

# St. John's Co-Cathedral

## Balletta, Malta

By  
Sir Knight Oliver Craughwell

**S**ituated in the Mediterranean, the small archipelago of Malta is steeped in history, from the Neolithic period, the shipwreck of St. Paul, right up to the blitz of WWII.

The Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta or the Knights of Malta, as they later became known, arrived in Malta in 1530 after being gifted the Island from Charles V of Spain. Fort St. Angelo (Birgu) became the seat of the Grand Master. After the onslaught of

the Ottoman invasion in 1565 and their subsequent demise, plans were laid to fortify the whole island. In fact, Malta is one of the most fortified countries in the world. Watch towers encompass the whole of the three islands, all within sight of the next to relay messages back to the capital using fires on the roofs of the towers. A true gem for the military historian! This brings us to its crown jewel, St. Johns Co-Cathedral.

Construction started on the Cathedral in 1572 and was completed in 1577. With



a plain facade and two bell towers, the church resembles a fortress instead of a place of worship. Two Doric columns, either side of the door, hold a balcony from which the Grand Master, who holds the rank of Cardinal in the Holy Roman Church, would address the population on special occasions. The sculpture of Christ above the entrance was originally placed at the entrance to the harbor. The architect of St. Johns was the Maltese Gerolamo Cassar, the Knights own military engineer. On a side note, the term “Co-Cathedral” originates with the seat of the Bishop of Malta. Since his seat was in the older capital Mdina, he often used St. Johns, being the conventual church of the Knights as his second see.

On entering the church, one is awed by the magnificent artistry, ornately carved walls, beautifully painted barrel ceilings, and priceless antiquities. The barrel vault ceiling was painted by Mattia Preti, who used oil based paint rather than the usual water colors for his frescos; this makes the imagery look deeper. The ceiling took him six years to knight templar



complete, and tells of many knightly adventures and of John the Baptist’s life. Extending outward from the entrance, the long rectangular nave draws your eye toward the richly decorated altar. The floor is made entirely of marble tombstones decorated with various expressions and achievements. Many of the order’s illustrious Knights, who came from some of Europe’s most powerful Catholic families, are buried here. Many of the tombs depict skulls and hourglasses, representing the end of a life on earth and the beginning of an eternal one. Nowadays these symbols seem, to many, to bear a morbid or arcane impression as can be seen with the discontinued use of the Knight Templar apron.

On either side of the nave are the Chapels of the various Langues of the Order. Since the order’s members spoke different languages, many fortifications were divided among the various nationalities or “langues.” Each chapel is highly decorated, and each altar is adorned by a beautiful painting dedicated to





a Saint. The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian from the Chapel of Auvergne can be seen above. One of the nine chapels represented is the Chapel of Our Lady of Philermos, which held the religious icon "Madonna Philermos," one of the most sacred relics belonging to the Knights which they brought from the Holy land. It was taken to Malta from Rhodes by Grand Master L'Isle Adam, hero of the siege at Rhodes, who along with 5,000 soldiers held the Island for six months against Suleiman's 200,000 man army. When the Knights were successful in battle, they would hang the keys of the captured fortresses next to the relic. Keys in this chapel include castles in Lepanto (from the huge naval battle) and Patras. It is mentioned that the relic was removed from the Island after Napoleon invaded and is housed in Montenegro. However there still remain two copies in the chapel, which I couldn't discern from the original. Its journey around Europe is fascinating; Tsars, bombings, fires etc. the Chapel of Auvergne; the Chapel of Aragon (which held the relic of the True Cross); the Chapel of Castile, Leon and Portugal; the Chapel of Germany (previously of the English who fell from favor after they broke with Rome); the Chapel

of Italy; the Chapel of France; the Chapel of Provence; and the Chapel of the Anglo-Bavarian langue. The French langues were the most senior, thus their chapels are placed closest to the altar. In turn, each of the chapels contains the bodies of Grand Masters that represented the Langues. They are hugely ornate and maybe not as politically correct in our times as in theirs.

It is contested, but many of the French Knights were members of the Freemasons, including two Grand Masters, Manuel Pinto de Fonseca from Portugal and Grand Master de Rohan. This would have been a major taboo at the time! It is even noted that Pope Pius IX was a member of the fraternity. Allegedly there are minutes about him receiving the degrees in Monte Video. Further research will determine how true this is. Some of our symbolism can be seen in the floor and in the artwork of the Chapel of the French Langues. Various symbols such as the cornucopia, the scales, and the symbolic pelican are displayed which have similar meanings in Christianity and Freemasonry.

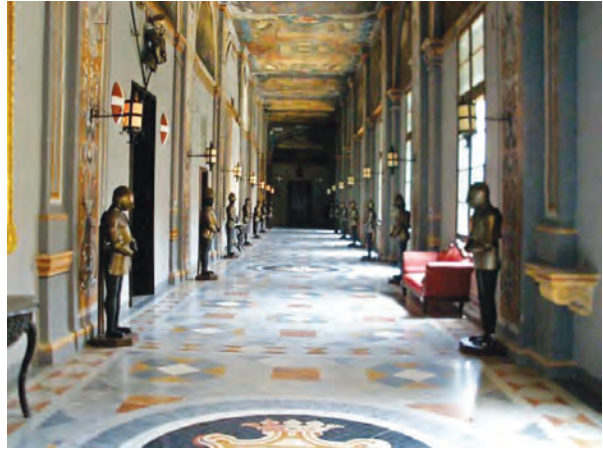
Some of the most revered members of the order were buried in the vault directly beneath the altar. This is where Jean de la Valette, hero of the great siege of 1565, is interred as well as Philippe de L'Isle-Adam, hero of the siege of Rhodes and Alof de Wignacourt who built many of the towers around Malta including St. Mary's Tower on Comino which was portrayed in the 2002 film, "The Count of Monte Cristo."

On the outer right side of the church



which has a huge armory and museum. Each of the hallways is lined with suits of armor that were donated when the knight passed away. This is now the seat of the president of Malta. It is well worth a visit for the history buff or the curious traveler. I also highly recommend visiting the cathedral's website for pictures of the various tombs and chapels.

lies the Oratory, where Caravaggio's magnificent painting "The beheading of John the Baptist" can be seen. The painting is gigantic and covers an entire wall. It is the only known painting which Caravaggio signed. Caravaggio, being a member of the order for a short period, was later expelled for seriously wounding a knight in a brawl; he had already been absolved of murder. Some of the other price-



less and highly regarded items that are contained here are the fine collection of choral books, the Flemish tapestries, and a huge Ciro Ferri Monstrance. This huge brass urn once held St. John the Baptist's hand that baptized Christ in the river Jordan. This, like many other items was removed from Malta by permission of Grand Master Ferdinand von Hompesch when Napoleon invaded in 1798.

Sir Knight Oliver Craughwell is a member of Lynn Commandery No. 9 in Marion, Virginia. This material he was kind enough to share with us as a result of his recent trip to Malta. He can be contacted at [olivercraughwell@hotmail.com](mailto:olivercraughwell@hotmail.com).

Valletta itself has many other churches which the Knights built. Behind the cathedral lies the Grand Master's Palace, knight templar

Further reading see  
*A History of Freemasonry in Malta  
 1730 – 1998* by A.J. Agius  
*Knights of Malta* by H.J.A Sire  
[www.sglom.eu](http://www.sglom.eu)





**The medieval 3000 year old city of Mdina, Malta by night.**

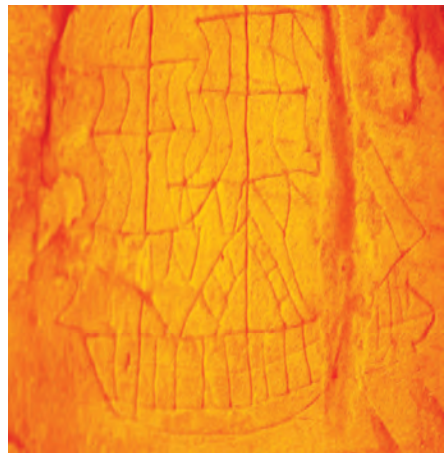


**Grand Master Vallette's armor, siege 1565.**



**Fungus Rock – Malta, Dwejra Bay, Gozo.**

The Knights believed that a plant which grew on its surface had medicinal purposes. It was so prized that it was even gifted to visiting dignitaries. The tower in the foreground which was installed by Grand Master Pinto (who supposedly was a Freemason and friend of Cagliostro) was to protect it from trespassers and to house the rickety cable car which extended out to it. It was later discovered that the fungus had no medicinal use.



**Old Prison, Citadel, Gozo, Malta.**

This was a prison for some of the rowdier members of the Knights of St. John. In fact Grand Master Vallette was imprisoned here for four months for assault. The cells are covered with graffiti from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This one is a tally for their length of stay. I.e. the stern was one month, mast two, and each oar for the remaining months.