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THE SOVEREIGN MILITARY HOSPITALLER ORDER OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM OF RHODES AND OF MALTA – A GENERAL HISTORY OF THE ORDER OF MALTA

INTRODUCTION: HOSPITALLERS

Following thirteen years of excavation by the Israel Antiquities Authority, a thousand-year-old structure – once a hospital in Jerusalem – will be open to the public; part of it seems earmarked to serve as a restaurant.[1] In Syria, as the civil war rages on, reports and footage have been emerging of explosions in and around Crac des Chevaliers castle, a UNESCO World Heritage site.[2] During the interwar period (1923–1943), the Italian colonial authorities in the Dodecanese engaged in a wide-ranging series of projects to restore – and in some instances redesign – several buildings on Rhodes, in an attempt to recreate the late medieval/Renaissance lore of the island.[3] Between 2008 and 2013, the European Regional Development Fund provided the financial support necessary for Malta to undertake a large-scale restoration of several kilometres of fortifications, with the aim of not only preserving these structures but also enhancing Malta's economic and social well-being.[4] Since 1999, the Sainte Fleur Pavilion in the Antananarivo University Hospital Centre in Madagascar has been helping mothers to give birth safely and assisting infants through care and research.[5] What binds together these seemingly disparate, geographically-scattered buildings, all with their stories of hope and despair? All of them – a hospital in Jerusalem, a castle in Syria, structures on Rhodes, fortifications on Malta, and yet another hospital, this time in Madagascar – attest to the constant (but evolving) mission of the Order of Malta "to Serve the Poor and Defend the Faith" over several centuries.[6]

The members of the Order are called "Hospitallers," a title derived from their foundation as a hospice in 11th-century Jerusalem. Alongside the Templars and the Teutonics, the Hospitallers constituted one of the three great military-religious orders of the Middle Ages. The Hospitallers were: "members of a religious order, restricted by the vows of obedience and celibacy, subject to a rule of life which was strictly enforced. They were bound, like any religious, to fast at times of the year and to attend mass and the customary monastic hours. [...] They fostered veneration for their own saints – especially Hugh of Genoa, Ubaldesca, Fleur and Toscana – and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist."[7]

The Hospitallers are frequently mistakenly described as "monks of war."[8] Such misnomers reflect the difficulty of fitting these men into the religious frameworks of the Latin Church. They lie somewhere between priests, forbidden by canon law to bear arms, and crusading warriors who carried out their religious obligation through combat.[9] The most apposite description of the brethren of the Order is that of religious laymen (*religiosi laici*) and not monks.[10] The twin functions of fighting and nursing, which the Order of Malta carried on concurrently for several

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centuries, complemented each other and were infused with sacred meaning. Various allegories of the Order painted during the course of the 17th century encapsulate this harmony between the different functions of the Order by showing Hospitallers in suits of armour assisting the sick while galleys waged war against Muslim vessels.

In 1667, the Grand Master (i.e. head of the Order) Nicolas Cotoner reflected upon the tension inherent in belonging to a military-religious organisation. According to him, his Council was composed of men who were most suited for being soldiers, and who were therefore liable to make mistakes. Even so, they still acknowledged the religious nature of their calling. As for himself, since he was a man he was prone to err, but not even the Devil could induce him to repeat a mistake.[11] Probably, it was an example on the lines indicated by Cotoner that led Edward Gibbon to utter the now famous description of the Hospitallers as men who "neglected to live, but were prepared to die, in the service of Christ."[12] In effect, grand statements such as these need to be periodically revised, particularly when an institution has existed for more than 900 years and operated in various regions across the world. At its core, the Order of Malta was – and still is – a religious and hospitaller institution. Over time, it adopted and dropped other facets to its identity, namely military and naval functions and the claim to territorial sovereignty.

ROOTS IN THE HOLY LAND (CA. 1070–1291)

Around 1070, a group of Cassinese Benedictines established a hospice in Jerusalem dedicated to the well-being of pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. By 1113, this hospice had broken away from its mother, the Abbey of St. Mary of the Latins. In the papal bull *Pie postulatio voluntatis* of 1113, which conferred papal protection and privileges to the Order, Blessed Gerard (d. 1120) was referred to as the *institutor* and *prepositus* of the Hospital. After the First Crusade (1095–1099), the fame and wealth of the Order soared and it soon became the first of the new international orders of the 12th and 13th centuries. The first known written Rule of the Order, attributed to Raymond du Puy (1120–1158/1160), successor to Gerard, was drawn up during this period.[13] As originally conceived, this was an entirely pacific organisation committed to the care of the sick poor; what distinguished the Hospitallers was the language of self-abasement which they adopted: each postulant promised to be a "serf and slave" of his "lords" the sick. "The lordship of the poor and the sick over the Hospitaller brothers and sisters was therefore a proprietary lordship, in the sense that the Hospitallers imagined themselves being owned by their patients."[14]

From the mid-12th century, the Order underwent a rapid process of militarization, a development that the Papacy did not always favour, but which nonetheless reflected the changing and pressing needs of the Latin states in the Levant.[15] The military wing of the Order became its dominant facet. This evolution in the Order's functions was conditioned by local circumstances, but it was also complemented by the theological opinions that had promoted the First Crusade and the others that followed.[16] The idea of fighting for God (*Militare Deo*) had its roots in the Old Testament, but was further amplified with the ideal of an army of Christ (*Militia Christi*) that emerged in the New Testament.[17] These ideas were further developed by a number of key Christian theologians, and the Papacy itself proved to be a particularly bellicose institution.[18] Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430) developed a theology of "just war": war was warranted when it was undertaken in self-defence, administered by a legitimate authority, and carried out in a humane manner free from vindictiveness, cruelty and sacking. In a different vein, St. Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480 – ca. 547) used military images in his teachings to depict his monks as battling for Christ, though this was relegated to the spiritual realm. On the other hand, Pope Gregory VII (1073–1085) used the phrase "Soldiers of Christ" to denote lay warriors engaged in actual fighting to defend the Church, rather than just a spiritual battle. However, it was St. Bernard of Clairvaux

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Rome

Malta

Rhodes

Cyprus

Jerusalem

500 km

300 mi.

1. The location of the "Convent" of the Order of Malta: ca. 1080–1291 Jerusalem and the Holy Land; 1291–1309 Cyprus; 1309–1522 Rhodes; 1523–1530 no fixed headquarters; 1530–1798 Malta; 1798–1834 no fixed headquarters; 1834 – to date Rome.

Over the course of several centuries, the headquarters or "Convent" of the Order moved a number of times. This was necessary due to powerful outside forces that were able to unhinge the Order from its place of residence. Wherever the Order went – particularly in Rhodes and in Malta – it sought to assert its scope and utility by running hospitals and providing security to foster prosperity. At the same time Hospitallers were active across Europe and the Mediterranean – and today across the world – carrying forward the mission of defending the faith and caring for the sick.

(1090–1153), in his book *In laude novae militiae*, written for the Templars, who sealed the link between warfare and piety. Saint Bernard championed the Templars (and hence the brethren of the other military-religious orders) as a new form of knighthood that combined spiritual and temporal concerns in the quest to serve God in the pre-eminent task of defending Christendom. Furthermore, St. Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274) described bearing arms in the service of God as a penitential activity, when this was performed in an appropriate frame of mind.[19] Moreover, in the 'Secunda Secundae Partis' of his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas dealt extensively with the question of contemplative and active religious forms of life. Aquinas in fact used the example of the military religious orders "to strengthen the argument for the validity of the mendicant way, because if the military form of active religious life was authentic" – and the Dominican theologian argued that it was – then "the value of the friars' pastoral work and scholarship could not be questioned."[20] Even so, it needs to be emphasized that attitudes towards the military-religious orders were far from unequivocal and a strand of theological thought opposed to religious knights was constantly present. Coming to terms with the idea and implications of *Militare Deo* and the *Militia Christi* was a recurrent controversy in medieval theology.[21]

From the 1130s, a series of Muslim leaders emerged who were able to unite the Muslims of the Middle East against the Latin states. As pressure from resurgent Muslim powers increased, the military-religious orders were increasingly responsible for the defence effort of Latin frontiers and outposts. They were also increasingly involved in the turbulent politics of the Latin states. Moreover, the military-religious orders also had commitments elsewhere, in particular in the Iberian Peninsula, which constituted another front against Islam.[22] The rise to power of Saladin in Syria and Egypt from 1174 presented the Latin powers with a formidable foe. When Saladin invaded the Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1187, the Hospitallers played a significant role in military affairs, earning both praise and criticism for their actions. Saladin's death in 1193 ushered in a new divisive phase among the Muslims of the Middle East, which allowed the Latin states to recover but the rise of the Mamlūks in Egypt in 1250 was to mark the last phase of the mainland Latin states. Gradually, the Mamlūks closed in on Latin outposts; in 1291, Acre was besieged. The Teutonic Knights fought to the last man while the Templar Master Guillaume de Beaujeu was killed in action. The Hospitaller Master Jean de Villiers was evacuated on his sickbed.[23] What was left of the military-religious orders and the rest of the Latin population fled to Cyprus.[24]

RHODES: FORGING AN ISLAND ORDER-STATE 1291–1480

Cyprus was never intended as a place of settlement, but as a stop gap onto something else, which given its geographical position and political status as the last major Latin state in the East, it was ideally placed to serve. Moreover, from Cyprus, the Hospitallers could still provide assistance to their long-term partner, Cilician Armenia; located in south-east Asia Minor, this was the only Christian state left on the mainland (it was finally overrun by the Mamlūks in 1375). The situation of the Order was not to be envied at all; aside from the physical and human losses, the final fall of Acre raised very serious questions about the whole purpose of military-religious orders. Many blamed the military-religious orders almost exclusively for the loss of the Holy Land. Pope Nicholas IV instructed the provincial Church Councils which were to meet in February 1292 to discuss whether the military orders should be united into one as part the strategy to recover the Holy Land.[25] Given this climate of opinion, the Order could ill afford to appear idle and between 1306 and 1309, the Hospitallers managed to conquer Rhodes. This gave them a much-needed lease of life that permitted them – unlike the Templars – to survive and prosper into the early 16th century. On 22 March 1312, at the Council of Vienne, the Order of the Temple was dissolved by the pope on the grounds that although the charges that had

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been brought against its members were unproven, the Order had suffered too much disrepute to continue. On 2 May 1312 the bull *Ad Providam* granted all Templar properties (except in Iberia) to the Hospitallers. Nevertheless, the same Council of Vienne which had disbanded the Templars also accused the Hospitallers of evils and vices and of spending their wealth on frivolities instead of fighting the infidel.[26]

The Hospitallers' new island-home necessitated the development of maritime forces and, particularly from the 1360s, coincided with the advent of a new mighty Muslim power, the Ottoman Turks. By taking Rhodes, the Hospitallers in effect became another pawn in the complex and volatile world of the Aegean. Here, the Latin states of Greece (known collectively as *Romania*), Byzantine remnants and Turkish forces all vied for power and influence. The Hospitallers were often able to play these different factions to their own advantage; moreover, as had been the case in the Holy Land, divisions amongst Muslims in the Eastern Mediterranean were a factor which worked in favour of the Order. A key feature of Hospitaller military activity throughout the 14th century was their participation in various naval leagues (at times described as crusades) in alliance with local Latin Aegean powers, as well as forces from the West, including the papacy, Burgundy, Genoa and Venice. In 1440 and 1444, the Mamlūks of Egypt launched two major attacks against Rhodes, but failed to take it. More ominous for the Order was the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II. The Byzantine Empire was now formally defunct and Hospitaller Rhodes stood practically alone in the Eastern Mediterranean.[27]

While on Rhodes, the Order refined its institutional administrative machinery into a set-up it would maintain when it transferred to Malta in 1530. Over the course of the 14th and 15th centuries, its members were organized into *langues*, a term which referred to the groupings of different Hospitallers according to linguistic-geographical criteria. Originally there were five *langues*, which gradually grew to eight, one for each "nation"– Provence, Auvergne, France, Aragon-Catalonia-Navarre, Italy, Castille-Leon-Portugal, Germany, and England – and they lived in buildings known as *auberges*.[28] These auberges were located in the *collachium* of Rhodes town, an area where Hospitaller administrative buildings were concentrated.[29] Within this organizational framework, the basic unit of administration within the Order remained the commandery. This consisted of lands and buildings which the Order had accumulated over time generally through pious donations; commanderies across Europe yielded the revenue which ultimately sustained the Order's activities. Moreover, commanderies provided income for individual Hospitallers and were intimately tied to processes of advancement within the ranks of the Order, so that there often was a turbulent connection between commanderies and questions of seniority.[30]

While the Order matured as an organisation, it also developed as the ruler of a state: the island *Ordensstaat* or order-state of Rhodes. The classic *Ordensstaat* was created in Prussia by the Teutonic Order which controlled an extensive continental territory and several hundred thousand subjects. Although the order-state was similar in many respects to other states in terms of its powers and prerogatives, its peculiarity was its dependence on outside material and human resources.[31] While Teutonic Prussia was richer than Hospitaller Rhodes, the former found it increasingly difficult to justify its function as it became increasingly bordered by Christian rather than infidel neighbours. At the Battle of Tannenberg of 1410, the Teutonics suffered a serious defeat at the hands of the Lithuanians and Poles and thereafter their scope in north-east Europe steadily declined.[32] By contrast, Rhodes' maritime frontiers and the persistence of an infidel presence on these meant a continued reason for existence. Furthermore, another factor that explains the success of the island order-state of Rhodes was the mutually beneficial relationship that developed between the Hospitallers and the Greeks of Rhodes. The *sacramentale* or agreement of 1309 compelled the Greeks to accept papal supremacy, but permitted them to keep most of their churches and ecclesiastical properties, and to continue to worship in Greek and according to the Byzantine rite.

Rhodes under the Hospitallers became a secure and prosperous haven which fostered the development of an affluent Greek entrepreneurial class; despite instances of friction over religion these men largely collaborated with the Hospitaller regime under which they flourished.[33]

FIGHTING, BUILDING AND MIGRATING: RHODES 1480 – MALTA 1580

For the Order, the period from 1480 to 1580 was a time characterized by epic battles, the relocation of its headquarters and extensive building activity. In 1480, led by Grand Master Pierre d'Aubusson (1476–1503), the Hospitallers and the Rhodiots managed to repulse an Ottoman siege of the island. The damage caused by the siege as well as earthquakes in 1481 left the defences of Rhodes in a critically exposed state. Guillaume Caoursin, vice-chancellor of the Order, captured their epic defence in an account which circulated widely across Europe and helped to garner support for the rebuilding of Rhodes. Moreover, the death of Sultan Mehmed II in 1481, followed by a quarrel between his two sons, Bayezid II and Jem (sometimes also written as Cem), provided the Order with a much-needed alleviation of the immediate Ottoman threat.[34] Through this affair, the Order was also able to gain a fantastic object, the relic of the right hand of St. John the Baptist, which was sent by Bayezid II as a gift. Between 1480 and 1483, ten editions in four different languages were published of *De translatione sacrae dextrae*, written again by Caoursin. This book explained how the Order came to be in possession of the relic of the right arm of John the Baptist.[35] The years after 1480 were followed by the extensive rebuilding and modernisation of the fortifications of Rhodes. Two factors were at play here: the need to have defences that could withstand the now sophisticated use of gunpowder technologies in offensive tactics and the knowledge that a renewed Ottoman assault was only a matter of time.

The winds of change would have been felt on Rhodes from at least 1512, when Selim I became sultan (1512–1520). He managed to defeat the Mamlūks and conquer Egypt. The balance of power between the northern shore ruled by the Ottomans and the southern shore ruled by the Mamlūks was therefore replaced by complete Ottoman hegemony. More than ever Rhodes seemed to be standing alone. In 1520, Selim died and his son Suleiman the Magnificent, took over. In 1521 he captured Belgrade. In December 1521 he made a treaty with Venice to ensure its neutrality in his planned assault on Rhodes. In 1522 he personally led the assault. Despite a heroic resistance, without substantial help from the West the fate of Hospitaller Rhodes was doomed. Grand Master Philippe de Villiers de l'Isle Adam (1521–1534) initially refused to make terms, but on 18 December he was finally prevailed upon to surrender. On 1 January 1523, he, the Hospitallers and many Rhodiots left Rhodes. Formidable as Hospitaller Rhodes had been, it could only survive as long as its immediate Aegean context was not dominated by one single power and as long as vital support from the West did not dry up; when both these factors came to be, the island order-state collapsed.

After seven difficult years without a base, the Order managed to secure tenure of the Maltese Islands and Tripoli in North Africa from Emperor Charles V (1516–1556). In Malta, the Order was able to transfer the Rhodian island order-state "model" and adapt it to this new context. It is worth noting that the first seven grand masters on Malta down to Pietro del Monte, who died in 1572, all had some experience of Rhodes and in most, if not all, cases of its final siege.[36] These (and other individuals who had direct knowledge of Rhodes) represented an important force of continuity in the challenging Europe of the 16th century, characterised by the divisions of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the discovery of the New World and the continued threat from the Ottoman Empire. Although in 1551 the Order lost Tripoli to the Ottomans, it was able to withstand the Great Siege of Malta from May to September 1565. The leader of the Hospitallers and the Maltese was Grand Master Jean de Valette (1557–1568). In terms of the balance of power in the Mediterranean, the Siege of Malta caused no significant changes; but as regards the Order,

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it signalled the commencement of a new confident phase in its history.[37] The allure of the Siege provided the Order with many admirers and it also cemented the ideal of the Soldier of Christ within its own ranks: male bonding, heroism and a militant faith were bound together through this glorious victory that had its truths, as well as its myths. A "Map of Malta" was included among the charts depicted in the Gallery of Maps (ca. 1580 – ca. 1581) inside the Vatican Palace. The lower part shows the Hospitaller outposts around the Grand Harbour being besieged by the Ottomans in 1565; the upper part shows the island after the siege, with the outline of the new city of Valletta visible. Above the island, there is a sword-wielding angel with the eight-pointed Cross of the Order emblazoned on its chest. The angel also carries a book with the inscription "Malta freed from the Siege." As a bastion of Christendom, the purpose of Malta within the iconography of the Gallery of Maps was to stand as a reminder of one of the Catholic Church's greatest victories over Islam.[38] In 1566, work commenced on the Convent City of Valletta, with the Magistral Palace, Holy Infirmary, Conventual Church and auberges being built during the 1570s, thereby creating the communal space that would act as the focal point for the Hospitallers from about 1580 onwards.[39]

A NEW ISLAND ORDER-STATE: MALTA 1580–1741

The model of the island order-state that was first developed on Rhodes reached new levels of sophistication on Malta. This was manifested in a variety of ways, including fortifications and art: the Order regularly brought to Malta the top military minds of Europe to advise it on defence matters and it was also able to attract the likes of Caravaggio and Mattia Preti to adorn the interiors of its buildings.[40] The grand master was invested with the powers of secular ruler of the islands, yet he had to contend with two separate and independent jurisdictions: that of the bishop of Malta and of the inquisitor. Each of these had his own tribunal with distinct but overlapping jurisdictions, which caused endless disputes about the limits of each other's powers. The Inquisition of Malta was established as a tribunal separate from the Bishop's in 1574. The first inquisitor was Mgr Pietro Dusina, who was sent to Malta by the Pope as apostolic delegate and inquisitor. From then onwards, all inquisitors of Malta were Italian and acted also as apostolic delegates and the Inquisition was a fundamental part of the lives of the Hospitallers in Malta.[41]

A census from 1632 revealed that 3,080 people, including Hospitallers, sailors, soldiers and rowers were employed on board the Order of Malta's six galleys. This figure shows the predominant role that maritime activities played in the local economy. In turn, this created the necessity for many nations to have consuls in Malta to represent their interests on the island: by the end of the 17th century there were about fifteen consulates in Malta.[42] Maritime activity in general, and corsairing in particular, boosted the economy and brought in a steady stream of slaves.[43] The two factors that came to shape the face of Hospitaller Malta were urbanisation and migration (both internal and external): these led to a substantial growth of the population. In 1530, this had stood at about 25,000 for the Maltese islands. By 1632 the total was 51,750. Throughout Europe there was a remarkable urban growth: the same was true for Malta where donations from various European princes helped finance the rise of the new city of Valletta. Over the course of the early modern period, Maltese and other merchants participated in an ever-growing trade in various commodities, ranging from slaves to cotton to wine. By 1798, the population of Malta and Gozo had reached 100,000, with a large percentage of these concentrated in the dynamic, cosmopolitan and mercantile urban-harbour district.[44]

From Malta, the Order participated in the main currents of European and global developments, including the renewal of the early modern nobility and of Roman Catholicism. It also carried on with its intended missions of caring for the sick and fighting for the faith, and offered a rather unique space for many men to lead their lives. The Order, with its headquarters in Malta and

Hospitallers active throughout Europe, was revered and admired by the nobility that dominated Europe. The kind of institution represented by the Order of Malta was so respected that it was used as a model for similar organisations. In 1562, the Medici created the Tuscan military--religious order of St. Stephen Pope and Martyr and modelled it (with some modifications) on the Hospitallers.[45] In turn, the intimate way in which the Order was entangled with Europe – as an institution of the Catholic Church, as a major landowner and as a corporation of noblemen and aristocrats – meant that the incessant warfare of the 17th century left a deep impact on it. The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) saw most European powers engaged in a conflict that was as much about Catholic-Protestant rivalries, as it was about Franco-Habsburg antagonism.[46] Franco--Spanish hostilities were reflected in Malta in arguments that arose between Hospitallers of those two nations.[47] The problems for the Order arising from the hostilities of these two nations reached their peak in the Franco-Spanish War of 1653–1659, which not only tested the harmony of national relations within the Order, but also created an almost impossible situation in terms of the Order's neutrality. Notwithstanding this complicated intra-European bickering that so forcefully affected the Order, it was still capable of carrying out its mission to wage war against the Ottoman Empire and Muslims in general throughout the Mediterranean. Despite the traditional rivalry between Venice and the Order, the Hospitallers were the most constant allies Venice had in the dragged-out War of Candia (1645–1669), in which they contributed as fighters and as healers. The Order also played a prominent part in the War of Morea (1683–1699) which saw an alliance of the Habsburg Empire, Poland, Venice, the Papal States and the Order ranged against the Ottoman Empire.[48]

As an extension of its conflict with Islam, the Order issued a regular stream of corsairing licences: permits which allowed their holders to carry out piratical activities against Muslim shipping under certain conditions, stipulating, for instance, the area where a corsair was meant to operate. Corsairing was practised by both Christians and Muslims throughout the Mediterranean. Hospitaller corsairing licences stated that corsairs could not attack other Christians, however, such conditions were not always followed. In the case of the Greeks, their status as Christian subjects of the Muslim Ottoman Empire placed them in an ambivalent position and although the papacy repeatedly instructed the Hospitallers not to attack Greek vessels, such incidents happened on a regular basis.[49] In the fluid world of early modern encounters and conflicts, the Hospitallers and those holding Hospitaller licences were prepared to forego legal formalities in view of the rich pickings to be had from corsairing. Conversely, the Order – even while carrying out its mission of fighting Islam – could not afford to ignore the wider picture, particularly the inclinations of its two most important patrons, the papacy and France.

BEYOND DECLINE: MALTA 1741 – ROME 1834

Paralleling the situation in Rhodes, the island order-state on Malta operated within the context of its immediate central Mediterranean setting and was intimately connected to the wider politico-cultural-economic currents prevailing in Europe. In the 18th century, Enlightenment and Revolution had a profound impact on the Order. The spirit of the age was epitomized in the person of the Portuguese Grand Master Manuel Pinto da Fonseca (1741–1773). In his own way, he was the equivalent of the so-called Enlightened Despots of the age: Catherine the Great, Frederick the Great, and others. He adopted the image of the closed crown of royalty, staked a claim to the island of Corsica, expelled the Jesuits and founded the University of Malta.[50] Pinto's ostentation, however, came at a high price for by the end of his magistracy both the Order and Malta were effectively bankrupt. Beyond Pinto, a "Maltese Catholic Enlightenment" among certain Hospitaller and Maltese intellectuals existed as a programme of reform intended to limit the powers of the Catholic Church in Malta and improve the clergy's education.[51]

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Sovereignty and neutrality in wars involving Christian kings were long-held principles that the Order cherished, but which in the 18th century it found particularly difficult to uphold. The Wars of Spanish Succession (1701–1714), Polish Succession (1733–1738), Austrian Succession (1740–1748) and the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) stretched the abilities of the Order's diplomats to the limits in trying to stay afloat amidst the political chaos of these conflicts. At the same time, the 18th century saw a number of initiatives on the part of the Order to adapt to a changing world, including an increase in economic exchanges with Spain, and diplomatic and economic contacts with Great Britain, the early American Republic and in particular with Russia. There were also increasingly amicable contacts with the North African Muslim states of Tunis and Morocco.[52] Symptomatic of changing Hospitaller-Muslim relations at this time was a transformation in Hospitaller-Venetian relations, from traditional enemies because of their opposing interests in the Ottoman Empire, to friends with common concerns; the two sides opened consulates in the 1750s and Malta served as an important naval base for Venice in the 1780s.[53] The irony in this rapprochement was that Venice and Hospitaller Malta, perennial enemies for hundreds of years, were both undone by Napoleon Bonaparte at the moment when they had finally been reconciled. Napoleon conquered Venice on 12 May 1797; Hospitaller Malta fell a year after, between 9 and 12 June 1798. The last grand master to reign in Malta, Ferdinand von Hompesch zu Bolheim went into exile in Trieste, seeking the protection of Emperor Francis II. A brief Russian tutelage followed when Tsar Paul I proclaimed himself Grand Master, till his death in 1801.[54]

The collapse of the French monarchy, the Order's principal protector, and the confiscation of the French commanderies by the Revolutionaries left the Order in an unfeasible position. The Order stood for everything that the Revolutionaries hated and Malta was considered a nest for the vices of all the nobility.[55] Moreover, many Hospitallers were active counter-revolutionaries: the Receiver of Paris, Fra' d'Estourmel even financed the flight of the royal family to Varennes from Hospitaller funds. When Napoleon's navy appeared on the horizon off Malta in June 1798, the island order-state fell largely without a fight: Hospitaller Malta was no more. The three decades after 1798 proved to be some of the most testing in the Order's existence. At the Congress of Vienna in 1814–1815, the representatives of the Order tried to argue that in a Europe of restored monarchies the Order's function of preserving the nobility was one of the strongest bulwarks that crowned heads could have; though a clever argument, it failed to convince.[56] In 1834, Pope Gregory XVI (1831–1846) instructed the Order to settle in Rome. The Priory of Rome on the Aventine became a place of refuge for the crippled Order. The downfall of Hospitaller Malta has often been gauged in terms of a language of decline in the Order's political effectiveness and the morals of its brethren. In effect, it is increasingly clear that such a perspective has more to do with present-centric views of the past and persistent stereotypes, than the actual circumstances of the last decades of the 18th century.[57] As had happened in 1522 in Rhodes, it was the overwhelming transformation of the Mediterranean political framework and the absence of support from the West which led to the collapse of the Hospitallers' second island order-state and home in 1798, rather than any particularistic decline within the Order itself.

FROM ROME TO A GLOBAL PLAYER: 1834 – TO-DATE

The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed formidable global changes: the replacement of divine-right monarchies by mass democracies and (or) totalitarian dictatorships, industrialization and urbanisation on a scale previously unknown, the rise of powerful new ideologies such as Socialism which challenged established ideas, the spread of European colonial empires and their subsequent dismantling, not to mention two world wars and various other conflicts. Such a brave new world hardly seemed conducive to the continued existence of a medieval organisation such as the Order

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of St. John and yet it did survive, both as an institution based in Rome which was trying to fork out a new path for itself, as well as in the imagination of many.[58] There were those who espoused a continued military role for the Order: a Greek island in the 1820s or an order-state in Algeria in the 1830s were floated as possible new centres of operation.[59] Instead, the Order abandoned its military operations and found a new niche for itself in the modern world by reverting completely to its original 11th-century function of hospitality and charity. Slowly, its fortunes revived and over the years it established associations in various countries which sustain its charitable and hospitaller activities. Administratively, the Order had to go through a long process of transformation. In 1879, Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) appointed a new grand master, Giovanni Battista Ceschi a Santa Croce (1879-1905); the next two grand masters were also appointed by the papacy, followed by a series of lieutenant-masters. Finally, in 1961, the reworked statutes of the Order gave it the administrative tools to operate on the international stage.[60] In 1962, there was the first chapter general of the Order since 1776 and the election by the chapter of a new grand master, Angelo de Mojana (1962––1988). Even while it existed in this kind of liminal state, the Order performed work – through its members and associations – of a charitable kind, including during the First World War.[61]

Today, with some 13,500 members, a "task-force" of 80,000 volunteers and 25,000 employees (mostly medical personnel), the Roman Catholic Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta is an international sovereign institution, subject only to the Pope in as much as it is a religious order, and with accredited diplomatic missions in more than 100 countries and permanent observer status at the United Nations.[62] Alongside it, the Order of Malta today recognizes four other Orders of St. John: the Most Venerable Order of St. John in Great Britain, *Die Balley Brandenburg des Ritterlichen Ordens Sankt Johannis vom Spital zu Jerusalem* in Germany, the *Johanniter Orde in Nederland* in the Netherlands, and the *Johanniterorden i Sverige* in Sweden; over the years co-operation between these has steadily increased.[63] The funeral for Grand Master Fra' Andrew Bertie in 2008 (he had been elected in 1988) – attended by heads of states, cardinals, ambassadors and representatives from across the world – was indicative of the respect with which the Order and its humanitarian work is held today. In the words of the present Grand Master, Fra' Matthew Festing:

"As members of a religious lay Order, we commit ourselves to the never-ending task of being not only on the side, but also at the side of all those who need a helping hand and a caring friend in times of crisis in their lives. [...] We were there yesterday, we will be there tomorrow, the day after, and for as long as the need remains."[64]

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