

Knights of Malta Restored

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The Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem were formed long time before their reign on Malta. The Order was originally established in 1085 as a community of monks responsible for looking after the sick at the Hospital of St John in Jerusalem. They later became a military order, defending crusader territory in the Holy Lands and safeguarding the perilous routes taken by medieval pilgrims. The Knights were drawn exclusively from noble families and the Order acquired vast wealth from those it recruited, as well as from the ill-gotten gains of their subsequent privateering.

The Knights came to Malta in 1530 having been ejected from their earlier home in Rhodes by the Turks in 1522. Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, gave them the choice of Malta or Tripoli as a new base. Neither was to their liking, but nothing, they thought could be worse than Tripoli. Having chosen Malta, the Knights stayed for 268 years, transforming what they called 'merely a rock of soft sandstone' into a flourishing island with mighty defences and a capital city coveted by the great powers of Europe.

The Order was ruled by a Grand Master who was answerable only to the Pope. Knights were chosen from the aristocratic families of France, Italy, Spain, England and Portugal. On acceptance into the Order they were sworn to celibacy, poverty and obedience. Few lived up to these ideas, many were very wealthy and the Knights' standoffish attitude towards the locals does not always seem to have applied when it came to the temptations of the flesh.

Ironically, it was the two great victories of the Knights which spelt the death-knell of the Order. The Great Siege of 1565, followed by the crucial Battle of Lepanto in 1571, were so successful in checking the Ottoman advance into the Western Mediterranean, that there was no longer an Infidel to fight. The Order gradually grew complacent and corrupt, with little to do but scour the seas for any booty that could be seized from Muslim ships.

By the late 18th century the Order was little more than a large but effete international gentlemen's club. The island was ripe for picking by Napoleon in 1798. When, four years later, the Order was formally resorted to Malta, the Maltese resisted their return and instead sought the protection of the British.

Today the Order boasts 10,000 knights and 50 embassies all over the world. The grandmaster is recognized as the head of state. The order continues to run hospitals and relief assistance worldwide. It dispenses according to some estimates over 50 million dollars a year in charities.

The government of Malta returned Castel Sant Angelo to the Order in 1999, starting out once again in the Mediterranean they once ruled with the cross and the sword.

Travel to Malta with D.H.I. Ltd to see personally the achievements of the Order. Dream Holidays International offers tours to the Grand Masters' Palaces and being a local incoming travel agency will assist you to travel to Malta. Find details for Malta Holidays: www.destinationmalta.com or Malta Hotels: www.destinationmalta.com/hotels.htm.

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