

The young Grand Prior of the Order of Malta Archduke Wenceslaus

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"Wenceslaus Ertz Herzog zu Osterreich" was an Archduke of Austria, the son of Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II and Maria of Spain. He was a German Prince of the House of Habsburg, and Grand Prior of the Order of Malta in Castile.

He was born March 9, 1561. His hometown was Wiener Neustadt. He died on September 22, 1578 in Madrid, Spain. He was the eleventh child, and the 8th son (some sources say he was the 6th son) of his parents' 16 children. Nine of whom survived infancy. Wenceslaus died suddenly at the age of seventeen: one year after being appointed Grand Prior of the Order of Malta. **He was buried in the Panteon de los Infantes in the Real Monesterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial. That was a historical residence of the Kings of Spain, and more significantly: the floor-plan is based on descriptions of The Temple of Solomon.** It has a portico followed by a courtyard open to the sky; followed by a second portico and second courtyard, all flanked by arcades and enclosed passageways leading to "the holy of holies". Statues of David and Solomon, one either side of the entrance to the basilica of El Escorial, lend further credence that this was the origin of the design.

The Temple-of-Solomon design was extensively modified to fill additional purposes of being a monastery; a pantheon; a basilica; a convent; a school; a library; and a royal palace. It was built from locally quarried gray granite, square and sparsely ornamented. It takes the form of a gigantic quadrangle: Its dimensions are approximately 224 meters by 153 meters.



In constructing the building, the instructions were simple and clear, directing the architects to have "simplicity in the construction, severity in the whole, nobility without arrogance, and majesty without ostentation".

The Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta -was originally styled the medieval Order of Saint John of Jerusalem. When the Holy Land fell in the year 1291 the order first settled in Cyprus; then in Rhodes in 1310; then on New Year's Day 1523 to the island of Crete; and it wasn't until the year 1530 that the Grand Master Fra' Philippe de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam (1464-1534) garnered possession of the island of Malta, being granted to the order by Emperor Charles and with the approval of Pope Clement VII.

Early in the 14th Century, the institutions of the order and the Knights who came to Rhodes (and later to Malta) came from every corner of Europe and were grouped together by the languages they spoke. The original seven Langues (Tongues) were: Provence, Auvergne, France, Italy, Aragon (Navarre), England (with Scotland and Ireland), Germany. And, after 1492, Castile and Portugal were separated from the Langue of Aragon.

A good portion of Castile encompasses modern-day Spain. Each Langue included Pories or Grand Pories; Bailiwicks; and Commanderies. While the term priory sometimes indicates a monastery for men or women under Christian Orders, the term 'Priory' here denotes the headquarters of the Christian Knights. A "Grand Prior" in the Sovereign Military Order of Malta serves a specific geographic region. Furthermore, each "Grand Prior" serves at "the will and pleasure" of the Grand Master of the Order, who governs worldwide.

The first Grand Master of the Order of Saint John was The Blessed Gerard in the year 1099 when the Order was founded. The 51st Grand Master of the Order, Fra' Jean l'Evesque de la Cassiere (1502-1581) was Grand Master of the Order of Malta when young Archduke Wenceslaus of Austria was appointed Grand Prior of Castile in 1577. Grand Master de la Cassiere had great foresight: he commissioned the building of the Conventual Church of the Order (St. John's Co-Cathedral) in Valleta, Malta. The current 79th Grand Master is Fra' (Frater) Matthew Festing, who is also a member of the Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.). He is styled "His Most Eminent Highness, Fra' Matthew Festing, Prince and Grand Master of the Sovereign Military Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta, Most Humble Guardian of the Poor of Jesus Christ".

The Grand Master of the S.M.O.M, is considered a Prince of the Church and his prerogatives equal to a Cardinal. In fact, his rank in the Church Hierarchy is the highest after the Cardinals themselves; and ---in addition to the Pope, the Grand Master of the S.M.O.M. is considered to be a "Sovereign Monarch." Both the 'Order of Malta' and separately, 'The Holy See' (the grounds are termed The



Vatican) each have their separate diplomats; and each has Permanent Observer status within the United Nations.

I find interesting the similarities between today's Sovereign Military of Order of Malta (S.M.O.M.) (described above) and today's Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the U.S.A. (which governs the conferrals and auspices pertinent to our Masonic 'Order of Malta'--with regard to various terminologies, usages, practices and customs.) In ancient times, both Chivalric Orders were sanctioned by papal decree. At times these Brother-Knights had their intra-rivalries; but they were initially established to be allies during the Crusades. The Hospitaller Order was intended to help sick, old, and injured Pilgrims venturing to The Holy Land. The Knights Templar were intended to be the armed patrol, guarding the routes and thus protecting the Pilgrims and their possessions as they traveled safely on their pilgrimages to the Holy Land. They held true to their official title: Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon. The Order of Malta (centuries after the death of the Templar's Grand Master Jacques de Molay) made a nice (and fitting) nod to the Templar legacy by constructing a building in SPAIN which had King Solomon's Temple as its inspiration/model.

The Grand Master of both Chivalric Orders has supreme governing authority. As noted earlier, in the case of the S.M.O.M., the Grand Priors serve at his "will and pleasure". Getting back to Archduke Wenceslaus (or Archduke Wenzel), he was young by his age, but mature by his outlook. He was born into a noble family --- even a more than that --- the Royal Dynasty of the Habsburg family. As such, certain "age requirements" of adulthood and maturity were waived. Even with Freemasonry, the son of a Freemason (as a "Masonic Lewis") was sometimes granted "early admission / initiation" into our Fraternity. The noted scholar Dr. Albert G. Mackey, noted that the original initiation, reception, and entrance into the ancient Order of Malta was not secret, but open and publicly witnessed. He often mused that it should be returned to this original method of admission, since this Order of Christian Knighthood was an Honor with no need for secrecy.

When young 17 year-old Archduke Wenceslaus (or Wenzel) of AUSTRIA was appointed Grand Prior of the Order of Malta for Castile in 1577, it did cause some outrage among Castilian Knights of the Order, who protested his appointment. In response, the Pope ordered the wayward Knights to publicly apologize before the Grand Master, for their insubordination. The matter seemed to be healed, when Grand Prior Wenceslaus died shortly thereafter in 1578. His tenure was short; but his impact was felt long after his death. The Order of Malta was stronger and more unified in the decades to come. Individual members put aside their differences and focused intently on the mission and motto of the Order: "Defense of the Faith, and assistance to the poor."

Grand Prior Wenceslaus may have proven the old adage "the good die young;" however, he (and other good men like him) are not forgotten.





Order of Malta Postage stamps honoring Grand Masters

Some of the Grand Masters of the Order of Malta...left to right & from top downward:

Emmanuel Pinto da Fonseca (1741-1773); Antonio Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736); Gregario Carafa (1680-1690); Philippe Villiers de L-Isle Adam (1521-1534); Joannes {Jean} Parisot de Vallette (1557-1568); and Raymond du Puy de Provence (1120-1158)

Sources and Recommended Readings:

- "The Complete Genealogy of the House of Habsburg" by Miroslav Marek.
- "Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry" by Dr. Albert G. Mackey, M.D., 33^o, and a Masonic Knight of Malta, as well as a Past Commander of his Knight Templar Commandery: South Carolina Commandery #1.
- Portrait of Grand Prior, Archduke Wenceslaus by Alonso Sanchez Coello.

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