

The Treasure of the Knight Hospitallers in 1530 Reflections and Art Historical Considerations

From *Peregrinationes*, a publication of the
Accademia Internazionale Melitense

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In 1530 the crusading brotherhood of the Hospitaller Knights of St. John of Jerusalem accepted the offer of the Emperor Charles V to occupy the Maltese Islands and hold them against the Ottomans who were seeking to control the Central Mediterranean. Seven years previously, on January 1st, 1523, the Knights had evacuated their convent on the island fortress of Rhodes, in the Dodecanese, after surrendering on terms to the great sultan, Soleyman the Lawgiver, whose invading army hopelessly outnumbered them. Their tenacity and heroism during the protracted siege earned them the admiration of their great enemy and they were permitted to take with them, in addition to a substantial part of their archives, their personal armour and weapons. They were also allowed to ransom, for jewels and plate, allegedly worth 30,000 ducats, the liturgical furnishings of the conventual church¹. These consisted of a rich collection of holy relics, icons, church-plate, tapestries, sacred vestments, and miscellaneous objets d'art. Other valuables, including the two holy icons of the Damascus and Eleimonitria Madonnas were successfully smuggled out of the island. The accumulated treasure reflected the special and, in many ways, unique character of the haughtily chivalric Order as well as its wealth and prestige.

The treasure packed in several boxes accompanied the Knights in their seven years of wandering from one Latin Christian court to another before they set up a permanent convent on Malta. There are clear suggestions that it was, in the interval, enriched by new acquisitions, but not all of it managed to reach Malta. At Viterbo, where they languished for almost four years (1523-27), they left behind them, in the church of Sts Faustino and Giovita, which served them as a temporary conventual church, various objets d'art, among which were a Byzantine icon of the Madonna and Child, several reliquaries, and a chest decorated with armorial shields and painted allegories of the cardinal virtues². Other paintings including a triptych of the Virgin and Child with Sts John the Baptist and Sebastian were, subsequently, in 1529, left behind in Nice³.

The treasure was also depleted as a result of petty thefts and sundry misadventures⁴. The tapestries had a particularly unfortunate history. Some were stolen in Rome during the Spanish sack of 1527, while others were, in that same year, captured at sea by the Turks while being transported to Nice⁵. A Flemish tapestry, in silk and wool, in the Museos de Arte de Barcellona, may, perhaps, be a survivor.

It represents the Siege of Rhodes of 1480 and is emblazoned with the arms of the Master Émeric d'Amboise (1503-1512) suggesting that it could have been woven for the magistral palace. It was bought in Barcelona, in 1589, by the Taula de Canvi, or, municipal bank, for 150 livres, but its provenance is not recorded⁶. The possibility is that it reached Spain in the baggage of an adventurer who had taken part in the Sack of Rome.

The intrinsic, artistic and religious worth of the Rhodes treasure was well appreciated and, upon its arrival in Malta, steps were taken to have it adequately protected. The Order's historian, Giacomo Bosio, refers to the building in Fort St. Angelo of a strong-room, which he calls a tolo, intended for the safe-keeping of the holy relics and of the most precious and revered objets d'arts (le cose...piu pretiose e care). Its key was under the custody of the Master and the piliers of the eight Tongues⁷. Its appearance and exact whereabouts are unrecorded but the choice of the word tolo (Latin: tholus or tholum), meaning "a domed or gabled building"⁸, is not without significance. Among the surviving early Knights' constructions in Fort St. Angelo, the one that comes closest to this description is the building with a fortified aspect and a circular internal space, just outside the precincts of the church of St. Anne, to the south.

This building was originally independent and had a round-headed door with large voussoir-stones but, at an unknown period, this was partially walled up and recut into a square-headed shape. A slit-window in the blank face of the masonry above provided the only source of light and ventilation⁹. The use and date of the building has long excited speculation. Themistocles Zammit, who investigated it in 1914, thought it was the tower of a windmill¹⁰. Architecturally it belongs to a vernacular building typology that remained in use well into the seventeenth century. It would therefore appear probable that, unlike the other early Hospitaller buildings within the precincts of the Fort, it was designed and built by Maltese masons. The building was at an unknown time incorporated into a barrack quarter and mutilated. It has now been restored and refurbished to serve as part of the quarters of the Knight Resident.

A number of holy icons, including the miracle-working Madonna of Phileremos, and some, at least, of the liturgical furnishings, went to the church of San Lorenzo a Mare, on the Birgu waterfront¹¹, that the Knights used as a temporary conventual church. A fire, which gutted the church in 1532, destroyed most of these treasures but the Madonna of Phileremos escaped serious damage. The most tragic loss were tapestries in silk and wool belonging to a set commissioned in the Flanders, in 1493, by the Master Pierre d'Aubusson, for the palace chapel on Rhodes. They represented scenes from the lives of Sts Catherine of Alexandria and Mary Magdalene.

There are hints that some of the tapestries were rescued and survived until around the end of the sixteenth century¹², but nothing definite is known.

A set of poorly preserved, and much restored liturgical vestments in the collection of the Vittoriosa Collegiate Chapter, might have been among the valuable items saved from the fire. It consists of a chasuble, two dalmatics, and a cope, and, is usually associated with the Pierre d'Aubusson bequest. A shield charged with the arms of the donor quartered with the Cross of Religion, is prominently displayed on the cope but the poor state of preservation does not unfortunately allow a reading although the quartering seems to imply a Master of the Convent. The interest of the vestments lies in their embroidered images, in silk and gold and silver thread, of Passion scenes, episodes from the Life of the Virgin, and individual saints standing in scalloped Gothic niches. They are of good quality and suggest a fifteenth century French, or possibly Flemish, manufacture. A better-preserved gold-cloth and embroidered silk chasuble in the Museum of the Conventual Church, Valletta, may also be a survivor of the fire. It carries five splendidly realised Passion scenes. This is an early sixteenth century Flemish work of high quality which, in spite of being trimmed to make it conform to Council of Trent specifications, has been spared the serious mutilations of the Vittoriosa set.

A monumental oils on wood Crucifix, now generally recognised as a work by Polidoro Caldara da Caravaggio (1492-1543), may have replaced a Rhodian icon that perished in the fire. It seems to have been commissioned in Messina, where the artist settled after fleeing from the Sack of Rome of 1527, and remained in Birgu until around 1578 when it was moved to the new conventual church in Valletta¹³. Whatever its history, the painting testifies to the discerning patronage of the Knights in the earliest phase of their Maltese period.

A painting of St. Lawrence Enthroned, which until around 1689 served as the main altarpiece of the Birgu church¹⁴, has been repeatedly proposed as a survivor of the Rhodian treasure. The date 1532, discovered when the painting was restored and transported to a canvas support in 1937, would, however, seem to indicate otherwise. The probability is that, as in the case of the Polidoro Crucifix, it was commissioned to replace a lost Rhodian icon. The painting, which could have been the central panel of a dismembered polyptych¹⁵, carried the arms of the Master Villiers de l'Isle Adam, and was worked in a tempera technique on a panel composed of six vertically arranged timber planks. It was destroyed in the Second World War, but photographs taken at the time of the restoration point to a provincial, possibly Sicilian, artist. They also suggest a work of limited artistic interest¹⁶.

A painting of the Adoration of the Magi which in the early seventeenth century decorated one of the walls of the church of St. Anne in Fort St. Angelo, was, on the other hand, of sufficiently high calibre, to attract the attention of the informed connoisseur Cardinal Scipione Borghese who skillfully exploited his political influence with Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt to secure it for his prestigious collection. The painting, which could have reached Malta with the Knights in 1530, enjoyed an apparently well-known reputation as a work by the great German Renaissance master Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528).

Wignacourt was approached through Cardinal Verallo. It was a request that he could not ignore given the tremendous prestige of Scipione Borghese as the powerful nephew of the then reigning pope, Paul V, the supreme head of the Order. On 10th July 1610, the Grand Master addressed two dispatches, one to his ambassador in Rome, Fra Francesco Lomellini, and the other to his ricevitore in Naples, Fra Vincenzo Carafa, giving detailed instructions on the transportation of the painting to the Borghese collection together with important information on its careful packaging. This last information permits us to form an estimate of its measurements as being, approximately, 125 x 100cm.¹⁷.

The subsequent history of the painting is unknown but it should be pointed out that paintings by Dürer are listed in inventories of the Borghese collection¹⁸. It has recently been proposed that there are good iconographic arguments for identifying it with the famous Uffizi Adoration of the Magi which is signed and dated 1504, and has roughly similar measurements of 113.5 x 099cm., or, possibly, with a now lost replica¹⁹. This hypothesis is not easy to maintain especially in view of the fact that the Uffizi painting is usually, although certainly not universally, associated with the Jabach Altar which Dürer painted, in the period between his two Italian visits, for the Schlosskirche of Wittenberg.

There is a sideline to the story. By an ironic twist of fate the departure of the Dürer painting from Malta coincided with the last illness and death at Porto Ercole, on 18th July 1610, of Caravaggio, whom both Wignacourt and Scipione Borghese had befriended and greatly admired. Caravaggio died tormented by the thought that the paintings he was carrying in his luggage to Rome, to donate to Cardinal Borghese in a final effort to secure papal pardon, had been lost. Three of them, two St. Johns and a Mary Magdalene were located a few days later at Chiaia, in the country palace of the artist's protectress, Costanza Colonna, Marchesa of Caravaggio, but Wignacourt's ricevitore, Vincenzo Carafa, sequestered them on the grounds that they belonged to the Order of St. John, of whom Caravaggio had been a member²⁰. Considering the fact that Caravaggio had been unceremoniously defrocked, nearly two years earlier, it is difficult to find justification for Carafa's action. The great question is whether he was acting on his own personal initiative, or whether he was obeying instructions from Malta.

Unfortunately we may never know the answer. Scipione Borghese did, however, succeed in getting hold of one of the St. Johns which is still in the Borghese collection in Rome. The fate of the other two paintings is unknown.

The fact that the Dürer painting was displayed in the church of St. Anne, which had previously served the Grand Master as his private chapel, has been interpreted as an indication of its superlative prestige²¹. The painting was, however, left behind in Fort St. Angelo when Grand Master Pietro del Monte moved the convent to Valletta in 1571, and none of the other Grand Masters between him and Aloff de Wignacourt bothered to have it transferred to the new palace chapel. This honour was, instead given, perhaps because of its greater post-Tridentine devotional appeal, to another work, which was also piously believed to have come from Rhodes²². This painting, a triptych of the Lamentation over the Dead Christ with Joseph of Arimathea and Mary Magdalene, is fortunately still on the island, and is currently on display in the picture gallery of the conventual church. Painted in oils on panel, this is a work of reasonable high quality, which has for a long time been vaguely ascribed to the Netherlandish School. In 1989, I argued that there are good stylistic and technical grounds to narrow this attribution to the immediate circle of Jan Van Scorel (1495-1652).

As a young man Van Scorel had established contacts with the Knights of St. John when, in 1519, he set out from Venice on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land stopping among other places at Rhodes where the Master Fabrizio Carretto commissioned him to paint a plan of Rhodes²³. He may also have painted other works and established useful contacts that he exploited in later life when, as the most famous Dutch artist of his generation, his workshop had contacts with the Order's Commandery of Haarlem. The Lamentation triptych seems to have been known outside the convent and a triptych of the same subject in the Galleria Nazionale di Palazzo Abatellis, at Palermo, is clearly based on it²⁴.

It is possible that Caravaggio saw this painting during his stay in Malta and was inspired both by the poignant formal simplification of the Golgotha story, and, more especially, by the emotionally charged detail on the central panel where the Virgin presses her face against her dead Son. An echo of its impact can, perhaps, be identified, as suggested by John Gash, in the great painting of the Raising of Lazarus, in the Museo Regionale of Messina, where the motif is reinvented with dramatic intensity and sharpness in the way in which Martha weeps over her dead brother. Here "the abbreviated structure of Lazarus's face ... is a conscious reminiscence of the triangulated face of Christ in the Malta Lamentation." This is "one of the most memorable passages in Caravaggio's entire oeuvre."²⁵

The devout bust-length image of The Suffering Christ which forms the main side of a two-faced icon known as the Christus Passus, is another painting of good quality which might have belonged to the 1530 treasure. Its harsh realism points to late fifteenth or early sixteenth century Spain, but may also be an indication of Flemish influence. The unusual shape suggests that the painting was trimmed to fit the frame of the gilt-silver monstrance-type support donated, in the early seventeenth century by the Florentine Knight, Fra Aloysius Mazzingus, Bailiff of Santo Stefano (1607-1623)²⁶.

The oval polychrome wood medallion of St. Anne, in the church of the saint at Fort St. Elmo, is slightly better documented. A late eighteenth century source claims that it came from Rhodes and was cut into its present shape around 1729²⁷. It was originally of square format and carried the arms of the Master Villiers de L'Isle Adam. The date 1521-1534, suggested by this information, seems to be corroborated by the stylistic evidence, which reflects the cross-fertilization of artistic ideas characteristic of the late Gothic period. The provenance is unknown but the general feeling is French. My suggestion is that this was the altarpiece of the chapel on board the caracca Sant'Anna commissioned in Nice in 1522 by Villiers de L'Isle Adam. The ship was dismantled in 1548 by the Master Juan d'Homedes (1536-1553) who built Fort St. Elmo and dedicated its church to St. Anne in 1552²⁸.

The caracca, popularly known as the Gran Caracca di Rodi, was a remarkable ship whose size and tonnage (it was reputed to weigh more than 2000 tons) made it a fearsome war machine. The general feeling was that it was unsinkable. It was sheeted in lead, had six decks, two of them below water-level, and its sails area was exaggeratedly claimed to be large enough to cover Fort St. Angelo when it entered or left the Grand Harbour. The ship was also remarkably ornate and, in addition to a spacious chapel, it was decorated with several statues of saints among which the most famous was an over 2m. high St. John the Baptist. This statue has survived and later generations of Knights it revered as a sacred relic. It is now preserved in the conventual church, in the Chapel of San Carlo Borromeo²⁹. It has sometimes been mistakenly described as a figurehead but as pointed out by Paolo Maria Paciaudi, who studied it in 1755, its flat back makes it clear that it was fixed to a level surface such as the tower on the stern³⁰.

When the caracca was laid up in 1548, the statue was first donated to the church of St. John the Almoner, known as Ta' Ghuxa, which stood in the countryside between the village of Tarxien and the suburb of Bormla on the Grand Harbour³¹. Bishop Miguel Balaguer y Camarasa saw it here in 1636 while on a pastoral visitation, and described it as a "large and gilt sculpture"³².

Its provenance was highlighted at a later period, in 1647, by the Vice Chancellor of the Order, Giovanni Francesco Abela, who described it as an “effigie ben grande di legno ... già portata per insegna della caracca di Rodi.”³³. Around 1580, when the building of the Cottonera Lines necessitated the demolition of the church, the statue was removed to the conventual church³⁴. In 1755 it was preserved in a wall niche near the steps leading down to Bartellot crypt. It was moved to its present location in 1858. Paciaudi describes the statue as “weather beaten” and he could still see the holes of the nails that secured it to the ship. The dull white coat of paint in which we now know it seems to belong to a nineteenth century restoration. It must originally have been gilt and naturalistically painted. The real value of the sculpture lies in its historical associations rather than in any intrinsic artistic interest. It is larger than life and the heavy, fleshy form, the position of the feet, and the prominent haloed head which is turned in profile and framed by flowing locks and thick beard, give it a rustic monumentality and reveal a fascination with the grotesque. A touch of elegance is introduced by the treatment of the single skin tunic, which is girdled at the waist and fans out in stiff folds. A perplexing detail is the heavy codex that the statue holds in one hand and which is an unusual iconographical symbol for a St. John the Baptist. The other hand carries the probable remains of a flag staff while by the left foot is a small spherical object the meaning of which is unknown. Seen from below the statue was presumably intended to swell out as an impressive high relief. The date and centre of production are unknown but the early sixteenth century seems probable. In 1684, Fra Pierre Vianny, Prior of the conventual church, donated two carved wood statues, a St. John the Baptist and a St. James, to the Grotto of St. Paul, at Rabat³⁵. They were transferred, a few years later, to the newly founded parish church of the Assumption of the Virgin, at Dingli. The St. John has survived, and in 1946 it was reported to be “covered with armorial graffiti”³⁶. Successive coats of dark varnish have since effectively obscured them except for one small shield with the arms of Villiers de l'Isle Adam, but I am reliably informed that some, at least, of the other graffiti reproduced the same coat-of-arms³⁷. The dating evidence given by graffiti can often be misleading and should be treated with academic caution. In this particular case they do, none the less, suggest a connection with the Master who brought the Knights to Malta. The statue has artistic interest and there are stylistic affinities with the St. Anne medallion that might indicate a similar provenance and history. It is possible that it had an association with the Gran Caracca, perhaps as a cult statue inside the chapel. The fact that it is in the full round excludes the sometimes mooted idea — suggested by the heavy, fleshy form — that it was a fixture on the poop, or stern, of this or some other ship of the Knights. It was certainly not fixed to a flat surface.

The statue shows a hieratic John the Baptist standing in strict frontality and proffering the Agnus Dei for the veneration of the spectator. The hand of the right arm is closed and could have been intended to carry a staff with a pennant or, maybe, a cross. There are hints of polychromy which indicate that the statue may originally have been gilt and painted. The treatment of the folds of the animal-skin tunic is of particular interest. They fall in heavy, stiff pleats and are so arranged to thrust into prominence the head and claws of the animal whose stylised treatment translates it into an almost heraldic device.

The St. James is believed to have disappeared without trace. There is, however, a possible connection with the statue of St. Joseph venerated in the oratory of the Franciscan Minors' church of Santa Maria di Gesù at Rabat. This statue has no documented history. According to popular belief it was a gift of the Master Villiers de l'Isle Adam who died in the adjoining convent on 21st August 1534. Drastic modifications, gessoing, painting, and gilding, make it difficult to argue on the basis of style. None the less, the grotesque features and the fleshiness of the form suggest another ship sculpture. It was not a figurehead because the galleys of the Knights did not carry one but it might have decorated the stern cabin or, perhaps the beak-head of a ship such as the caracca.

It is probable that the statue was not originally a St. Joseph. The Child is obviously a later interpolation and is very uncomfortably posed on the outstretched right hand which seems to have been intended to carry a completely different object such as an alms, or pilgrim's, bowl. The blossoming stick may similarly be replacing a pilgrim's staff. My suggestion is that the statue may, quite possibly, be identified with the Pierre Vianny's St. James, metamorphosed as a St. Joseph.

During their long stay of over two hundred years, between 1306-1522, on Rhodes, the Knights came into close contact with Byzantine art. In spite of the fact that they seem to have remained essentially western in their aesthetic and artistic orientation, they could not escape its influence. While they continued, all along, to commission and import from the West liturgical and other objets d'art, the cultural realities of their convent home made it impossible for them to avoid the employment of Greek artists and, in time, came to rely increasingly on them³⁸. They also acquired a rich collection of icons, some of which they brought in their luggage to Malta. The latter included the exceptionally high quality Madonna of Damascus, which for the warmth of its human poignancy and simple sureness of line stands out as one of the finest surviving, early twelfth century paintings of the School of Constantinople. It is an earlier and more accomplished work than the better known Madonna of Vladimir in the Tretiakov Gallery Moscow, which is iconographically very similar.

The Knights cherished it more for its talismanic significance than artistic worth and concealed the original image beneath an over painting. It was restored by the Istituto Centrale di Restauro, Rome in 1963-1966.

Two other miraculous icons, the Madonna Eleimonitria and the Madonna of Phileremos, were of a seemingly inferior quality. The Eleimonitria was badly shattered during the Second World War and its subsequent restoration was more in the nature of an approximate reconstruction. This makes a sound artistic judgement difficult. The Phileremos Madonna, the most venerated of the three, left the island with the Knights in 1798 and had a subsequent close association with the Russian Imperial Family who venerated it in the Winter Palace at St. Petersburg. It escaped the Revolution of 1917 but vanished in Yugoslavia in 1941. It was only relocated a couple of years ago in the monastery of Cetigne, Montenegro, where it awaits the serious study of a Byzantine Art specialist³⁹.

A diptych reliquary composed of twenty-five miniature images assembled together, presumably for the private devotions of an individual Knight, is preserved at the Cathedral Museum, Mdina. Paolo Maria Paciaudi, who described and illustrated it in 1755, called it an "Agiothecum". The images may, perhaps, be identified, as suggested by Anthony Luttrell, with the twenty-five seen by the pilgrim Nicolò da Martoni, in 1395, in the Hospice of St. Catherine on Rhodes, when they were mounted "in a beautiful cona reliquary surrounded by inscriptions"⁴⁰. The images are carved in low relief in a soft stone known as steatite. Nineteen of them are the work of the same artist, or workshop, and probably formed part of a single set.

The date of the images is unknown. As in the case of most other Byzantine objets d'art, stylistic considerations are by themselves insufficient dating tools. Two enamel armorial shields of the Master Fra Hélión de Villeneuve (1319-1346), on the post-1530 red velvet covers, are of dubious interest. The early fourteenth, or perhaps, the thirteenth centuries are probable, but an earlier date cannot be excluded. The centre of production is equally unknown. Paul Hetherington suggests Cyprus where the Knights languished for fifteen years between the fall of Acre and the definite capture of Rhodes⁴¹. The style was, however, widely diffused and Nicolò da Martoni, assuming that he was referring to the same images, was told that they were acquired in Constantinople.

The sixteen images on the right-hand volet form a homogeneous group. The saints are shown in half figure. Some are frontally posed but others have their heads slightly turned in profile. In spite of a certain dignified monumentality the execution is rather crude. Three other half-length figures on the left-hand volet are identical in style and workmanship and obviously belonged to the same set.

This distances them from the remaining six images. One of the latter, a central Golgotha scene, has technical and iconographic affinities⁴², but betrays westernizing influences and might, in fact, have been produced separately in a Latinized context, perhaps on Rhodes itself. Four of the remaining five images show standing saints. The fifth is a composite scene of the Communion of St. Mary of Egypt. The iconography of all five is more stylised, abstracted, and decorative. On a technical level one should note the use of the drill to enhance and diversify the visual appeal, particularly in the drapery and haloes of the standing saints.

The diptych contains in addition two empty frames, which might never have carried images. A little box in the lower left-hand corner contains relics, which, Paciaudi suggests, are stone splinters from the Holy Sepulchre itself. The copper engraving published by Paciaudi confirms that the position of the steatites has remained the same since 1755. Hetherington has convincingly argued that the order does not make Byzantine theological or iconographic good sense⁴³. This suggests that the position of the images must have been altered in a Latin context, at an unknown period. It was perhaps at this time that the diptych received its new red velvet covers.

An objet d'art of better quality and costlier materials, is a tafelportatile, or portable altar, which presumably belonged to a portable chest of the type known technically as a kastenportatile, meant for the celebration of the divine liturgy in places other than churches. The stone, in the collection of the Cathedral Museum, Mdina, has no documented history but is claimed by a tradition of unknown antiquity to have belonged to a galley of the Knights. The cultured sophistication of the work and the exquisiteness of its finish, which give it a jewel-like appearance, suggest an aristocratic origin and a level of informed patronage which in the Maltese context points directly to the Knights. The probability is that it reached the island from Rhodes in the baggage of the Knights.

The altar consists of a red marble slab within a wide silver frame that has an outer border of chased acanthus leaf scroll work and is richly ornamented with lucid Tuscan enamels and miniatures protected under thin plates of rock-crystal. There are in all twenty-eight images, fourteen miniatures, and fourteen enamels. They depict scenes from the life of Christ, Old Testament Prophets, Kings, Patriarchs, Apostles, three Evangelists, and a Virgin and Child. The last image misfits both iconographically and stylistically and is obviously a late interpolation, presumably replacing an image of the Evangelist Mark which was either lost or irreparably damaged. The bright gold-leaf backgrounds of the miniatures and warm colours of the enamels charge the scenes with almost heraldic intensity.

Since, on the one hand, no lucid Tuscan enamels are known before around 1290 when the Sienese master goldsmith, Guccio di Mannaia, produced the famous gilt silver chalice for Pope Nicholas IV (1288-92), and, on the other, there are no known examples of miniatures under rock crystal after around 1350, the terminus post quem and the terminus ante quem for the altar can be fixed to the period between around 1290 and 1350. The centre of production can, furthermore, be identified with Venice for the simple reason that rock crystal miniatures were an essentially Venetian craft and there is no evidence that they were produced elsewhere. Moreover the Tuscan way of enamelling was well known in Venice.

What makes the altar more significant is the fact that rock-crystal miniatures and lucid enamels are used together. There is only one recorded other instance of such a combination in the better known Cross of Assisi produced around 1337. The images of the latter are, however, in an entirely western idiom while those on the altar, are a mixture of western and Byzantine styles. Some scenes, such as, for example, The Nativity, are in an entirely Byzantine idiom while others, such as the Deposition or the Noli Me Tangere are essentially western. Charlotte van der Heijden, who submitted a thesis on the altar, to the University of Leiden, has proposed that the closest parallels to the images, especially the miniatures, are to be found in Venetian manuscript illuminations. This has permitted her to date the altar to the second quarter of the fourteenth century, which is very probable⁴⁴.

The apparently contemporary silver-gilt reliquary of St. Peter, in the treasury of the conventual church, seems to be Tuscan, or, perhaps Umbrian. This is a splendid example of the high degree of technical excellence that characterised Italian metal work at the close of the Middle Ages. It is refined and intricate, and wrought with an exquisite skill that speaks the language of aristocratic sophistication. The stem is decorated with two sets of six square plaques chased with allegorical birds that retain traces of enamelling. Of greater interest are the six roundels on the ornate central knop which are chased with the images of St. Peter and five female saints one of whom is St. Mary Magdalene. On the lobed base are quatrefoils with enamel images of the Crucifixion, the Sorrowing Virgin, St. John the Evangelist, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Peter, and St. Paul. These alternate with six shields chased with archangels in various attitudes.

The St. Peter reliquary is one of the few items of the 1530 treasure of precious metals that escaped destruction. The Knights themselves were not averse to recycling their church plate and objets d'art if the need arose and most of what survived was melted down by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798. One other lucky survivor is the slightly earlier silver-gilt reliquary of the True Cross which was, probably, produced in Paris c. 1240⁴⁵.

It consists of a patriarchal cross with ornate finials carrying, on the obverse side, reliefs of the evangelical symbols, and of two angels with passion tools, while, on the reverse side, are the Agnus Dei, two Old Testament Prophets, and the Four Evangelists. At the crossing of the longer of the two lateral beams is a Christ in Majesty whose vivacious expressive figure, rhythmic drapery folds, and feeling for the body structure are in the best Romanesque tradition. The reliquary stands out for its sophisticated accomplishment and high degree of finish.

A richer and artistically more splendid example of late medieval metal work is the processional cross, now in the treasury of the Metropolitan Cathedral at Mdina. The cross, of parcel-gilt silver, carries the respective arms of the Master Philibert de Naillac (1396-1421) and the financier Dragonetto Clavelli, who was presumably the donor⁴⁶. Stylistic and technical considerations make it apparent that the cross was produced in Venice⁴⁷. The pedestal is an earlier work that was, possibly, refashioned from an erstwhile reliquary. In typical late Gothic style it is wrought in the shape of a miniature hexagonal temple crowned by a dome. Buttresses define the six walls each of which is pierced by a two-light window, while cast effigies of the Virgin and Child and five saints, one of whom is a bishop, encircle the dome.

It has been the scope of this study to focus attention on some of the highlights of the treasure that the Knights brought in their luggage to Malta when they established their Convent here in 1530. The high artistic quality of these objets d'art testifies to the importance that the Order attached to its artistic patronage. This tradition was maintained and fine-tuned during its long Maltese period.

- 1 A.T. Luttrell, "The Rhodian Background of the Order of St. John on Malta", in J. Azzopardi (ed.), *The Order's Early Legacy in Malta*, Malta 1989, 13.
- 2 O. Tencajoli, "Il Soggiorno a Civitavecchia e a Viterbo dell'Ordine di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme di Rodi: 1523-1527", Roma, vii (1929), 487-489.
- 3 O. Tencajoli, *L'Ordine di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme a Nizza*, Turin 1929, 22-23. The painting was emblazoned with the shield of Phillippe Villiers de l'Isle Adam, which suggests either a very late Rhodian work, or, more probably, that it was painted after the loss of Rhodes, possibly in Nice itself.
- 4 G. Bosio, *Dell'Istoria della Sacra Religione et ill.ma Militia di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, iii, Rome 1602, 16. A relic of St. Sebastian was, for example, stolen at Baia, near Naples, by a Greek-rite cleric who reportedly took it to Mallorca.
- 5 G. Bosio, ii. (2nd. ed. Rome 1630), iii. 58, 79, 111. The latter were, apparently, recaptured by the Knights in 1530.
- 6 *The Order of St. John in Malta* (ed. Council of Europe), Malta 1970, 278, pl. 33.
- 7 Bosio, iii, p. 89.
- 8 Du Cange, *Glossarium Medie et Infimae Latinitatis*, 1886, R-Z-, 7-8.
- 9 It is possible, however, that the window was originally one of a pair (its companion having been destroyed as a result of stone replacement) which would explain why it is not centred with the door.
- 10 National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta, Field Notes of Themistocles Zammit, Notebook 1, 93, 95.
- 11 Birgu was honoured with the title of Città Vittoriosa after the Great Siege of 1565. The name Vittoriosa by which the town is now generally known, is here used for the post-1565 situation.
- 12 A.T. Luttrell, *op. cit.*, 14.
- 13 M. Buhagiar, "Paintings", in J. Azzopardi, *op. cit.*, 25-26.
- 14 It was replaced by Mattia Preti's giant altarpiece of the martyrdom of St. Lawrence.
- 15 Two possible side panels were recorded in 1937 (G. Porsella-Flores, "An old picture of St. Lawrence", *The Daily Malta Chronicle*, 30.x.1937). They were destroyed at the same time as the painting.
- 16 M. Buhagiar, "The Artistic Heritage", in L. Bugeja, M. Buhagiar, S. Fiorini (eds.), *Birgu A Maltese Maritime City*, vol. ii, Malta 1983, 467-471.
- 17 The dispatches in NLM, AOM 1389, f. 198v-199, ff. 200-201rv, were first published in S. Macioce, "Scipione Borgese e un'Adorazione dei Magi di Albrecht Dürer. Notizie d'Archivio", in *Storia dell'Arte*, vol. 88 (1996), 287-300.
- 18 S. Macioce, *op. cit.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 H. Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life*, London 1998, 390.

21 S. Macioce, *op. cit.*

22 NLM AOM 1953, f. 241. The painting was also claimed to have served as an icona on one of the galleys but of this there is no real evidence.

23 A.T. Luttrell, *op. cit.*, 9.

24 The painting (oils on panel) [Inv. 73] is labelled "School of Antwerp" and dated to the beginning of the 16th century. It is iconographically almost identical but certain elements such as the positioning of the volets with the Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea, and the cross and the ladder on the central panel are reversed producing the effect of a mirror image. It could, in fact, have been based on an engraving of the Malta painting. The quality is inferior.

25 J. Gash, "Caravaggio's Maltese Inspiration", *Melita Historica*, xii/3, 254-255.

26 It is emblazoned with his armorial shield. The icon of the Virgin of Sorrows, on the reverse side of the monstrance, is a late eighteenth century work in the style of Antoine Favray, but it possibly replaces an earlier icon.

27 AOM 1953, f. 218v.

28 G.F. Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta*, Malta 1647, 105.

29 Also known as the Chapel of the Holy Relics.

30 P.M. Paciaudi, *De Cultu Sancti Johannis Baptistae*, Rome 1755, 315-316.

31 The exact location of the church is unknown but there are indications that it stood in present day Fgura, just outside the Margherita Lines in the neighbourhood of St. Thomas Gate: E.B. Vella, *Storja ta' Hal Tarxien u Rahal Gdid*, Malta 1932, 93-96.

32 Archiepiscopal Archives, Floriana, *Visitatio Balaguer* 1636, f. 36rv.

33 G.F. Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta*, Malta 1647, 105. Abela was apparently responsible for the myth that the statue was a figurehead.

34 The old church of St. John the Almoner was demolished about this time because of the building of the Cottonera Lines. A new church was built in a new location, within the fortifications, by the Prior Fra Pierre Vianny, but the statue remained in the conventual church.

35 An entry in the account books of the Grotto (Archives of the Collegiate Church of St. Paul, Rabat, vol. C [Conti] 5, f. 62) records the payment of the sum of 6 tari effected on 8th July 1684, to the two men (*burdinari*) who transported the statues.

36 H. Braun, *Works of Art in Malta - Losses and Survivals in the War*, London (His Majesty's Stationery Office), 1946.

37 Verbal communication by Captain C.G. Zammit, Director of the National Museum Department (1954-1970).

38 As shown by the surviving fresco cycles: J. Gash, "Painting and Sculpture in Early Modern Malta", in V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.), *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798: Studies on Early Modern Malta and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem*, Malta 1993, 513.

39 For a history of the icon before its recent rediscovery: M. Buhagiar in J. Azzopardi (ed.), *op. cit.*, 20-23.

40 P.M. Paciaudi, *op. cit.*, 384-399; A.T. Luttrell, *op. cit.*, 12, 45.

41 P. Hetherington, "Byzantine Steatites in the Possession of the Knights of Rhodes", *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. CXX. n. 909, December 1978, 819.

42 *Ibid.*, 811-812. Hetherington suggests on such evidence that it came from the same workshop as the half-length images.

43 *Ibid.*

44 For an excellent critical analysis of the altar: Charlotte van der Heijden, "On the Origin of a Unique 14th century Portable Altar", in *Treasures of Malta*, vol. ii/3 (Summer 1996), 49-54.

45 C. Oman, *op. cit.*, 104-5. The stem and the pedestal of the reliquary are subsequent accretions added at different periods. They, therefore, fall outside the scope of this study.

46 A.T. Luttrell, *op. cit.*, 11. Clavelli who died around January 1415 was a notable benefactor of the Convent, even though he was not a knight.

47 C. Oman, *op. cit.*, 179.

Alternative Titles: Crusader Knights of Rhodes, Hospitalers, Hospitallers of Saint John of Jerusalem, Knight Hospitaller, Knights Hospitalers of the Order of Saint John, Knights Hospitaller of St. John of Jerusalem, Knights of Malta, Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem, Order of Malta, Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem, Order of the Knights of Rhodes, Sovereign Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes, and of Malta, Sovereign and Military Order of the Knights Hospitaller of Saint John of Jerusalem, Sovereign and Military Order of the Knights of Malta.Â Heraldic flagsBanner: The blazon of the shield is applied to the whole surface of a square or a vertically or horizontally oriented rectangular flag. In popular culture, the Knights Hospitallers are much less used than their brother orders, the Templars and The Teutonic Knights. They tend to be used more as local color, their distinctive habits adding a note of pageantry to a historical setting (as, for example, in John Webster's *The White Devil*, whence the picture quote).Â The famous black habit was changed around 1248 due to practical considerations. (Fighting is kind of hard while wearing a bulky monk's robe!) Celibate Hero: The Knights were required to take a vow of celibacy.Â Ironclaw has Knights Hospitaller in the *Book of Horn and Ivory* supplement, based on an island in the Shallow Sea known as the Honey Isle (a pun on one possibly etymology of Malta). The Knights Hospitaller were a group of military knights fighting in Jerusalem. They are the group that became the Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem and, eventually, St. John Ambulance. The Hospitallers are a Catholic military order founded at Jerusalem in the 11th century. They later became the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. Today their headquarters are in Rome. The order continues its humanitarian tasks in most parts of the modern world under several slightly different names. Contents: Preface; List of Plates; Frivolous and Vainglorious Grand Master de Paul; Hughes de Loubens de Verdalle, Cardinal and Grand Master; The Miraculous Image of the Madonna of Philermos and its Uniqueness to the Knight Hospitallers of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta; The Treasure of Relics and Reliquaries of the Knight Hospitallers in Malta; The Treasure of the Knight Hospitallers in 1530: Reflections and Art Historical Considerations; Church Art and Architecture in the Fifteenth and EarlyÂ An Art Historical Appreciation; NiccolÃ² Nasoni between Malta and Portugal The Knights Hospitaller was a Christian organization that began as an Amalfitan hospital founded in Jerusalem in 1080, to provide care for poor, sick, or injured pilgrims to the Holy Land. After the Western Christian conquest of Jerusalem in 1099, during the First Crusade, it became a religious/military order under its own charter, and was charged with the care and defense of the Holy Land. Following the loss of the Holy Land by Christian forces, the Order operated from Rhodes, over which it was