

CAPTAIN ALEXANDER BALL AS KNIGHT OF MALTA – SOME AUTHOGRAPHS

By Giovanni Bonello LL.D.

Few who are not professional historians seem to know that Captain Alexander Ball, one of the king-pins in the scheme to oust the Order of St John permanently from Malta, was himself a Knight of the Order.



*Fig. 1 Portrait of Captain Alexander Ball as Knight Commander of the Order of Malta.
Private Collection, Malta*

Ball's Maltese knighthood came about through the personal intercession of Lord Nelson, who brought pressure to bear on Paul I, the insane Czar of Russia, to bestow that signal honour on his mistress Lady Hamilton and on his trusted envoy in Malta, Captain Ball.

On October 31, 1799, Nelson wrote from Palermo to the Czar a long letter in French, of which the following is the free translation of an extract:

“Sir

“Your Majesty will deign to observe that, when you were elected Grand Master and the Order was to be reconfirmed in its rights over Malta, I never permitted any suspicion that Great Britain coveted the possession of Malta. I therefore ordered that the flag of His Sicilian Majesty should be hoisted as he is the legitimate sovereign of that Island.

“The quarrels of the nobility and the poor conduct of the leaders (of the Maltese) made it imperative that some prudent person be placed at the head of the Island. His Sicilian Majesty, following the unanimous desire of all the Island, appointed Captain Ball as Governor in Chief, and he will remain in that position until Your Majesty, as Grand Master, will appoint someone else.

“The painful task of keeping peace among the Maltese, following difficulties which your Majesty will readily understand, has been accomplished by Her Majesty the Queen of Naples who, in a moment of extreme need, sent £7,000 from her own and her children's purse, through the intercession of Lady Hamilton, wife of Sir William Hamilton, Minister of my Gracious Sovereign to the Court of the Two Sicilies, known personally to your Majesty, and through the brave conduct and prudence of Captain Ball.

*“Should your Majesty honour these two persons with the Order's decorations, I can assure you that none more than them deserve the Cross, and that this distinction will gratify Your Majesty's most humble and devout servant
Bronte Nelson”¹*

Czar Paul, little realising how treacherous Nelson's declarations of allegiance were, and how the decision to disposses the Order and the Two Sicilies from any rights over Malta had already been taken, fell for Nelson's soft talk. He almost instantly conferred the Cross of Knight Commander of the Order of Malta on Captain Ball, and that of *Dame Petit Croix* on Nelson's mistress, Emma Hamilton.

Writing to Nelson from St Petersburg on December 21, 1799, Czar Paul said:



Fig. 2 Portrait of Lady Emma Hamilton, as Dame Petit Croix of the Order of Malta. She received her decoration the same day as Captain Ball. Painted by Schmidt in 1800

"I have received your letter of the 31st October. It is my great wish that the expedition against Malta will be successful. In that event, Major General Prince Wolconsky will stay there with three regiments of Grenadiers, and will remain on duty in his capacity as Commander of Malta, pending a definitive arrangement between the English, Russian and Neapolitan troops.

"I accord with pleasure, at your request, the Cross of Commander to Captain Ball, and that of Knight to Lady Hamilton, which you will remit to them with the letters I have addressed to them.

"The capture of Malta will add an extra branch to the crown of laurels for the Victor of Aboukir. Whom I pray God, my Lord Duke of Bronte Lord Nelson, to have under his saintly and worthy protection.

Paul I²

The letter addressed by Emperor Paul I to Lady Hamilton has been preserved:

"My Lady Hamilton,

"Having learnt with particular satisfaction the active part you have played in maintaining tranquillity and good order among the inhabitants of Malta, we have determined to give you evidence of our benevolence by decorating you with the Small Cross of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, which is herewith enclosed.

"With which we pray God, My Lady Hamilton, that He will have you under his saintly and worthy protection.

Paul I³

I have been unable to trace the other letter sent by the Czar to Captain Ball, accompanying his insignia as Knight Commander of the Order of Malta.

The demented Czar did not limit himself to awarding the decoration to Nelson's mistress; at the same time his own lover, Madame Lapoukhine was also made a Knight of Malta.⁴

Ball and Lady Hamilton must have been delighted by the important decoration. Both had their portraits painted, sporting the Maltese Cross, to leave to posterity a visual memento of so grand an honour.

Captain Ball's likeness in full uniform as Knight of Malta, proudly displays the coveted eight-pointed Cross of the Order. I believe the painting, now in a local private collection, has not been published before. Likenesses of Alexander Ball abound, but after Britain's machinations to take the Island away from its

Clefford 4 Fev^r 1802

Monsieur

Je conseil M^{rs}ieurs
Les Deputes de venir officiellement
a Mr Lord Hobart Secritaire
d'Etat pour annoncer Leur
arrivee a Londres

J'ai l'honneur d'etre
Mons^r Le Marquis avec la
plus haute consideration

Votre tres humble Secritaire

Alex^r Ball

a Mons^r Le Marquis de Testaferrata

Fig. 3 Autograph letter by Ball to Marquis Mario Testaferrata. Private Collection, Malta

legitimate rulers, the Sicilian King or the Order of Malta, were put into full and manifest execution, Ball may have considered it politic not to ostentate the honour given to him by the Order he betrayed.

Elated, too, was Lady Hamilton. The artist Johann Heinrich Schmidt was in 1800 commissioned to paint her picture in Dresden as *Dame Petit Croix* of the Order of Malta. Of the many dozens of portraits of Emma Hamilton, this was Nelson's favourite. He had it hung in his dining cabin on the *Victory*, and it is this



Fig. 4 Portrait of Marquis Mario Galea Testaferrata. Private Collection, Malta

picture of his lover as Dame of the Order of Malta that he looked on when he died in action in Trafalgar in 1805.

We have the evidence of an eye-witness on how proud Emma Hamilton was of her Maltese decoration. A Swedish diplomat wrote "Milady Hamilton, once considered the most beautiful woman in Europe, is now the fattest I have ever set eyes on... she wears the Maltese Cross so that she now has all the titles that can impress people"⁵

Henceforth, Ball added the new title to his signature. He became Cav. Alexander John Ball.⁶ Similarly, on the marble inscriptions he set up in Gharghur and Zejtun, he calls himself *Cav. e Baronetto Ball*.

What a stroke of irony that Captain Ball, only shortly after flaunting proudly the new decoration, was to order that no one, including Bishop Ferdinando Mattei, should wear any insignia or decoration of the Order of Malta.⁷

The Testaferrata Delegation in London

I would like to add two original and unpublished manuscripts by Alexander Ball, to those recorded in this issue by Dr Alfred Bonnici.

One is a short letter addressed by Ball to *Le Marquis de Testaferrata*, to inform him that the Maltese deputies who wanted to meet Lord Hobart, Secretary of State, had arrived in London. It is dated Attard (S. Anton), 4 February, 1802.

Behind this brief note hides a whole volume of history. Marquis Mario Testaferrata led the first-ever official delegation of Maltese to London since the British connection. His personality is variously assessed. Being at that time, ardently pro-Ball and pro-British, Charles Cameron described Testaferrata most favourably in a secret memorandum:

"Marquis Mario Testaferrata, of the first family in the Island. One of his ancestors was made Grandee of Spain. The Marquis has been distinguished for his moderation in practice and his prudent though manly conduct in the various trying situations he was placed in since the invasion of the French. He was so well thought of by all parties that he was appointed one of those who drew up the capitulations to the French. The French laid heavy contributions on his family which is still one of the most opulent in the Island.

"He has always shown a great attachment to His Majesty's government, and is at the same time esteemed a well-wisher to his country, and conse-

quently he is very popular. As to his talents, he is a man of sound judgement and is well informed with respect to the ancient privileges, as well as the modern state of the Island".⁸

That picturesque maverick, Anthony O'Hara, the Irishman who was the last Russian Minister to the Order of Malta, had, obviously, less reason to like Testaferrata and his delegation, whom he calls traitors. Another secret memo, this time by O'Hara, states:

"It must be remembered that the delegates who have been induced to go to London in order to win support for the formation of a Maltese Priory, are the same gang of traitors — they are also the wealthiest people in Malta — who in conjunction with some of the French Knights have betrayed the Order in the hands of the Jacobins, in order to introduce into Malta the system of equality. The Army of the Directory came here at their invitation, to be the witness of their treachery.

"In creating a Langue of their own, these traitors calculated that they would not only escape the punishment of their base perfidy, but would soon be in control of the government of the Island".⁹

Deposed Grand Master Hompesh himself had some scathing things to say about the Testaferrata delegation:

"The Maltese who went to London are not at all what they would like to appear. They are six: The Marquis Testaferrata; a certain Castagna, a cotton merchant; a certain Cachia of Zejtun, an architect and surveyor; a certain Mallia from Gozo oppressed by debts; and two priests: one Mallia who teaches the A-B-C and the other, an ex-Capuchin monk, called Ricaud. Their going to London is the effect of intrigue".¹⁰

The mission of the Maltese contingent in London proved anything by plain sailing. Having gone there to offer Malta to the British Empire, they expected a royal welcome. Instead they were treated with disdain and contempt.

Lord Hobart refused to receive them, and eventually only condescended to do so unofficially in his private residence. When he did, he showed them in no uncertain manner that what they had to say did not matter.¹¹

To see the King, they had to waylay him on his way out of church at Kew on April 11, 1802. "It must create some surprise that those gentlemen who attended as Ambassadors from the State, should not be admitted officially to a regular audience".¹²

A special gold medal was coined, which Ball, as representative of the King of Sicily, presented to the leaders of the Maltese. These medals are rare. Portraits of notables wearing the victory medals include those of Bishop (then Canon) Francesco Saverio Caruana, Emmanuele Vitale, Filippo Castagna, Vincenzo Borg 'Brared', Giovanni Gafà of Gharghur and Alexander Ball.

Mgr Alfredo Mifsud states he also saw those belonging to Giuseppe Fenech of Balzan and Pietro Buttigieg of Zebbug, besides three in private, and two in public collections.¹⁷

The attestation I am publishing, I believe for the first time, refers to Enrico Scerri, the representative of Hal Chircop: A free English translation from Italian reads:

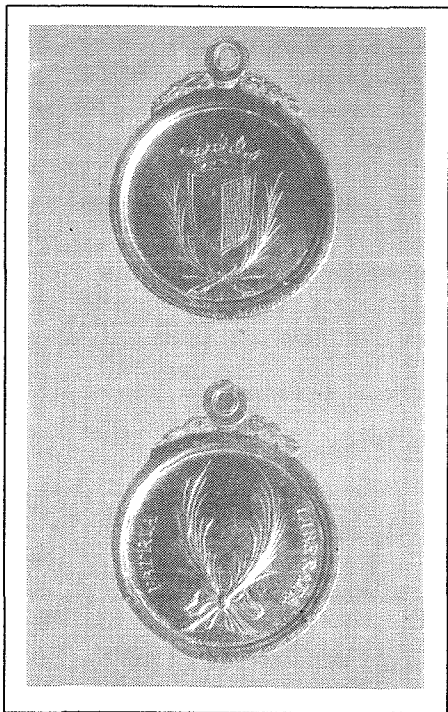


Fig. 6 The gold medal awarded in 1801 to the leaders of the Maltese by Captain Ball as representative of His Sicilian Majesty. Private Collection, Malta

"We Alexander John Ball, Governor of the Island of Malta and Gozo

"Having confirmed the merit and the zeal that you, Enrico Scerri, manifested in the defence of your native land on September 2, 1798 against the French, and having confirmed your courage in offering yourself as a representative of Casal Chircop to form a Company in the most dangerous time of the revolution;

"We therefore present to you this, together with a gold medal, to serve you and your family as everlasting memory and honourable consideration.

"From the Office of His Excellency's Secretariat.

February 9, 1801.

Alex Jn. Ball

(Ball's Seal as
Representative of
His Sicilian Majesty)

Felice Cutajar
Secretary of His Excellency"

Dr Enrico Scerri, a physician who graduated at Salerno University, the recipient of the Medal and Certificate, besides being the Representative of Casal Chircop was later Captain of the Port.¹⁸

A similar certificate, given to Michele Cachia, was published by Ganado-Sammut in their important study on Anglo-French Caricature on Malta during the Napoleonic period.¹⁹

Two other certificates like the one published today, are preserved in the National Library. They refer to Saverio Zarb of Attard, and Stanislao Gatt of Qormi.^{20, 21}

Notes and References

1. Raffaele Palumbo, *Carteggio di Maria Carolina*, Naples, 1907, p.117
2. *Ibid*, p.119
3. *Ibid*, p.118
4. Flora Fraser, *Beloved Emma*, London, 1986, p.267
5. H.J.A. Sire, *The Knights of Malta*, New Haven, 1994, p.243
6. E.g. Mgr. Alfredo Mifsud, *Origine della Sovranità Inglese su Malta*, 1907, p.440
7. *Ibid*, p.366
8. William Hardman, *A History of Malta*, Malta, 1908, p.419
9. Valentine O'Hara, *Anthony O'Hara*, London, 1938, p.197. A different version of the memorandum in Lib. Ms. 523
10. Lib. Ms. 419
11. Albert Ganado & Joseph Sammut, *Malta in British and French Caricature*, Malta, 1989, p.61
12. Cobbett's *Annual Register*, 1802-3, London, part iii, col. 705-706
13. *Ibid*
14. William Miles, *Correspondence on the French Revolution*, London, 1890, pp.322-324
15. Cobbett's, *op. cit.*, col.862
16. Letter of June 2, 1806
17. Mifsud, *op. cit.*, p.378
18. Hardman, *op. cit.*, p.49. For full biographical details about Dr Enrico Scerri (December 28, 1776 — February 8, 1841) see the funeral oration delivered in his honour by Dr Francesco Leone Gravagna in *Il Mediterraneo*, February 14, 1841, p.1442
19. Ganado-Sammut, *op. cit.*, p.49
20. Lib. Ms. 570, p.22
21. After completing this article, I read the exhaustive study by Chev. Joseph C. Sammut, *Maltese Blockade Medals*, in *Proceedings of History Week 1992*, Malta, 1994, pp.77-87 to which the reader is referred.