

## **THE KNIGHTS OF RHODES**

**R.W.BRO. ART SCOTT**

(refer to page 96 in ritual book)

Last October my wife and I visited the Island of Rhodes as part of a tour of the Greek Islands and while there we spent the better part of a day in the Grand Master's Palace and in the old medieval town of Rhodes. I was amazed at what I saw. Upon my return, my curiosity was piqued and the following is an extract from a paper I recently wrote and presented to the Victoria Lodge of Education and Research.

The Island of Rhodes lies in the Aegean Sea between Asia Minor and Crete. It is about 150 miles from Turkey, 273 miles from Athens, and 300 miles from Cyprus, and has a long history of occupation dating back to 2000 BC, beginning with the Greeks. During its history it has been dominated by the Persians, Egyptians, Macedonians, Romans, and even pirates of the Mediterranean and Aegean seas. Matters changed, however, in 1309 AD when the martial monks of St John of Jerusalem (the Knights Hospitalier) arrived and decided to make Rhodes their new base. Life was altered dramatically on the island and for the next 213 years building works were done on a scale that had not been seen for nearly 1000 years.

Who were these men who became known as the Knights of Rhodes?

The Knights of Rhodes were not always known by that name. Their origin dates back to the time of the Crusades. Prior to 1309 they were known as the Hospitallers of Jerusalem, then the Knights Hospitaller (the Order of Knights of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem), a militant Christian monastic group founded in the 11th century, based in the Holy Land, and charged with the care and defence of pilgrims.

The origins of the order have given rise to learned discussions, to fictitious legends and considerable conjecture. The mostly commonly accepted explanation is that in the year 1020 AD, merchants from Amalfi and Salerno in Italy were given permission by the Caliph of Egypt to build a hospice or infirmary near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The hospice, which was originally dedicated Saint John Almoner, and later to Saint John the Baptist, took in Christian pilgrims traveling to visit the birthplace of Christ in the Holy Land. Initially the group just cared for those pilgrims who had made the long journey to Jerusalem

Their conduct was religious and their role was that of infirmarians, there being no mention of knights. It was still a religious order and had useful privileges granted by the Papacy, for example, the order was exempt from all authority save that of the Pope, and it paid no tithes and was allowed its own religious buildings. But by the mid-12th century, the order was clearly divided into military brothers and those who worked with the sick (including five physicians and three surgeons who were maintained at its expense). The order soon extended into providing an armed escort to pilgrims, and grew into a substantial force. Together with the Knights Templar, they became one of the most powerful Christian groups in the area. Many of the more

substantial Christian fortifications in the Holy Land were the work of either the Templars or Hospitallers, at the height of the Kingdom of Jerusalem the Hospitallers held seven great forts and held 140 other estates in the area. The largest of these, their base of power in the Kingdom, was Krak des Chevaliers, east of Tripoli in what is now Lebanon.

To accompany and defend at need the arriving and departing pilgrims, the Knights Hospitalier became a veritable army, comprising knights recruited from among the crusaders of Europe, and serving as a heavy cavalry, and Turcoples recruited from among the natives of mixed blood, and serving as light cavalry armed in the Turkish fashion. Later the Grand Masters themselves went into battle. Thus the Order of St. John imperceptibly became military without losing its eleemosynary (of or pertaining to alms, charity or charitable donations; dependent on or supported by charity) character. There was also a marked distinction between the secular knights, who were externs to the order and served only for a time, and the professed knights, attached to the order by a perpetual vow. Henceforth the order numbered two distinct classes of members: the military brothers and the brothers infirmarians. The brothers chaplains, to whom was entrusted the divine service, formed a third class.

The order came to distinguish itself in battles with the Muslims, its soldiers wearing a long black monastic coat or mantle with slits at each side for their arms, and bearing a white cross on the chest. In war the knightly brothers often wore above their armour a red surcoat with the white cross. Some Knights supplemented the red surcoat with a black cloak. The basic design

of the cross was the eight pointed Cross Pattee-Nowy, known as the Maltese cross.

The standard of the Order was a white cross on a scarlet field. Each of the Masters of the Order also had their own personal arms, depicted on a banner.

They soon became rivals of the Knights Templar, and this rivalry had much to do with the rapid decline of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The two orders held the same rank in Church and State, both being recognized as regular orders and endowed by the papacy with most extensive privileges, absolute independence of all spiritual and temporal authority save that of Rome, exemptions from tithes, with the right to have their own chapels, clergy and cemeteries. Both were charged with the military defense of the Holy Land. On the battlefield they shared between them the most perilous posts, alternately holding the van and rear guard.

When the kingdom of Jerusalem was at the height of its glory, the Hospitallers possessed no fewer than seven strongholds, some situated on the coast, others in the mountains. They enjoyed the revenues of more than one hundred and forty estates in the Holy Land. As to their European possessions, a writer of the thirteenth century credits them with about nineteen thousand manses or manors. It was necessary to organize a financial administration in order to assure the regular payment of revenues of these widely scattered possessions.

Thanks to these resources, drawn from Europe, the order was able to survive the fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, which involved the loss of all its

possessions in Asia. After the capture of Jerusalem by Saladin (1187), the Hospitallers retained only their possessions in the Principality of Tripoli, and these they lost a century later by the fall of Acre (1291). They were obliged to seek refuge, under their Grand Master, Jean de Villiers, in the Kingdom of Cyprus, where they already has some possessions. King Amaury assigned them as a place of residence the town of Limassol on the coast. But on Cyprus, however, they felt restricted. They were vassals of the Frankish king and unable to act freely. In 1306 plans were initiated to conquer and relocate to the island of Rhodes, and three years later the Order under Grand Master Foulques de Villaret conquered Rhodes and persuaded the Pope to grant the Order title to rule the island as an independent sovereign.

After a failed attempt at merger, and following the Papal ban on the Knights Templar, the Knights of St. John received many of the Templar's estates in 1312 AD, along with many new recruits seeking refuge from the Pope's Templar inquisition. Members of the Order came to Rhodes from all over Europe and were grouped according to languages spoken. There were initially seven such groups of Langues, or Tongues.

The first decade after the island's capture was troubled with assaults by the Turks, who were quick to realize the threat posed by the martial monks so close to them. But their efforts to capture Rhodes were to no avail.

The conquest of Rhodes in 1309 brought about a complete transformation of the order. From that moment on, the defence of the Christian world required the organization of a naval force. So the Order built a powerful fleet and sailed the Eastern Mediterranean, fighting many famous battles for the sake

of Christendom - for example, the Crusades in Syria and Egypt. Rhodes provided a strategically located base for naval operations in both the Mediterranean and the Aegean and the ocean route that brought iron, lumber and slaves from the Black Sea to the Egyptians. The Knights of Rhodes used their island as a launching pad for raids on Muslim shipping and coastal towns. They prospered on loot. The character of the order was transformed the knights into corsairs. The piracy practiced by the Muslims was the scourge of the Mediterranean and especially of Christian commerce. The Knights of Rhodes armed cruisers — not only to give chase to the pirates, but to make reprisals on the Turkish merchantmen. With increasing audacity they made descents on the coast and pillaged the richest ports of the Orient, such as Smyrna (1341) and Alexandria (1365). However, a new Muslim power arose at this period -- the Ottoman Turks of Iconium -- and took the offensive against Christianity. After the fall of Constantinople, Mahomet II directed his attention to the task of destroying this den of pirates which made Rhodes the terror of the Muslim world. Henceforth the order, thrown on the defensive, lived perpetually on the alert.

Unlike the battles pitched against the Muslims in the protection of pilgrims en route to the Holy Land, the Order of St. John on Rhodes did not fight large battles in the open field, although they could deploy a strong force of dismountable knights backed by crossbow and spear. Most of their fighting was done defending the fortress walls of Rhodes during a siege or from ship deck or disembarked on smaller raids.

## **THE FORTIFICATION OF THE MEDIEVAL CITY**

During the first decades of Rhode's occupation by the knights, the Grand Masters successively began repairing reinforcing and extending the Byzantine fortification of the city. Each grand master set his personal coat-of-arms in the ramparts or above the gate over which he had directed repairs or improvement or built from new foundations.

The fortifications works were planned and directed by specialist master masons (*muratores*), some of whom are known to have been Greeks.

Beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the use of gunpowder in warfare imposed fundamental changes in both weaponry and strategies of attack and defence. The practical experience of masons and military men was no longer enough for the fortification of a site. New defence tactics demanded knowledge of mathematics and the science of engineering. Henceforth the defence of cities such as Rhodes and other cities throughout Europe would be organized by engineers, although their contribution to the fortification of Rhodes is only confirmed towards the end of the time of the Knights in Rhodes.

The fortifications that were implemented by the Knights came about through the use of cannon, which transformed warfare as it was then known, particularly with respect to the defence of structures such as the castle of Rhodes. The thin walls were strengthened from the inside with earthwork. The moat was widened and a high retaining wall was constructed on its outer side. In many places, escarps (a steep artificial slope in front of a fortification) were built into the walls so that the cannon balls would ricochet. Masonry proved to be very vulnerable to cannon fire, whereas earth tended absorb the cannon balls.

Another change implemented by some of the grand masters was to join the towers, which up until now had been freestanding so that they would be isolated during battle, to the wall in order to resist the force of cannon fire. Low bulwarks were erected in front of the towers. As well, some of the gates to the city were abolished and converted to bastions.

Much attention was paid to the moat, which was always dry. This was a death trap to the enemy, and battles in the moat were always particularly bloody ones. There was heavy fire from the lower outworks around the base of the walls, and several towers had embrasures (apertures with slant sides in a wall or parapet, through which cannon are pointed and discharged) at moat level.

Even the defence of the harbour was reinforced. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, two mighty towers were built, followed by the St. Nicholas tower, the most important of the three and one which was the centre of ferocious battles during two sieges of the city.

Most of the manual work entailed in fortifying the city was done by slaves, including Muslim slaves, some of which were owned by the Order. Specialist craftsmen were paid for their labours.

The castle of Rhodes, with its fortifications, public buildings, churches and residences was considered by medieval travellers to be invulnerable, and was considered the last bastion of Christendom and the west.



During their occupation of Rhodes, the Knights of Rhodes were subject to two sieges. The first occurred on 1480 when, on May 23, a fleet of 170 ships appeared on the northwest coast a short distance from Rhodes and about 100,000 Turkish soldiers disembarked. The Turkish forces, led by the grand vizier and admiral Meshikh Pasha Palaiologos, laid siege to the city. Their plan was to take control of the harbour, cutting off supplies, and to breach the weak sea wall and capture the castle. Their first task was to capture the Tower of St. Nicholas. Their artillery kept up a relentless bombardment (during the siege, the city had to endure the destructive effects of over 3,500 cannon balls during the bombardment by the Turks.) followed by an assault on the tower which was repelled. The Turks also launched a similar attack on the seaward sector of the city, defended by the tower of Italy. Although their cannons created large cracks in the fortification, they were repelled, but not without numerous casualties on both sides. According to contemporary reports, the sea was red with blood. Then on July 27 the Turks launched a vanguard of 2500 janissaries who managed to take the tower of Italy and enter the city. After three hours of intense fighting, the Turks were decimated by knights and began to withdraw, then beat a quick retreat when counterattacked by the knights. The knights succeeded in capturing the holy standard of Islam. On that day between three and four thousand Turks were slain. On August 17, 1480, Meshikh Pasha and the remnants of his army boarded their ships and returned to Phoikos, from whence they had come. The Knights of Rhodes had successfully held off the first major siege since beginning their occupation of Rhodes.

Unfortunately, the following year Rhodes suffered a major earthquake, which destroyed all of what the Turks had left standing. This necessitated a major rebuilding of the city and its fortifications.

The second and final siege began on June 26, 1522, when Turkish forces again landed on Rhodes. This time the army comprised some 200,000 men, including 10,000 janissaries and over 60,000 specialists in constructing underground tunnels for blowing up fortifications. At first about 280 vessels sailed to the island, but this number soon increased to 400. Rhodes was defended by a force of between 6,000 to 7500 men at arms, only 290 of whom were knights. The remainder were hired mercenaries. The surrounding villagers flocked into the city with their families and animals and were soon put to work.

This time the Turkish offensive tactics were different from those of 1480. Attacks were mounted against the landward fortifications, while the ships were used to blockade the harbour.

The Turkish artillery began bombardment on three towers (Spain, England and Provence) in conjunction with infantry charges, but to no avail. The Turkish army began to lose heart. Seeing this, the First Vizer of the Turks sent word to the Sultan to hasten his arrival at Rhodes. Suleiman's arrival on July 28 with more ships and troops restored the Turks morale, and the struggle continued relentlessly day and night. The Turks dug tunnels in an attempt to enter the city or blow up sections of the wall, but were invariably thwarted by counter-tunnels dug by the Knights.

Over two thousand Turks fell on one day alone during a major attack on the tongue of England's tower. Another three thousand Turks fell in a subsequent offensive on the position of the tongue of England. But the assault took its toll. In some places, particularly the position of the weaker tongue of Italy, the walls had been reduced to rubble.

As the months rolled by and the siege continued, supplies and ammunition became depleted and the moral of the people, particularly the villagers, was at a low ebb.

On September 24 a major offensive was mounted by the Turks. The combatants fought man to man. The knights had captured 40 enemy standards and piles of corpses lay around the walls. The sea beside the tongue of Italy's tower turned red with blood, just as it had during the siege of 1480. The Turks counted 15,000 to 20,000 dead. The Knights counted about 200 men dead and 150 wounded. The fortifications were in ruins and there was no one to repair them. The situation became hopeless.

Another offensive by the Turks at the end of November resulted in another three thousand dead.

Even though the Knights of Rhodes were almost on their knees, the Turks too were in a difficult position. The soldiers were exhausted after four months of fighting. Winter was approaching and food was becoming scarce.

There was a rumor that Charles V and the Pope might send help to the Order.

It was then that the Turks made a shrewd move. They addressed the people of Rhodes directly, bypassing their leaders. They shot arrows over the walls with proclamations promising the ordinary folk peace, respect of religion, and honour if they surrendered.

At first the knights would not think of capitulation to the Turks, but bowing to pressure from the people, a three day truce was declared (December 11 – 13). On December 22 it was agreed that the Knights of St. John would be given twelve days grace to depart from the island, taking their weapons and whatever else they desired. Residents of Rhodes (Rhodians, Greeks and Franks) who wished to leave could do so within a period of three years. The churches would not be desecrated and everyone could keep his religion. The Sultan would grant tax exemption for five years.

After officially signing the surrender of the city, the knights, together with 4,000 or 5,000 Rhodians embarked on their ships and at dawn on January 1, 1523, set sail for Crete. Rhodes, after being the outpost of western policy and Christianity for 213 years, had become part of the Muslim empire.

As for the Knights of Rhodes, they subsequently traveled to Italy, where they moved from town to town. They then decided to ask Charles V of Spain to grant them the island of Malta, which he did in 1530.

Thus the Knights of Rhodes became the Knights of Malta, and continued their struggle against the infidels in the name of Christendom. They remained on Malta until 1797, when the island was captured by Napoleon.

But that's another story for another day.

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