

The Persona and Deaths of Six 16th Century Grand Masters of the Order of St John

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In a previous issue of this Journal, I focussed on the personal and psychological traits of four sixteenth century Grand Masters of Malta, perhaps the most popular, or, anyway, the better known.¹ I believe it would be equally rewarding to investigate the physical and mental set-up and health of the other six, who may have left a more indistinct impact on the course of Maltese history, but are nonetheless net contributors to the formation of our nationhood. Noticeable in these short footnotes is the emphasis on psychosomatic factors that shaped the health and promoted the deaths of these Grand Masters too.

L'Isle Adam's successor, the Italian **Pierino del Ponte**, became Grand Master in 1534 and only ruled for just over a year. He too could boast of being a veteran of the siege of Rhodes, born in 1462. When informed of his election (he was in Italy then) instead of rejoicing, *"tutto attonito ne rimase"*. He burst out crying, mostly lamenting the death of his predecessor.²

His rule turned out too brief for his personality to leave its stamp. One salient episode that precipitated his death was a strong reprimand from the Pope and the assassination in his presence of Fra Gaetano Gallies. The Council had demoted Fra Pedro Fernandez de Heredia from his post as Prior of Alhambra, and in his stead placed Fra Francisco de Benedettes. Pope Paul III intervened on Heredia's side, fulminating the Council with a Breve couched in the harshest of terms, and threatening them all with excommunication if they resisted his order to reinstate Heredia.

Gallies, the messenger of Heredia, brought the Pope's Breve to Malta and read it out in the Council. The Aragonese knights mutinied and murdered him on the spot. "In consequence of which the good old Grand Master became so disturbed that within two days he was in his last illness. Having remained in bed twenty five days without any improvement, acknowledging that his disease was fatal, he gave a generous and general absolution and pardon to all prisoners, delinquents and persons convicted" (including the murderers of Gallies?).

He called the Council to his bed and addressed them compassionately. He wanted to say more, but his infirmity cut him short. The councillors, "their eyes overflowing with tears", withdrew and left him to the cares of the doctors. His condition worsened; he made his will and took the last sacraments.

For three whole days he could ingest no food and suffered atrociously the pains from his kidney stones. On November 27, he died. His body was opened and embalmed, and his funeral took place in the church of St Laurence, Birgu. He was buried in the chapel of St Angelo, next to L'Isle Adam. His epitaph describes him as "pious, of solid judgement, distant from all vanity".³

The rule of the next Grand Master, the Frenchman **Didier de St Jalle**, proved to be shorter still. Envoys from Malta informed him of his election. These were Commendatore Trebons and the scholar Dr Quintin.⁴ St Jalle left Toulouse for Malta followed by many French knights, but "being extremely old, on arriving in Montpellier, the excitement and the bumps and jerks of the journey, caused him to fall ill".⁵ He died on September 26, 1536, without ever having set foot in Malta. His companions buried his corpse in the church of the Commandery of St Gilles outside the gate of Montpellier. His date of birth and his age remain unknown.⁶

The Spaniard **Juan d'Homedes** *"signore di vita molto esemplare"* succeeded him.⁷ Many members of the Order attributed to him indecisiveness and a lack of assertiveness and personality - *di animo alquanto basso e rimesso*.⁸ Some saw him more apt *alle quieta e spirituale vita che all' attiva e temporale*. Though healthy and robust he was già molto vecchio; "his senses and blood had already cooled too much" for leading an Order in the frontline of battle.⁹

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He had lost an eye in the siege of Rhodes, and never let go of an occasion to bring the subject round to that war, so he could brag about his missing eye.¹⁰ In 1545 he built a park “with animals, gardens and pleasure grounds (*a ninfeo*) in the Isola di S. Michele (later Senglea)”. It had over a thousand species of animals, ponds stocked with rare fish and a deer park.¹¹ He started wasting long periods there, cut off from the business of the Order. “He thereby gave even greater reason for complaining that he did not attend to the governing of the republic with that diligence and vigilance that seemed necessary to many, and that he relied too much on the Council and the Treasury officers for this.”

His apathy was seen as all the more deplorable as Malta, Gozo and Tripoli lacked any fortifications on which they could depend to defend themselves and “no vigorous resolution necessary for the honour and stability of the Order” was apparent.¹² The situation deteriorated. The unattended weakness of Malta and the inertia of d’Homedes resulted in discontent. “Many started grumbling openly in the Council to his face against his lethargy (*freddezza*)” This was in 1551, just before the Order lost Tripoli and the Ottomans also sacked Gozo with practically all its inhabitants taken in slavery.

The historian refers to d’Homedes as “the good old Grand Master, an enemy of change and of novelty”.¹³ No notice was being taken of him any longer after the Chapter General of 1548, rather than fortify his authority, turned into a festival for the Capitolanti to share among themselves the most lucrative and honorary jobs in the Order.¹⁴ Faced with the risk of Malta being overrun by the Turks “he showed an admirable calm and firmness of spirit”. He personally comforted with paternal charity those *poverelli* (the Maltese) hit by misfortune.¹⁵

The sacking of Gozo and the defeat in Tripoli showed d’Homedes in his worse colours. When the French ambassador (who had been present at the siege of Tripoli), arrived near Grand Harbour and sent news of the surrender of that town, “the Grand Master remained so stunned and astounded that for a long time he stayed without saying anything. Then in indignation and rage he said he would not raise the chain in the harbour (to let the Ambassador in) until the following day, when he would convene the Council to decide what to do”.¹⁶

The loss of Tripoli sharpened the animosity of the knights against him. To shift the blame from his own ineptitude, he ordered the arrest of all the surviving knights, kept them in chains and accused them of cowardice and treason; he was resolved to have the leaders executed. Durand de Villegagnion, charged him publicly with having bribed and intimidated the Maltese judge Agostino Cumbo to pass the death penalty on them, after d’Homedes had defrocked and handed them over to the lay tribunal for sentencing. These two disastrous setbacks briefly preceded the military debacle of Zoara, where so many

knights and soldiers lost their lives. The news left d’Homedes “sighing and his eyes filled with very abundant tears”.¹⁷

In 1553, now eighty years old, he succumbed. For the last two months “he had felt poorly and oppressed, partly by old age itself, partly by a certain arid fever that daily withered and consumed him, in consequence of which, though he did not stay in bed more than ordinarily, he noticed he was reaching the end of his days”. He convened the Councillors “seating clothed, but not adorned otherwise than had he been healthy”, gave them a detailed account of his illness, declaring that he was feeling the vital spirits and energies so waning and disappearing, that he was convinced he would be passing away within a few days.

On Sunday, September 3, 1551 he confessed, reconciled himself to God and, with impressive devotion received the Eucharist. On the following Tuesday he made his will and personally asked for extreme unction, and, on Wednesday 6, at 3 p.m. “returned his soul to God”. When his testament was read out and the Council realized what very little there was for the Order to have, an undignified dispute arose about whether the funeral expenses should be borne by the Treasury. Why not by his nephews, who he had enriched conspicuously? After a heated debate “the more seemly and pious option prevailed” and the majority decided that his corpse be honoured at public expense, justifying the meagre estate he left with the many alms and charities he continually distributed in secret. The corpse was opened up, embalmed, dressed up in the magistral robes and exposed in the great hall. People flocked to pay their last respects, many paupers who mourned his great loss and bitterly felt his disappearance, kissing and soaking his hands with tears.¹⁸

De Valette’s gigantic stature as a leader set a challenge to his successor, the Italian **Pietro di Monte**, first cousin of Pope Julius III, another survivor of the siege of Rhodes “where he behaved very fearlessly, and showed himself a prudent and a brave knight”. De Valette placed him in charge of the defence of Senglea during the Great Siege and he acquitted himself courageously.¹⁹ During the crisis of St Elmo “though old and infirm” he had volunteered to go and die there.²⁰

He gave proof of style and moderation in a tricky episode. After the Italian was elected head of the Order in 1568, de Valette’s nephew, Cornisson was returning home with other French favourites of the late Grand Master, realizing that with his death, their protection and influence had waned. A French vessel, which had also left with the galleys, had to turn back to harbour due to heavy weather. On board she carried a number of armoured trunks (*forzieri*). The new Grand Master was advised to have a look at their contents: he would find “inestimable riches, the best and most precious objects that de Valette had kept in his safes”.

An embarrassing situation indeed, which di Monte resolved



Grandmaster Jean de la Cassiere

with elegance and prudence. It was not convenient, nor fair, he argued, to insult the nephew and proteges of his predecessor. Good and honourable knights, as he liked to believe, would not have taken anything their master had not given them, or so, at least, he said. He vetoed the opening of the chests.²¹

In time Bosio seems to have tempered his admiration of di Monte. The Grand Master, he says “was precipitate and fast in his anger, and easy to change and calm himself”. The others “started esteeming him little, taking notice ever less of anything he said or did”.²² Dal Pozzo shares this view: “He was easily stirred to anger, and easily becalmed, forgetting offences against him”.²³

The cares of office wore him down. *Nauseato, fastidito e stanco*, a strong desire to resign overcame him, but, fearing to be accused of cowardice, decided to wait until an impending Turkish threat had abated. He then sent an envoy to the Pope to beg his permission to quit “being of a decrepit age” and to end the few days that remained to him in Montecassino. He would be happy with a gratuity of 10,000 scudi for maintenance.²⁴ The Pope would have none of that. He exhorted him to persevere, not to be dismayed either by age or weakness. The letter from Rome proved a great consolation to di Monte.²⁵

A pestilence broke out on the vessels during his term of office. This confirmed the efficacy of the *terra di Malta*, the powder mined from St Paul’s grotto, Rabat: “it served as a most effective and marvellous antidote for the cure of those putrid malignant fevers, which gave signs of being pestilential and contagious and which, with that remedy, disappeared very fast”.²⁶

But di Monte’s days were numbered. “Having reached extreme old age, oppressed by an unusual languor that hindered all the functions of his body, in his sadness he found no comfort other than the expectation of death. Fever set in and, at the third paroxysm, his illness was declared mortal”. He received the last sacraments on his knees, with exemplary humility and devotion. The next day he was given extreme unction and on January 1572, he passed away, aged 76, not before granting a general pardon to all knights detained in prison.²⁷

The Frenchman **Jean de La Cassiere** in 1572 followed di Monte and his was to prove one of the most turbulent and unstable governments ever. He had to suffer rebellion and the humiliation of being deposed.

The revolt climaxed in 1581, when he was 78 years old, though a year earlier a plot to poison him had allegedly been uncovered. Suspected of attempting to kill La Cassiere was Antonio Bonello on instructions from Inquisitor Domenico Petrucci. Though the Grand Master subjected Bonello to torture, he steadfastly denied any guilt.²⁸

La Cassiere too, in his youth, had a brush with the criminal law when, in 1536, he took part in a slinging match of heavy insults with Fra Emeric de La Pierre.²⁹ La Cassiere’s longevity proved one of the unspoken causes of the revolt. Those aspiring to replace him found the wait unbearably long. He is described as “*di complessione robusta e durevole, quantunque attemptato*”.³⁰ Held against him too was the fact that he had gone deaf and fell asleep during Council meetings.³¹

His moral rigour did not endear him either; his order to make Valletta out of bounds for prostitutes proved the proximate spark of the revolt. The celibate knights could not take such ham-fisted meddling; they rebelled openly. For his severity “he was generally feared but not loved and, those offended having been many, as many had turned into his enemies, charging him with the sin of hate and persecution, which in truth was only his extended zeal for the common good”.³²

Those most hit by his discipline went around accusing him of dementia: “his decrepit age had weakened his mind, making him incompetent to exercise the functions of Grand Master”. Lack of food provisions in Malta and a threatened raid by Ulucciali did not move him to action: “all nonchalant the Grand Master slept this through, only showing vigour in fighting his own knights”. They had enough of having as Grand Master an old man *scemo e rimbambito*.³³ The rebels imprisoned the

Grand Master in St Angelo, parading him on the way through streets thronged with jeering whores. In the castle he was allowed free access to his three doctors.³⁴

The Pope, having a full blown rebellion in a religious order on his hands called to Rome the Grand Master and Fra Mathurin Lescaut 'Romegas' who had replaced him as Lieutenant, to hear their reasons. They both died there, Romegas, it was said, poisoned. The Pope vindicated La Cassiere and chastised the rebels, a short-lived triumph for the Grand Master. Preparing to return to Malta he "was assaulted by a *mal di fianchi*?", aggravated by a supervening fever. His infirmity was soon judged to be mortal. The Pope encouraged him: he had to return to Malta in his old position as Grand Master "victorious over his enemies". La Cassiere, more of a realist, answered him "*Il est trop tard* to think of anything except dying".

He ordered to be buried in Malta, in the crypt of St John's which he had built at his own expense and where he had already transferred the sepulchres of his predecessors. He passed away after receiving the Sacraments "with acts of true piety" on December 21, 1581, "the most religious of all his predecessors, full of goodness and unbounded love for his Order, in persecutions borne with such fortitude, he demonstrated that innocence finally triumphs over the calumnies of others".³⁵

The brief grand mastership of the Spaniard **Martin Garzes** who followed Verdalle in 1595, brought the sixteenth century to a close. Like many of his predecessors, he too had a criminal record. When 27 years old, the Council charged him with beating up a married woman, hitting her jaw with the hilt of his sword. The elders found him guilty and condemned him to two months jail with an injunction never to set foot again in the woman's home.³⁶ As Grand Master he founded the institute for penitent prostitutes.

Garzes had long suffered from urinary retention (*carnosità e ritenzione d'urine*). Aged 75, a fever complicated his condition and he died on February 7, 1601.³⁷ With him ended the *cinquecento* and started the seventeenth century.

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