

Knight Templar Remains in Gozo?

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Introduction

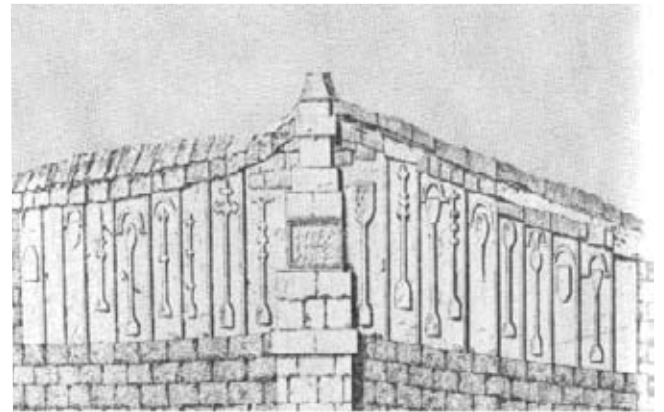
The Maltese Archipelago occupies a central position in the Mediterranean being barely 93 km away from Sicily and 290 km from Northern Africa. Gibraltar is 1836 km to the west and Alexandria is 1519 km to the east. During the medieval period, the Islands lay at the southern most position of Christian Europe which at the end of the 11th century A.D. initiated the first of a series of campaigns to recapture lands under the dominion of Islamic rulers. Some of these Crusades proceeded overland, but a number utilised naval transport. These generally made use of the Ports of larger Sicily to the north of the Maltese Islands and there is no documentary evidence of any of the major campaigns being launched from Maltese ports. The Islands would however have served as a useful stepping stone for campaigns against North Africa especially when maritime conditions were unfavourable for remaining out at sea.

While there is no documentary evidence for any of the major campaigns being launched from the Maltese Islands, there is evidence that minor campaigns originated from the Islands. One of the Counts of Malta named Henry Pescatore is known to have used his island base to launch a personal crusade to the Holy Land. Accompanied by 300 *iuvenes maltenses*, he led a successful expedition to Tripoli in Syria in 1205. This won him the praise of Pierre Vidal, the renowned Provençal troubadour who was his guest in Malta. In the following year with support from Genoa, Henry Pescatore led an expedition against Crete and for six years managed to retain some form of presence on that Island until he was ousted by the Venetians in 1212. Subsequently, in 1221, he participated in the ill-fated naval expedition against Damietta on the African coast (Dalli, 2006: 98-100).

Archaeological Artifacts

Archaeological artefacts from the Medieval period may further show links to the ill-fated Crusade of 1270 led by King Saint Louis of France. Displayed in the

sacristy of the Don Bosco Oratory Chapel at Rabat – Victoria in Gozo, are to be found ten globigerina slabs incised with various Catholic symbols. Three similar slabs are found in the Museum of Archaeology in the Rabat – Victoria Citadel and another is found in the hallway at St. Augustine’s Convent also, at Rabat – Victoria. The original provenience of these slabs appears to be a now built-over cemetery situated in the region previously known as *Ta’ Fejn Santu Wistin* located near the church and convent of the Augustine Order in the suburbs of the Grand Castello of Rabat. Speculation as to the date and origins of these slabs has fascinated antiquarians since the eighteenth century. The St. Augustine’s Cemetery had apparently been established during the medieval period and was extant by at least the early fifteenth century.



Medieval Tomb-slabs mounted on 1770 wall at St. Augustine’s Cemetery

The cemetery was first recorded during the Apostolic Visitation made by Mgr Petrus Dusina in 1575 in his report on the Chapel dedicated to St. Michael, wherein he opines that the chapel and benefice were founded by the brothers Giovanni and Paolo Nicolacio, Andrea Santoro, and Giovanni Dalli (Aquilina & Fiorini, 2001: 142). A notarial record shows that this chapel had in fact been established prior to 1441.¹ Dusina further refers to the Chapel dedicated to St. John the Evangelist. This chapel was endowed with a benefice conferred by Viceroy Acugna to Ugolini Manixi in Palermo in 27th July 1489 (Aquilina &

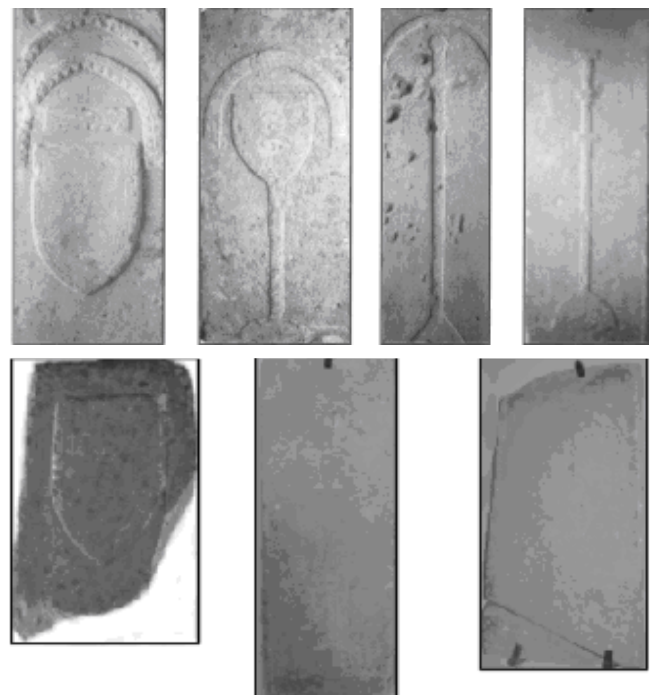
1. Notarial record of Andrea Benjamin 15.xii.1441 as reported by G.P.F. Agius de Soldanis: *Il Gozo. Antico-moderno e Sacro-profano, Isola Mediterranea adiacente a Malta Africana*. Gozo: Manuscript National Library, 1746 [english translation by A. Mercieca: *Gozo. Ancient and Modern, Religious and Profane*. Malta: Media Centre Publ., 1999, p.146]; as transcribed by J. Busuttil, S. Fiorini (eds.): *Documentary Sources on Maltese History. Part V Documents in the Curia of the Archbishop of Malta. No.1 The Registrum Fundationum Beneficiorum Insulae Gaudisii 1435-1545*. University press, Malta, 2006, doc.52 [p.73-75].

Fiorini, 2001: 357). In the mid-eighteenth century, the Cemetery housed ten chapels dedicated to various saints (Mercieca, 1999: 146-147). These included: St. Paul's Chapel [benefice of Mag. Nucius de Episcopo dated 14th November 1435 - notary Andrea Benjamin (Busuttill & Fiorini, 2006: 43-46)]; St. Michael the Archangel Chapel [benefice of Antonius de Raspullo dated 15th December 1441 - notary Andrea Benjamin (Busuttill & Fiorini, 2006: 73-75)]; the Chapel dedicated to St. John the Evangelist [benefice of Viceroy Acugna dated 27th July 1489 (Aquilina & Fiorini, 2001: 141)], St. Bartholomew's Chapel [benefice of Paulus de Manuele dated 8th October 1497 - notary Pinus Saliva (Busuttill & Fiorini, 2006: 10)]; St. Nicholas Chapel [benefice of Petrus Cabrera dated 9th November 1516 - notary Pinus Saliva (Busuttill & Fiorini, 2006: 32-33)]; the Chapel dedicated to St. Anthony the Abbot [benefice of Margarita Saliva dated 20th March 1544 - notary Don Laurentius Apap (Busuttill & Fiorini, 2006: 142-146)]; St. Catherine's Chapel [benefice of Johannes Castellata dated 7th January 1544 - notary Don Laurentius Apap (Busuttill & Fiorini, 2006: 126-128)]; St. Blaise Chapel; St. Catald's Chapel; and Our Lady of Mercy Chapel (these were mentioned pastoral visit made by Vicar-General Pietro Francesco Ponteremoli in 1630). The establishment of these benefices dedicated to defined chapels, some in the early decades of the fifteenth century, suggests that the Cemetery may have been in existence even earlier.

Documentation of the Tomb-Slabs

The tomb-slabs were first documented during the pastoral visit of Mgr. Alpheran de Bussan in 1736. He reported that the cemetery had been in use since ancient times and may have been set up to house the remains of the faithful who died in 1270 during the Holy War of St. King Louis in Africa. He interpreted a few of the incisions as representing bishop's symbols including the mitre and a Greek Bishop crosier.² In his unpublished notes Can. Costanzo wrote that "In this cemetery here are buried a number of noble persons thought

to have been brought to Gozo by Sicilian ships two hundred years ago or even more than that at the time when there was trouble with Djerba and Tripoli. There are many slabs that bear crosses that are a sign that important persons are buried under them" (Mercieca, 1999: 148). G.P.F. Agius de Soldanis writing in 1746 described both the cemetery and the slabs. His description remains the only attempt at a complete study of the remains. Agius de Soldanis concurred with Mgr. Alpheran de Bussan's view that the slabs represented the tombstones of abbots, bishops, archbishops, and princes who had died in Tunis during the disastrous campaign against the Muslims led by St. Louis IX, King of France in 1270 (Mercieca, 1999: 146-151). G.A. Ciantar also reported in 1780 the existence of the slabs and included a copy of the inscriptions. He questioned the traditional view that the tombstones belonged to the various bishops and prelates who accompanied King St. Louis in 1270 stating "But what did all these Bishops and Priests do in that war? Maybe they were to celebrate some Provincial Council in the camp where the fighting was taking place?" He proposed that the tombstones may have belonged to several illustrious Maltese and foreign personages who died in Gozo possibly after



Best preserved tombstones from the French Cemetery in Gozo

2. "Coemeterium jam usque ab antiquis temporibus, quibus non in ecclesiis sed in coemeteriis extra castra, & civitatis humabantur mortui, destinatum pro sepeliendis mortuis hujus insulae.... Vel juxta aliorum sensum paratum pro sepelendis Christi Fidelibus defunctis in bello sacro, redeunte anno 1270, exercitu S. Ludovici Regis ab Africa &c... Inspiciuntur multae lapides monumentorum cum aliquibus signis in superficie et specialiter in uno extant insignia episcopalia, nempe mitra et lituus pastoralis, non recurvus, sed instar fulcri subularis, quo utuntur episcopi graeci". As reported in: A. Ferres: *Descrizione storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*. Achille Ferres, Malta, 1866 [fasimile edition: Midsea Books, Malta, 1985], p.566-567; G.A. Ciantar: *Malta Illustrata, Ovvero, Descrizione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano del Commendatore F. Giovan Francesco Abela Corretta, Accresciuta e Continovata dal Conte Giovannantonio Ciantar*. 1780, Lib.I, Not. X, p.358-360

proceeding to that island to recover their health.³

History of the Cemetery

The Cemetery and Chapels had a tremulous history with some chapels falling in disuse throughout the centuries. By the mid-eighteenth century the Cemetery had fallen in disuse and had been abandoned (Mercieca, 1999: 146). In 1770, Bishop Mgr. Alpheran de Bussan instructed that a boundary wall was to be built around the cemetery, this incorporating the slabs. An inscription, which repeated the traditional 13th century origins of the slabs, was put up to commemorate the event.⁴ The cemetery continued to receive attention and restoration throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century⁵ until 1946 when it started to be cleared and the area was used to build the now-standing Don Bosco Oratory.

Foreign 18th and 19th visitors to the St. Augustine's Cemetery were poorly impressed by what they saw. The French visitor Jean Houel visiting Gozo in 1770 wrote that he "went to see a monument locally called The Bishops of Ancient Times: it is in the Augustinian cemetery at Rabat. Despite the fact that the Gozitans boast of it as a curiosity it scarcely deserves to be mentioned. The Bishops is just an assemblage of ecclesiastical trophies composed of mitres, crosses, stoles and so on, sculpted in bas-relief; they seemed to me allegorical, and perhaps the attributes of some bishop interred here. The bas-reliefs are set into the wall, and I did not find them of particular interest" (Monsarrat & Vella, 1999: 41). The Italian visitor Giuseppe Periuoli Borzesi in 1830 wrote that the "burying ground or *Cimiterio di S. Agostino*, which is worthy of much attention, to inspect the tombstones and their inscriptions" (Borzesi, 1830: 85). The English visitor George Percy Badger in the early nineteenth century transcribed the commemorative inscription put up by Bishop Alpheran and wrote "I presume that the sepulchral stones referred to in the above are those which stand in the wall close by the inscription. They are twenty-eight in number, each bearing some symbolical figure roughly cut on

its surface in *alto-rilievo*. The principal figures are crosses differently shaped, and other ecclesiastical trophies, such as chalices, crosiers, etc. The assertion contained in the inscription, concerning the original design of these stones does not appear to rest upon any substantial evidence. Ciantar himself is very dubious on the subject. It is the current tradition among the inhabitants that they were put up in remembrance of so many African bishops, who died here on their way to one of the general council. This is certainly extravagant enough." (Badger, 1872: 305-306).

The Origin and Function of the Slabs

The true origin and function of the incised slabs remains elusive. The location in a confirmed Christian cemetery supports the commonly held view that these were tombstones used to cover sepulchral chambers. The size of the tombstones now kept in the Don Bosco Oratory vary from 70x118cm to 54x176cm, averaging 60 x 143 cm. The short length measurement of some of the slabs makes whole length burial an unlikely option in that tomb as practised during the medieval period. It is possible that these rather small tombs were meant to contain skeletal remains only. It was common practice during the Holy Wars to boil down



King St. Louis collecting the bones of dead comrades for eventual burial in Christian land. (Manuscript illustration from *Le livres des faits de Monseigneur Saint Louis*. Bibliotheque National de France, Paris)

3. "Ma che far doveano tanti Vescovi e Prelati in quella guerra? Doviano forse celebrare qualche Concilio Proviniale nel campo, in cui seguir dovra la battaglia?... Ne' par verisimile che tanti, e tati personaggi fossero morti in un tempo medesimo, in un' isola tali; ma che di tempo in tempo vi fosse morto qualcheduno di questi personaggi, in parte nazionali, ed in parte forestieri, che si fossero cola' portati inferme, per recuperare la sanita' col beneficio dell' aria". G.A. Ciantar, 1780, p.358-360

4. "Galli hanc Gaulos insulam imperantes Anno Domini CDCCLXX, ne sacra ossa Praesulum, ac virorum illustrium Qui cum S. Ludovico Francorum Rege, Profecti, Ac ab Africa post Bellum Sacrum Heic translata, oblivioni darent Hoc sacrum Coemeterium Erexere, In quo singulis Lapidis Sepolcrales Anaglyphis Distinctos Propriis insigniis decoratos posuere, Ill. ac. Rev. D. Paulus Alpheran de Bussan, Melitae Episcopus Qui hunc dormitionis locum visitavit anno MDC-CLV M. SEPT. die XVI. Ut reliquae ex maximo numero Lapides vetustiores, insignioresq. inventae omnibus pateant Et conserventur, Heic Aere proprio apponi jussit". As reported in: G.P. Borzesi: *The Historical Guide to the Island of Malta and its dependencies*. Government Press, Malta, 1830, p.85-86

5. Note Commemorative Slabs reading: "Can. D. Michael Sammut VI. For. Aamore dei et in veneratione xi fidelium hi quiescentium tum proprio aere tum ex collectis elemosynis novis portis ho oemeterium exornavit plu ribusq instaurationibus pre para vit anno dni MDCCCLVIII" and "Vetus sepulhretum rite instauratum a rerreis cacellis septum stipe collecta cura Michaelis Gonzi Episcopi MCMXXVII."



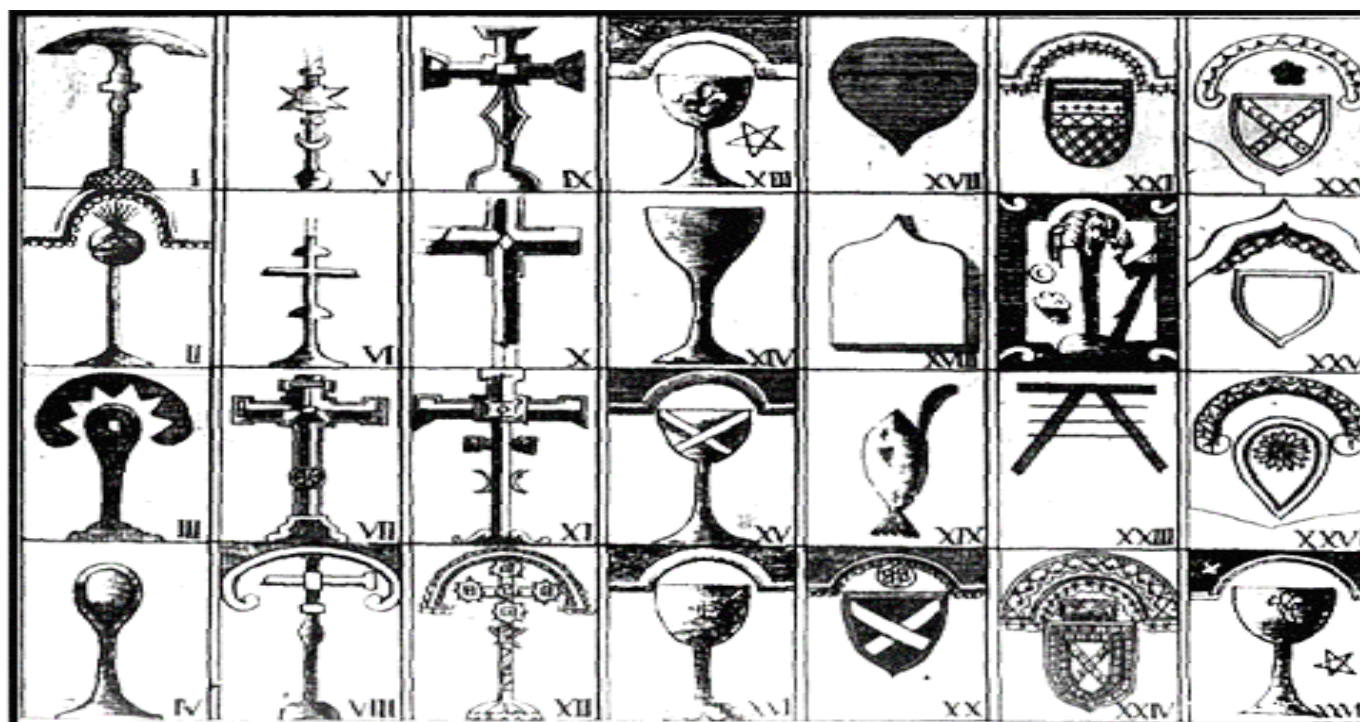
The Death of King Saint Louis (Manuscript illustration from *Grandes Chroniques de France*, xivth century. Condé Museum, Chantilly)

the bodies of distinguished personages dying during the campaign and transport to Christian shores only the skeletal remains and/or the heart of the deceased. This practice was, for example, followed in the case of King Louis IX who died in the Tunisian campaign in 1270. His bones and heart were transported from the battlefield to France and deposited in the Basilica of St. Denis (Paris) where they rested until they were profaned during the 18th century French Revolution. The tombstones held in the Don Bosco Oratory are today in a poor state of preservation. Those kept in the Museum of Archaeology (Rabat, Gozo) are in a better condition. Agius de Soldanis in 1746 described twenty of the slabs, while Ciantar included

a diagrammatic drawing of twenty-eight slabs. The style of the bas-reliefs as depicted and the presumed dating of St. Augustine's Cemetery suggest a medieval age.

The incised patterns bear similarities with other thirteenth century tombstones such as those of Raoul Sarrazin and Guillaume de Vaugrignane in the Musee de Cluny in Paris (inv. Nos. 14252, 18817). Agius de Soldanis had attributed them to the 13th century and grouped these according to what was incised or what he interpreted to have been incised on the slabs:

- Greek Bishop Crosier - one slab measuring 5 feet in length [depicted as fig. I by G.A. Ciantar];
- Maronite Bishop Crosier - five slabs [depicted as fig. II-VI by G.A. Ciantar];
- Cross - four depicting a prelate's cross [G.A. Ciantar depicts five such slabs - fig. VII-XI], one an archbishop's cross [depicted as fig. XII by G.A. Ciantar];
- Chalice - five slabs [depicted as fig. XIII-XVI, XXVIII by G.A. Ciantar];
- Heart - one slab [depicted as fig. XVII by G.A. Ciantar];
- Bishop's Mitre - one slab [depicted as fig. XIX by G.A. Ciantar];
- Armorial bearings - two slabs were noted by Agius de Soldanis, one depicting the armorial bearings of a family, the other the coat-of-arms of a layperson. G.A. Ciantar depicts eight slabs that may depict armorial bearings [fig. XVIII, XX-XXII, XXIV-XXVII].



Medieval Tomb-slabs from St. Augustine's Cemetery

- One design depicted by G.A. Ciantar [fig. XXIII] is difficult to interpret and place within this grouping.

Two near identical slabs (as depicted in Ciantar 1780 fig. XIII, XXVIII) are worthy of particular note since they may help elucidate the origins and dating of the slabs. Both slabs depict a chalice with a fleur-de-lys engraved on it. A cross with equidistant arms is inscribed in the left upper quadrant of the slab, while a pentagram is inscribed in the right lower quadrant.



Tomb-slabs XIII & XXVIII (As depicted by G.A. Ciantar, 1780)

The fleur-de-lys refers to the lily flower and was used in heraldry from the twelfth century onwards being adopted by the Bourbon family. The Bourbon family originated in the 10th century, taking its name from the barony of Bourbonnais in central France. The family was originally of little social or political influence, but became prominent through a series of marriage alliances. This heraldic sign also features on the seal of the French Templar knights Frere Hugues de Rochefort (1204) and Frere Giraud de Chamaret (1234). The depiction of the fleur-de-lys on these two tomb-slabs suggests that these belonged to French personages possibly related to the Bourbon family.



Seal of Frere Hugues de Rochefort [1204]



Seal of Frere Giraud de Chamaret [1234]

The Pentagram and the Knights Templar

The next significant symbol on these tomb-slabs is the pentagram. The pentagram is the simplest star pattern that can be designed with a solitary line. The design was believed to be a powerful guardian against evil and hence it was considered an emblem of protection. The open form of the design is depicted on the two tombstones. This was considered to symbolise preparedness for conflict. Early Christians attributed the pentagram to the Five Wounds of Christ and until

medieval times, the star was a lesser-used Christian symbol. In its heyday, the pentagram was apparently adopted by Knights Templar, a military order of monks formed during the Crusades. Used inverted as depicted in the slabs, with the top point pointing downward, it represents a second or third degree status in the organisation. The interpretation of the pentagram changed during the Inquisitional Period when it was seen to symbolise a Goat's Head or the Devil in the form of Baphomet. At this point in time the pentagram became equated with 'evil' and was called the Witch's Foot. Among other accusations, members of the Order of the Templar Knights were accused of worshipping Baphomet during the persecution of the Templar Order after 1307.

The Knights Templar Order was founded in Jerusalem in 1120 by Hugo de Payens and eight other companions with the purpose of defending the Holy City. The Order followed the rule of St. Benedict according to the Cistercian pattern. Solemn forms of initiations were developed, while the Order was organised into an elaborate hierarchy. After receiving the approval from the Council of Troyes in 1129, the fame of the Order spread throughout Christendom and with an augmentation in its members flourished and grew wealthy and powerful. After Saladin expelled the Order from Jerusalem in 1187, the Templars relocated their main quarters to Paris. By this time, the Order held over 7000 estates, primarily in France and England but also in Portugal, Spain, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Sicily and the Middle East. Its wealth and links established the Order as the banking establishment of the Mediterranean basin having developed a system that transferred money between their perceptories on paper rather than in bullion. Members of the Order held important positions in the courts of various European rulers. Their political mission was to maintain the rights and privileges of the Order, while striving to keep out of local politics. Military brothers of the Order regularly involved themselves in the various Crusades against the Saracens, but were eventually ousted out of the Holy Land with the fall of Acre to the Mamluks in 1291. In 1307 Philip IV of France turned his attention to the Order's wealth and started a wave of persecution against the Templars ordering their arrest. Pope Clement V, unable or unwilling to prevent the persecution, suppressed the Order in 1312 and granted the Templar properties to the Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, eventually after 1530 also of Malta (Lord, 2002).

The presence of the pentagram on the Gozo tomb-slabs sited in a Christian cemetery suggests that the

slabs most likely dated to the period prior to the demonization of the symbol i.e. prior to the early fourteenth century. It is therefore possible that these two tomb-slabs may have belonged to two French Crusaders, possibly Templar knights, who accompanied St. Louis of France on the 1270 crusade in Tunisia. Templar brothers commanded by Master William of Sonnac had accompanied King Louis IX in his first Crusade of 1248-50. No less than 280 Templars were slain in one of the battles characterising this crusade (Wedgwood, 2004: Supp 2016).

The 1270 Crusade

It is highly likely that members of the Order responded to the King's call for the launching of a new Crusade in 1270. King Louis IX of France embarked on his second Crusade in 1270. The French army sailed for Tunis from Sardinia on the 18th July 1270 and arrived off the African coast two days later where they encamped to await the arrival of the King of Sicily. During their sojourn, dysentery or cholera spread among the troops irrespective of rank. On the 3rd August, King Louis himself sickened and died 22 days later. Louis's brother Charles of Anjou, King of Sicily arrived the same day of Louis's death and assumed command of the crusading army. Active operations were begun against the King of Tunis until a truce was signed on the 31st October under the terms of which the Christians obtained many privileges in Tunis. The army embarked for Trapani in Sicily on the 18th November, but just as it was reaching its destination a terrific storm burst and the eighteen ships were scattered, some sank with significant loss of lives, while some (including the ship holding the remains of King Louis) reached Palermo and Trapani (King, 1931: 266-268). Others may have reached nearby Gozo.

Malta's Links with the Templars

If the traditional origins of the St. Augustine's Cemetery tomb-slabs and the interpretation of the designs are correct, these slabs would then represent the only evidence of a Maltese link with the Templar Order. The only other identified mention of the Order in the Maltese medieval documentation is the brief given by Pope Boniface VIII to Cardinal Bishop Gerarduc sent as Apostolic Legate to the Kingdom of Sicily and the neighbouring islands including Malta in July 1299. Among the powers granted to the legate was an authorization to exact contributions or request provision for his officials from any prelate, dignitary or religious including members of the Order of St. John and

the Templars overriding previously granted decree of the Council of Lyons held by Pope Gregory X in 1274 (Aquilina & Fiorini, 2005: 57, 59, 69). The National Library of Malta has in its holdings the Archives of the Order of St. John which include documentation relating to the Templar Order before its suppression (Zammit Gabarretta & Mizzi, 1964: Vol.1 Arch.1-72).

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