

THE KNIGHTS OF MALTA

by H.J.A. Sire

book review by Fred O. Wyant

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This work by H.J.A. Sire is purported to be the most complete work of the Order of St John, or Knights Hospitaller, known successively as the Knights of Rhodes and of Malta. This order was founded in Jerusalem in the 11th Century and continues today. It may surprise many to learn that it maintains traditional rights of sovereignty and has diplomatic relations established with an increasing number of countries. Membership in the modern Order is over ten thousand and they continue nine centuries of hospitaller work throughout the world.

THE KNIGHTS OF MALTA by H.J.A. Sire was copywrited in 1994 by the author and published by Yale University Press of New Haven and London. It is a work of 279 pages, 8 x 10.5" and is footnoted with references to ten pages of bibliography and notes. The three appendices contain interesting and valuable information for the modern student. Appendix I lists the 78 Grand Masters and 14 Lieutenants who have been heads of the order with their Country of origin, date of birth where known, place and date of election, and date of death, abdication or retirement. Appendix II contains the Diplomatic Representation of the Order of Malta at the date of publication which includes 59 Embassies and 5 Legations. The third and last appendix provides the Institutions of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta. These include the officers by title, the Grand Priories and sub-Priories, and the 39 National Associations (including three based in the United States of America) and one National Committee.

This book provides a full narrative account of the Order and describes and illustrates the architectural and artistic legacy of the Knights -from Crusader Castles in the Holy Land to fortified villages throughout Europe. It provides the first rigorous study of the Order's strategic naval role in the Mediterranean, the success of which can be argued to have done much to prevent the further spread of Islam into Europe during that period.

The Order fell on hard times when Napoleon conquered Malta in 1798 and the final chapter deals with its efforts in the two centuries since to recover an effective role. It narrowly defeated an attempt in the 1950s to subject the Order to Vatican control and in 1988 elected the first English Grand Master in its history. Of most interest, perhaps, to a York Rite Mason, are the references to the Knights Templars found throughout the book. The first is found pp 5-7 and deals with the apparently overlapping work of the Templars and Hospitallers. The Templars were the first

to receive the blessing of the Church as a military order and the Hospitallers benefited from their pioneering. During this period the title of "Master" for the head of the Hospitallers was borrowed from the Templars, and there is strong evidence that there was movement of members from one group to the other at various times. In fact, in 1258, the Templars and Hospitallers banded together to provide mutual assistance in war against the Saracens; however, within 33 years the Kingdom of Jerusalem was lost, first with the fall of Acre in May 1291 and the subsequent loss of Tyre, Sidon and Berytus in July. The Templars fought on, abandoning Chateau Pelerin and Tortosa in August, retreating to the small island of Ruad off the coast. They maintained a presence there until 1302 when that outpost was lost and "not a watch-tower remained of the long dominion of the crusaders in the East". Other references are contained throughout the book with the last being on page 271 with the statement, "The age of the common man has proved fertile in bodies of private citizens adopting the titles of Knights Templar and similar exciting fraternities..." No mention is made of masonic Knights Templar by name; however, one may infer the above reference to include the York Rite body so named.

Also of interest to the modern Knight Templar is the information on pp 25-26 of the suppression of the Knight Templars by Philip IV of France during the years 1307-1312. On 13 October 1307, by secret order, he had every Templar in France arrested. There followed "government propaganda, secret denunciations, interrogation by torture and show trials such as the present century has made familiar in the practice of totalitarian regimes." The French puppet pope, Clement V lent the Church's courts and sanctions to the act of injustice, and "when he showed signs of wishing to bring to the trials a semblance of fairness, King Philip expedited procedures by burning fifty-four Templars alive in Paris." In 1312, with extorted evidence as a pretext, Clement V decreed the suppression of the Order of the Temple, and two years later, the Master, Jaques de Molay and the Preceptor of Normandy were burned at the stake. Mr. Site here quotes the legend of de Molay's curse on the King and Pope and their subsequent early deaths.

While the Knights of Malta had nothing to do with the demise of the Templar Order, there is no question that they profited enormously from it. The Templars were by far the richest in lands and material wealth; that which the Church and various Kings did not appropriate, subsequently, in large part, became the property of the Knights of Malta. (pp 118-120). This was accomplished by judicious diplomacy and through strong alliances with papal powers, various nobles and monarchs. It is no secret that the strength and longevity of the Knights of Malta has been closely tied to that of the Popes and of the Catholic States throughout the world.

There are today, 38 of the Hospitallers who are Knights or Chaplains of Justice-professed members of a religious order of the Catholic Church. These members must also be single or widowed and take a vow of chastity and poverty. "Secondly, since 1960, the Order has been a religious institute comprising laymen (the Knights of Obedience and Donats of Justice) who are bound by promises of obedience to their appointed superiors. Thirdly, it is an autonomous order of chivalry conferring the titles of knight or dame chiefly on Catholics but also occasionally on non-Catholics of high rank; its status of international sovereignty is linked with this third aspect of its nature, knighthood being conferred by the Grand Master in his capacity as a sovereign prince." There are a number of prominent Americans such as Peter Grace (he headed the Grace Commission to investigate government waste) who are members. Mr. Grace has been the President of the American Association of the Knights of Malta since 1977. Other requirements of membership in the various groups are found on pp 273-274.

The modern mission of the Knights of Malta is much as in the past; however, the Hospitaller is emphasized -they no longer maintain a military presence in the world. It is interesting that while they are recognized in the World courts as a sovereign body with diplomatic powers, they have been without a country to govern since 1798 when Malta was lost to Napoleon. Their good works continue; for example, during the Vietnam war they maintained a team of 45 doctors and young workers in South Vietnam from 1966 through 1970; In 1969, three of these died of starvation in a North Vietnamese prison camp. (pg 268). Most of their charitable works today are maintained in Africa, Europe and Catholic countries around the world.

THE KNIGHTS OF MALTA is an interesting book, which is difficult to follow in some sections and will be best understood if the reader has a strong background in medieval history. In some parts, "reading between the lines" is required to obtain the best understanding of the material presented, especially as to the "diplomacy and alliances" employed by the Order. It is worthwhile to persevere. One cannot help but admire an Order that is still viable after nine centuries of work as Hospitallers.