

THE MALTA 5d. STAMP OF 1889.

By Chas. Spiteri.

When one looks at the 5d. Malta stamp issued in 1889, listed in Gibbons' Catalogue as No. 32, one immediately notices, on the upper corners, the so-called Maltese eight pointed cross worn on the habit of the Knights Hospitaliers of St. John of Jerusalem.

On the left side of the ornament are to be seen a shield bearing the eight pointed Maltese Cross and several other implements of war such as swords, lances of various types, as well as a drum. Such a drum used to be sounded in the streets of all the towns and villages of Malta to give the inhabitants the warning of an approaching enemy. This warning was called "In-Naffra".

On the right side of the ornament are depicted other war implements: the slide bearing the Maltese colours of red and white which are the National colours given to the Maltese by Count Roger of Normandy when he liberated Malta from the Arab yoke in 1090.

The middle design represents a Maltese galley in which the Knights Hospitaliers of St. John of Jerusalem used to fight the Turkish corsairs of the Mediterranean, the great enemies of the Christian Faith.

These galleys were constructed at the arsenal situated between the two towns of Senglea and Vittoriosa. Nearby are still to be seen barrel-vaulted magazines hewn from the living rocks by the slaves of the Hospitalliers. These magazines were made so damp-proof that everything appertaining to the construction of a galley was stored in them.

If one were to go back as far as 1644 and place oneself in the Watch Tower of St. Angelo, one would then see such galleys as that on the above-mentioned stamp, with the command amidship dressed in full armour and his red habit bearing a white cross at the front and back, and big red and white feathers dangling in his visor.

Alongside of him stand in files the knight brothers with shield in the left hand and drawn sword in the right hand, flaunting their scarlet and gold amid a forest of oars.

Gradually the galley would be seen leaving Vittoriosa side and the Commander's quarters, setting forth for her perilous summer cruise while her white and red coloured sails take in the breeze which slowly carries her out of harbour.

With such a galley the courageous General de Cambere Boisbour defeated the big Turkish Sultana, a marine colossus, near Rhodes Isles on the 8th September 1644 in a fight which lasted seven hours. A memoir of this battle may still be seen on a fresco in the Magisterial Palace in Valletta.

Waving from the poop mast, the galleys flag may be seen bearing the Cross of St. John the Baptist, the Patron Saint of the Knights Hospitaliers of Jerusalem, a flag which every Moslem dreaded and under which every Christian traveller sailed in all confidence.

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