purposes of this article, a page is one side of a folio.

time and in line with the fashions of the era, the pomp, vanity and the princely affectations had reached an all-time high; Favray's full length portrait of Grand Master Pinto being the epitome of this. The portrait, commissioned in 1747 by the assembly of conventual chaplains as a gift to the Grand Master was a visual representation of ceremonial nobility, splendour and vanity which resulted in Antoine Favray garnering Grand Master Pinto's favour and patronage.²² Indeed, it is between 1744 and 1762 that Favray, painted works for the Order that had a historical significance to the Hospitallers, including *Grand Master L'Isle Adam's Taking Possession of Mdina*.²³

The Order was at the time keen to root the *possesso* firmly in the past, as an age old custom. The older the tradition, the greater the prestige bestowed onto the event. In an era when the Grand Master was keen to underscore his status as a sovereign prince of an island Order state, harking back to age old prince-like traditions would give a further patina of legitimacy to these princely claims. What better way to do this than to commission Favray to execute a painting of L'Isle Adam's entry into the *Città Notabile*? This was certainly an exercise in Hospitaller propaganda but it also ensured that the first *possesso* was finally given pride of place in Hospitaller history. The event was, therefore, not only traditionally chronicled in the official history of the Order but was also given a visual representation, which, in and of itself, would have had a wider appeal. As the artwork was commissioned over two hundred years after the event, Favray would have certainly looked to Bosio's account to guide him. This notwithstanding, Favray was looking at a sixteenth-century ceremony through an eighteenth-century lens. Just by way of example, one need look no further than the sword being held by the figure standing behind the Grand Master. This is not a sixteenth-century sword but an eighteenth-century weapon.²⁴

22 Kevin Sciberras, *Baroque Painting in Malta* (Malta, Midsea Books, 2009), 340.

23 *Ibid.*, 331, 343.

24 Franco Davies, 'The Practical and Symbolic Dimensions of Edged Weapons for the Hospitallers, in Particular Swords, 1530-1798', unpublished M.A. Dissertation, Department of History, University of Malta, 2014, 91.



Figure 4. L'Isle Adam from Favray's Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam Taking Possession of Mdina, Mid-Eighteenth Century. Reproduced with the kind permission of Daniel Cilia and Heritage Malta.

Particular elements present within the painting

The fulcrum of the staging of a *possesso* was the presentation of the symbolic keys to the city. It is no surprise these objects featured prominently in Favray's work. The biblical reference to Christ presenting the keys to the gates of heaven to St Peter would have been obvious to all those present.²⁵ Just like Christ placed his trust in St Peter, so did the *Università* as representatives of the Maltese, place their trust

25 Paola Rapelli, *Dizionario dell'Arte. Simboli del Potere e Grandi Dinastie* (Milan, Mondadori Electa S.p.A, 2004), 58.

and fealty (as vassals) in the Order.²⁶ This was the classic tribute-gift which was dictated by the exigencies of protocol. Gifts given in early modern Europe were also meant to create obligations.²⁷ In this instance, it created an obligation on the part of the Grand Master and the Order to protect and safeguard Mdina, its citizens, and by extension, the entire Maltese population. It also signalled to the participants that the municipal council had the authority to make such an important gift and in so doing underscored their status as people of importance. In accepting the gift, the Grand Master acknowledged their authority but also their fealty and allegiance. It was a political exercise in reciprocity. The keys themselves were laden with significance. According to Bosio, the keys given to L'Isle Adam were made of silver.²⁸ The gift had to be worthy of the recipient and therefore had to be made of a precious metal. Silver keys were deemed to be devices that opened doors²⁹ and given that the door to the city was closed at the beginning of the ceremony³⁰, it was only fitting that the key presented to the Grand Master would be one that would symbolically open the door to him. It would appear that the keys were not always made of silver; there were instances (just by way of example, Zondadari's³¹ and Rohan's³² entry) where one of the keys was gilded. Apart from the increased intrinsic value of the object, this addition would add to the symbolic meaning attributed to these devices. A gold key is considered one that closed doors.³³ The Grand Master was therefore given the means to both open (silver key) and close (gilded key) the door of the city. It appears that, unlike other similar rituals held outside Malta,³⁴ the keys were not handed back to the municipality but were kept by the Grand Master or given away as a gift. According to

26 Rapelli, *Dizionario dell'Arte. Simboli del Potere e Grandi Dinastie*, 56.

27 Diana Carriò-Invernizzi, 'Gift and Diplomacy in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Italy' in *The Historical Journal*, 51, 4(2008), 883.

28 Bosio, *Dell'Istoria Della Sacra Religione*, 89-90.

29 Rapelli, *Dizionario dell'Arte. Simboli del Potere e Grandi Dinastie*, 56.

30 Bosio, *Dell'Istoria Della Sacra Religione*, 90.

31 NLM, Univ, 26, f.542v, 1720.

32 NLM, Arch., 273, f.114r, 1776.

33 Rapelli, *Dizionario dell'Arte. Simboli del Potere e Grandi Dinastie*, 58.

34 Thöfner, *A Common Art*, 152.

the accounts found in the *Libri Conciliorum Status* and the *Università* records, keys were especially made for every *possesso*. The detailed accounts of the entries of Perellos,³⁵ Zondadari,³⁶ Vilhena³⁷ and Rohan³⁸ described how each key had the coat of arms of the Grand Master embossed on one side of the bow (*l'annello*) while the *Università* coat of arms was embossed on the other. In Pinto's case, the coats of arms were embossed on the shaft of the key. The keys presented to the Grand Master were therefore personalised and were not meant to be returned. In four particular instances (Perellos,³⁹ Zondadari,⁴⁰ Vilhena⁴¹ and Rohan⁴²) the keys were immediately given away by the Grand Master to a member of his household, the *Cammeriere Magistrale* (the Grand Master's Chamberlain). The records refer to this as customary. It is unclear whether this was a gift or if the Grand Master was just handing the keys over for safe keeping. The word *date*⁴³ (given) would indeed be ambiguous, but the word *regalò*⁴⁴ (to give something away as a gift) used in the account describing Vilhena's entry and the word *regalate*⁴⁵ used in the account describing Zondadari's entry seem to indicate that this was indeed a gift. If it was the latter, this would show that the Grand Master held his chamberlain in the highest regard. Rohan's *Cammeriere* went so far as to pin the keys to his breast for all to see the esteem within which he was held by the Grand Master.⁴⁶

Another element or device also connected with a member of the Grand Master's household was the Grand Master's ceremonial sword. In his painting, Favray prominently depicted an individual holding a

35 NLM, Arch., 264, f.142r, 1697.

36 NLM, Univ. 26, f.542v, 1720.

37 NLM, Arch., 267, f.144r, 1722.

38 NLM, Arch., 273, f.114v, 1776.

39 NLM, Arch., 264, f.142r, 1697.

40 NLM, Arch., 267, f.79r, 1720.

41 Ibid., f.144r, 1722.

42 NLM, Arch., 273, f.114v, 1776.

43 NLM, Arch., 269, f.215r (Pinto) and NLM, Arch., 269, f.114v (old pagination), 1741.

44 NLM, Arch., 267, f.144r, 1722.

45 Ibid., f.79r, 1720.

46 NLM, Arch., 273, f.114v, 1776.

ceremonial sword pointed upwards. Swords were often used during civic rituals as they were a symbol of a ruler's legitimate authority.⁴⁷ These swords could either be weapons used in actual combat or beautiful ornamental swords that were never meant to be used in battle. These weapons at times took on legendary reputations and became famous objects in their own right. Personalities using such objects in civic rituals would publicly associate themselves with the device and borrow in effect the 'legendary mantel'.

The ceremonial sword which was often used during the *possesso* of Mdina was imbued with symbolism that resonated deeply with all those present. This sword was given to de Valette by Philip II of Spain as a celebratory gift following the siege of 1565.⁴⁸ This legendary victory, which was applauded and celebrated throughout Europe, proved to be a focal point of the Order's rule in Malta. It was etched in the collective memory and survives till this day as an epic event in Maltese history. The Maltese identified themselves as a people bent on preserving their faith at all costs. The Holy War was an intrinsic part of what made an early modern Maltese. This crusader identity was reinforced in public rituals thanks to devices which had strong connections to this militant spirit and also acted as a 'glue' which brought everyone under one common purpose: the defence and preservation of the faith in Malta.⁴⁹ De Valette was the hero who led Malta to victory against the 'Turk' and took on legendary status with the Maltese and the Order alike. The use of the ornamental sword during the *possesso* would have connected past momentous acts carried out by the heroic and almost venerated de Valette to the present Grand Master. As the sword was also bestowed to de Valette by Philip II of Spain, the Order's overlord,

47 Davies, 'The Practical and Symbolic Dimensions of Edged Weapons for the Hospitallers', 89.

48 Carmel Cassar, *Ritual, Splendour and Religious Devotions: The Siege of 1565 and Festival Celebrations in 17th Century Malta*. In George Cassar ed., *From the Great Siege to the Battle of Lepanto – The Life and Times of Malta and The Order of St. John 1565-1571* (Malta: Sacra Militia Foundation, 2011), 69.

49 Cassar, *Ritual, Splendour and Religious Devotions*, 69-70.

it also symbolised the authority the Order held over the island.⁵⁰ The sword was carried pointed upwards by the *Cavallerizzo Maggiore* (the Master of the Horse) who walked just ahead of the Grand Master during the processional entry. The *Cavallerizzo Maggiore* was the third most important member of the Grand Master's household and was in charge of his horses, carriages and pages' training. This was in line with the protocol adopted in other European countries where the monarch's sword was also borne in civic rituals by a high ranking member of the monarch's household. The fact, therefore, that this ceremonial sword was not borne by a member of the Order's council, but by a member of the Grand Master's household, underscored the authority exercised by the Grand Master as a prince rather than the head of the Hospitaller Order.⁵¹ The sword was at once a unifier but also a device that clearly placed the Grand Master above everyone else. The sword's significance was such that it would invariably feature in the Order's official accounts of the *possesso* and could not fail to be represented in Favray's work. In some accounts (by way of example, Vilhena's⁵² and Rohan's⁵³ entry) the chronicler went as far as to describe the illustrious provenance of the said sword, underscoring its significance to the Order. The reading of the *Libri Conciliorum Status* indicates that the sword took on even more prominence in the eighteenth century, possibly indicating a need to connect the glorious past with the present. Prior to Perellos, the sword was not a fixed feature in the accounts drawn up by the Order's scribe. This might lead one to question whether the ceremonial sword was used with regularity in these occasions. Favray's painting of L'Isle Adam's entry seems to indicate that the use of a ceremonial sword was standard practice but this is merely an interpretation of an event. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the sword depicted was certainly not the one given by Philip II to de Valette. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the artist might have looked at common elements present in previous *possessi*

50 Davies, 'The Practical and Symbolic Dimensions of Edged Weapons for the Hospitallers', 90.

51 |Ibid., 91.

52 NLM, Arch., 267, f.143v, 1722.

53 NLM, Arch., 273, f.114r (old pagination), 1776.

and included them in the painting.

As Grand Master, l'Isle Adam was the central figure in Favray's work, his clothing is an important feature that cannot be ignored. In fact, Bosio went to great lengths to describe the Grand Master's robes. Despite there being minor discrepancies between the artwork and Bosio's account, the general idea is the same. The clothes were sumptuous, made out of rich materials such as satin and velvet and were rigorously black. The eight pointed cross, which was the symbol of the Order featured prominently on the magistral habit. Black clothing had a further significance in the sixteenth century as it was the colour worn by princes and emperors. The use of black clothing was introduced by Philip the Good of Burgundy and was subsequently adopted by the Spanish Court. This colour was favoured by both Charles V and Philip II as it was considered to be a majestic colour symbolising both humility and moderation. Black clothing represented the whole spectrum of Christian values.⁵⁴ The white eight pointed cross, emblazoned on the black robe, also followed another trend which was found in the Spanish Court. Monochrome clothing was all the rage in the sixteenth century and again symbolised 'clarity, piety, seriousness and decisiveness'.⁵⁵ The clothing worn by the Grand Master therefore alluded to all these virtues and added to his princely demeanour. As mentioned previously, the *Università* records do mention that the Jurats went to great lengths to be dressed luxuriously for the occasion, using velvet and silk. Using similar materials to those worn by the Grand Master the Jurats hoped to bring attention to their own importance.⁵⁶ The records, however, do not mention the colour black. There is one exception, the ceremonial entry of Zondadari. The *Università* records state that the Captain of the

54 Michel Pastoureau, *Black, The History of a Colour* (New Jersey/Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2008), 100-102.

55 Ulinka Rublack, *Clothing and Cultural Exchange in Renaissance Germany*. In Herman Roodenburg ed., (*Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe. Vol. 4 Forging European Identities, 1400-1700*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 269.

56 Cremona, 'Spectacle and 'Civil Liturgies' in Malta During the time of the Knights of St John', 55.

Rod and the Jurats were dressed in *negro*⁵⁷ (black). This was apparently a special concession and privilege granted to them by Zondadari.⁵⁸ This must have been truly remarkable for it to warrant a mention in the records.

L'Isle Adam certainly provided the template as far as the magistral robes were concerned. Accounts mention that the Grand Master changed into his magistral habit and *berettone* before the processional entry was initiated. The magistral habit was intrinsically part of that spectacle. In the eyes of the Hospitallers, L'Isle Adam was also considered to be one of the truly legendary Grand Masters and wearing similar robes would have once again connected a newly elected prince with an almost venerated predecessor. A specific reference to L'Isle Adam's robes was made in the account of Pinto's entry in *Libri Conciliorum Status*.⁵⁹ The robe is described as being long, in black velvet, with wide sleeves, in a style similar to the Roman Pretexta. The robe also had a train mimicking Cardinals' vestments. This was worn over a satin soutane which in turn was adorned with the aforementioned eight pointed cross and was trimmed in the finest ermine. This connection to such an illustrious past was a fitting beginning to a magistracy. The eight pointed cross on the magistral robe was a powerful symbol of the holy war spirit which was part of the collective identity of all Maltese and Hospitallers alike.⁶⁰ Its significance was such that there were instances when the Grand Master (by way of example, Vilhena⁶¹ and Rohan⁶²) took the oath to safeguard the privileges of the Maltese on this cross. This would have constituted

57 NLM Univ, 26, f.546v, 1720.

58 Cremona, Spectacle and 'Civil Liturgies' in Malta During the time of the Knights of St John., 50.

59 NLM, Arch., 269, f.214r (old pagination), 1741 '... *in quella stessa maniera lo vesti il Fra Gran Maestro Lisladamo l'anno 1530...Che' era un gran robone di velluto nero lungosino a piedi con le maniche larghe. simile forse all'antica veste chiamata Pretexta dalli Romani usati, la di cui posterior parte era cosi lunga che formava una coda a modo delle cappe pontificali dalli Cardinali usati, sotto della quale si vedeva una sottana di raso nero soppannata di finissimo ermellino con una gran croce del suo proprio abito nel petto...*'.

60 Cassar, *Ritual, Splendour and Religious Devotions*, 70.

61 NLM, Univ, 27, f.24v (old pagination), 1722.

62 NLM, Univ, 33, f.261r, 1776.

a very powerful image to all those present. The relative simplicity of the magistral robes belied the symbolism attached to them.

Another object that featured prominently in Favray's painting was the baldachin which was held over the Grand Master. The use of baldachins in civic rituals was common in cities across Europe and was considered to be an honour which was bestowed on overlords / monarchs as a matter of course. In line with customs overseas, the baldachin was a feature of the gradual procession made by the Grand Master and his entourage from St Augustine Friary in Rabat to the main entrance of the city. This processional walk was filled with gravitas and solemnity, with the baldachin adding to its grandeur. Unfortunately, from a reading of the *Libri Conciliorum Status*, the moment when the Grand Master is placed under this canopy is unclear; the same applies to the moment when this canopy is removed. Bosio's account states that L'Isle Adam walked under a baldachin from the moment he exited St. Augustine's monastery. In later accounts, the baldachin is mentioned only after the Grand Master processionally walked to the stone cross (which still stands today in Piazza Mario Galea Testaferrata) outside the city.

No account mentions when the baldachin is done away with. It is possible that this was removed once the procession reached the Mdina Cathedral. It is not clear whether it was used again after the Grand Master left the Cathedral. Furthermore, Favray's painting might lead one to believe that the baldachin was used every time the *possesso* was staged. The records themselves are inconclusive. Direct references to the canopy are made in some accounts such as those describing L'Isle Adam's,⁶³ Carafa's⁶⁴ and Pinto's⁶⁵ entry, but are conspicuously absent in others such as De Paule, Lascaris and Nicolas Cotoner. Moreover, even where the canopy is mentioned, no reference is made in the *Libri Conciliorum Status* to the colour or the type of cloth used. There is, however, a reference to the colour of De Redin's baldachin in the

63 Bosio, *Dell'Istoria Della Sacra Religione*, 89-90.

64 NLM, Arch., 262, f.119r, 1741.

65 NLM, Arch., 269, f.215r, 1741.

Cathedral Archives specifically in the work penned by Padre Pelagio, where the canopy is *velluto cremesi* – a shade of red.⁶⁶ Favray, in his portrait of L'Isle Adam's entry, opted to paint the baldachin red. The custom in other parts of Europe (such as Spain and Venice) was for canopies to be generally gold or yellow and only occasionally red. Such was the case in the triumphal entry into Seville staged by Philip II in 1570, where the *palio* (baldachin) was made out of rich gold brocade⁶⁷ and again in Venice where Henry III of France walked under a canopy made of cloth of gold.⁶⁸ On the other hand, a scarlet baldachin was used for the entry of Dona Blanca (a foreign princess who would eventually become a queen) into the city of Burgos.⁶⁹ One has to presume that Favray had unfettered access to information regarding the staging of ceremonial entries in eighteenth-century Malta and one must therefore assume that the canopy used was in fact red as described by Padre Pelagio. In entries staged in the cities of Spain⁷⁰ and Venice,⁷¹ the baldachin was held aloft by either the local nobles or the municipal council. Similarly in Malta, the baldachin was held aloft by the *Capitano Della Verga*, two Jurats and the *Secreto* or another Jurat. The Grand Master's entry was very similar to entries staged by monarchs in other European countries and hence signalled to all that the Grand Master was indeed the *de facto* prince of the Maltese islands and was on a par with other princes across Europe.

The baldachin was therefore an important accessory to the processional segment (which could not be represented in Favray's work) of the *possesso*, which necessitated the participation of various dignitaries belonging to the Order, *Università* and even the Church. The order in which these participants processionally walked was rigidly structured according hierarchical rules with commoners acting

66 ACM, MISC, MS.79 (Pelagio), f.55v.

67 Ruiz, *The King Travels*, 69-70.

68 Iain Fenlon, *The Ceremonial City. History, Memory and Myth in Renaissance Venice*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 198.

69 Ruiz, *The King Travels*, 107.

70 *Ibid.*, 69.

71 Fenlon, *The Ceremonial City*, 198.

as jubilant spectators. The procession, therefore, acted as a 'model' or idealistic standard of how relations amongst the various strata of society should be conducted.⁷² In reality, relations between, for example, the *Università* and the Order or the Church and the Order were anything but the seamless congenial relationship portrayed during the ritual. The *possesso* also acted as a 'mirror' where the ritual presented a situation or a tableaux as the truth.⁷³ The Grand Master accepting the keys to the city was a form of declaration. The act of publicly taking possession of Mdina and by extension the island was a powerful statement. It mirrored the inescapable truth that the Order was now the island's overlord and, by virtue of the ritual, reinforced the Order's role and position to all those present. It is therefore not surprising that Favray's work depicts this very moment and not, for example, the moment where the Grand Master took the solemn oath to safeguard the island's privileges as a subject matter. If one looks closely, the painting also provides insight not only in the relationships between the authorities on the island but also between elements of society: more specifically that between men and women. Bosio's account of L'Isle Adam's entry into Mdina makes no mention of women, not even as members of the crowds (Bosio goes to great lengths to describe what appears to be male spectators with their long beards).⁷⁴ Having said that, women do make an appearance in Favray's interpretation of the first *possesso*.

In the painting above, the women depicted are viewing the spectacle from within the city walls. Although they are painted as background figures, one cannot deny that these women must have hailed from important families, or at the very least, affluent families. The outline of these small background figures bears many similarities to the portraits of noble ladies executed by Favray during his lifetime (for instance *Portrait of Maria Amalia Grognet*⁷⁵ and *Portrait of a*

72 Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

73 Ibid., 4-5.

74 Bosio, *Dell'Istoria Della Sacra Religione*, 89.

75 Sciberras, *Baroque Painting in Malta*, 346.

*Maltese Lady*⁷⁶). Arguably, they displayed fashions which were more akin to the eighteenth rather than sixteenth centuries. They appear to be viewing proceedings from the *piano nobile* of a residence. The first *possesso* was by all accounts a male centric event with Favray's painting hinting at women's presence as mere spectators in the background. This was certainly a model for things to come. No mention is made of women as active participants in accounts of subsequent ceremonial entries except for those instances when the Grand Master (for example Pinto) stopped by a convent (whose nuns generally hailed from the most important families on the island) to pay his respects towards the end of the processional route.⁷⁷ Arguably, this could be viewed as a mirror of the role of women in early modern society, where though their presence (and importance if they hailed from the island's nobility) was acknowledged, their participation in politically charged civic events was severely restricted.

In his painting Favray depicts a man in the background in the act of pushing the door to the city of Mdina open. The door is clearly depicted as being open. This, however, is not quite correct, as already mentioned, the door to the city would have been firmly shut during the ceremony.⁷⁸ The door would be opened only once three events occurred. The first was for the Grand Master to take a solemn oath to uphold and honour those rights and privileges granted to the city and island as a whole by the crown of Aragon. This was generally followed by the senior Jurat, representing the entire Maltese populace, swearing fealty and obedience to the Grand Master. Once oaths were exchanged, the keys were presented to the Grand Master. It was only then that the door to the city of the Mdina would open and the Grand Master, together with his entourage, local grandees and representatives of the clergy would enter the city in a carefully coordinated procession amid fanfare and gun salutes. Sound was an important element of the ceremony. The accounts describe how musketry as well as artillery salvos were fired

76 Ibid., 359.

77 NLM, Arch., 269, f.216r, 1741.

78 Bosio, *Dell'Istoria Della Sacra Religione*, 90.

just after the keys to the city were handed to the Grand Master and he made his way into the city (just by way of example Perellos⁷⁹ and Zondadari⁸⁰). Although it is very difficult to convey noise and jubilation in a static painting, Favray hints at this in the background, where one can see canons in the act of firing salvos. All the figures in the painting are about to perform an action and there is the perception of movement, of something momentous happening – one can almost imagine the noise accompanying the said event.

The sound of salvos being fired was not the only sound one would have heard. The accounts describing Pinto's entry describe how the clergy sang the *Te Deum* once the door to the city was opened and they were making their way processionaly into the city.⁸¹ Furthermore, the crowds had a very important part to play as they truly ensured that the event would be a celebration; they cheered, applauded enthusiastically (Vilhena)⁸² and shouted out 'Viva' (Perellos⁸³ and Vilhena⁸⁴), further adding to the cacophony. Coins were thrown at the crowds, in a sign of benevolent largesse bestowed by the incoming Grand Master (Pinto)⁸⁵ which would further foment the crowd's enthusiasm. This technique was used at regular intervals during the ceremony but in Pinto's case the coins were also thrown as he made his way processionaly into the city. A cheering crowd legitimised and reinforced the power of those who were cheered. This applied equally to both the Grand Master, including members of the considerable entourage, as well as the *Università*. Therefore, it is not surprising that no effort (such as the random distribution of coins to the spectators) was spared to ensure that the event was well attended by the populace.

79 NLM, Arch., 264, f.142r, 1697.

80 NLM, Arch., 267, f. 79r, 1720.

81 NLM, Arch., 269, f.215r (old pagination), 1741.

82 NLM, Arch., 267, f.144r, 1722.

83 NLM, Arch., 264, f.142r, 1697.

84 NLM, Arch., 267, f.144v, 1722.

85 NLM, Arch., 269, f.215r, 1741.

The limitations of the artwork

Favray artfully portrayed various actions that formed part and parcel of this civil ritual; actions that would have occurred in an ordered fashion were layered in this one moment and yet the painting has very obvious limitations. The *possesso*, as hinted earlier, was much more than the moment when the keys of the city were bestowed to the Grand Master in sign of vassalage.

The ritual was preceded by months of preparation where master artisans and artists were commissioned to create pieces of ephemeral art in the form of triumphal arches. As the pageant became more elaborate and following European trends, a series of arches were at times erected along the entire route between Valletta and Mdina. Pinto's *possesso* is the prime example of this with a total of eight triumphal arches being constructed.⁸⁶ Indeed, one particular arch even sported a fountain sprouting wine!⁸⁷ Arches were not the only form of street decoration used as the accounts describe Mdina's streets as being lined with tapestries and damasks.⁸⁸ Scholars composed verses in Latin extolling the virtues of the new prince and these were placed on placards or triumphal arches in key locations along the processional route.⁸⁹ Apart from the obvious tribute gift of keys, other gifts also formed an intrinsic part of the day and some were commissioned well ahead of time. Gifts were meant as a mark of favour (gifts given by the Grand Masters to the Inquisitor)⁹⁰ to garner popular approval (coins thrown to the crowds) and/or used to underscore the importance of both the donor and the recipient (filigree bouquet given by the *Università* to the Grand Master).⁹¹

The event was attended by different personalities or groups each having some role in Maltese society. These included the Bishop, the Inquisitor, the Grand Crosses, the cavalry of the island and the

86 NLM, Arch., 269, f. 213r, f. 231v, f.214r, f.215v, 1741.

87 Ibid., f.213v, 1741.

88 For example, NLM, Arch., 267, f.75r, 1720.

89 For of example, NLM, Arch., 267, f.75r, 1720.

90 Ibid., f.144r, 1722.

91 NLM, Arch., 269, f. 215r, 1741.

various town militias. Unlike the Grand Master and the members of the municipal council, their participation was not guaranteed and their attendance very much depended on the circumstances of the time. Thus, for example, the Inquisitor did not attend every *possesso* (for instance no reference is made in the *Libri Conciliorum Status* of the Inquisitor in De Paule's or Zondadari's entry); even his level of participation varied. He was at times granted the privilege of riding in the same carriage with the Grand Master,⁹² at other times he met the Grand Master in Rabat (Rohan's entry).⁹³ It could be argued that his presence or otherwise and how his presence was 'managed' in the ceremony, were in and of themselves indicators of relations between the Order and the Inquisition. Tensions were not only experienced in the higher echelons of authority but also between groups of participants. Town militias gave this event great importance as it was not only an occasion for the local militia to 'show off' in front of the populace but also an occasion to compete visually with the Order's armed forces. Records show that the Mдина militia performed many drills in order to perfect their marching order and their 'presentation' for the day.⁹⁴ Issues of precedence between town militias also caused friction and on one occasion resulted in one town militia boycotting the event instead of losing their 'ranking' and thus prestige in the eyes of society.⁹⁵

These are just examples of what is by necessity not included in the painting. The *possesso* was a public ritual where participants worked together and created what was a real-life stage; where the game of subtle political manipulation could be played and favour could be garnered or even lost. It was also the occasion where supremacy between factions could be made publicly obvious whilst maintaining a veneer of congenial unity.

92 NLM, Arch., 267, f143r, 1722.

93 NLM, Arch., 273, f.113v, 1776.

94 NLM, Univ, 26, f.543r, 1720.

95 Ibid., f.546r, 1720 and NLM, Arch., 267 f.28v, 1720.

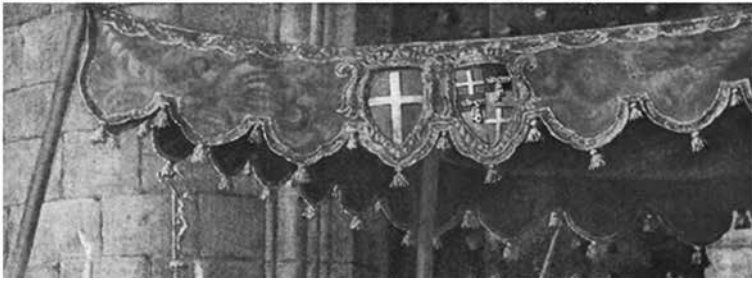


Figure 5. Baldachin from Favray's Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam Taking Possession of Mdina, Mid-Eighteenth Century. Reproduced with the kind permission of Daniel Cilia and Heritage Malta.

Conclusion

Favray's representation of L'Isle Adam's entry is an impressive piece of art which gives the observer a snapshot of what the first ceremonial entry of a Grand Master might have looked like. It successfully portrays key elements that made the *possesso* what it was – an unequivocal declaration of power and authority by the Order and Grand Master over the islands. Each 'device' used in the ceremony be it de Valette's sword, the baldachin or the keys to the city themselves, had a purpose and were used effectively with their significance clear to all. As impressive as Favray's work is, it fails to give the full picture. It presents just one angle and one moment (albeit with various actions taking place at the same time) during the staging of an urban ritual that spanned a whole day. During the entirety of the civic ritual, the participants went through various acts where they consciously displayed a formal and commemorative self. The *possesso* was a collective act of 'self-portraiture' progressing through different spaces with different artefacts/devices, acting as backdrops for the different stages of the civic ritual.⁹⁶ The urban ceremony was a collective effort, both in the preparation stage with local artisans, artists, militia, and learned individuals taking an active part, as well as on the day itself. It

⁹⁶ Thøfner, *A Common Art*, 12-13.



Figure 6. Stone Cross in Piazza Mario Galea Testaferrata.



Figure 7. (left). Women as Spectators in Antoine Favray's Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam Taking Possession of Mdina, Mid-Eighteenth Century. Reproduced with kind permission of Daniel Cilia and Heritage Malta.

Figure 8. (right). Salvos being fired in Antoine Favray's Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam Taking Possession of Mdina, Mid-Eighteenth Century. Reproduced with kind permission of Daniel Cilia and Heritage Malta.

was what Margit Thøfner defined as a 'common art'⁹⁷ which was much more than oil on canvas or a piece of ephemeral art. The *possesso* was a visual and tangible display of unity amongst all the participants. It represented that cohesive whole which was much more than the sum of its individual parts: it was a very real enactment of the Maltese-Hospitaller island Order state.

97 Ibid.,20.