

PALACE OF THE GRAND MASTERS IN VALLETTA

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VISITORS TO THE GRAND MASTERS' PALACE

Petra Bianchi

In the spring of 1804, the British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge left England and sailed to the Mediterranean, in the hope of restoring his fragile health. Two days after his arrival in Valletta on 18 May, he visited the English chapel at the Grand Masters' Palace, intending to both hear Mass and pay a visit to the British Civil Commissioner of Malta, Sir Alexander Ball, with the intention of delivering a letter of recommendation to him and perhaps being given some employment during his intended prolonged stay in Malta. During morning service at the Palace, Coleridge was horrified to see a cross painted onto the wall in a small niche, and wondered whether it was a remnant from the period of the Knights or instead a result of "complaisance to Maltese superstitions". In truth, the reason for this crude marking on the wall was that the room that had now been converted into the Anglican chapel, had previously been the kitchen of the Grand Masters of the Knights of St John.

When morning service had ended, Coleridge went upstairs to seek out the Civil Commissioner, who regularly received visitors on Sunday mornings in the grand ceremonial hall. Coleridge first walked through the '*Sala del Maggior Consiglio*' – the state room known as the Hall of the Supreme Council – and admired the series of frescos adorning its walls, painted in the sixteenth century by the Italian painter Matteo Perez d'Aleccio. In between the frescos there were elaborate curtains in rich fabric, over which were hung portraits of knights and crusaders, as well as examples of seventeenth-century art, such as a painting by Spagnoletto and another attributed to Caravaggio. Coleridge was duly impressed.

By the time Coleridge came to Malta, the Palace had been standing for over two hundred years, and was still – as it had always been – the main seat of the rulers of the Maltese Islands; beginning with the Grand Masters of the Knights of St John, followed by the British Civil Commissioners and Governors of the islands, and finally by a succession of Presidents of Malta. Then as

now – today the seat of Malta's Parliament and the Office of the President – distinguished visitors are greeted and hosted in this grand building situated in the heart of Valletta. Looking at the Palace through the eyes of its guests and spectators is one way of discovering a small part of its changing character, of recreating the history, drama, and life of the building.

Stories and anecdotes of guests at the Palace vary according to the period in which they visited. For example, in 1624, a fleet of warships carrying the distinguished Toledan adventurer and poet, Diego Duque de Estrada, sheltered in Malta on its way back from a skirmish with Muslim forces in North African waters. Upon his arrival, the Duke was invited to the Grand Masters' Palace in Valletta to be received by knights and eminent officials of the Order of St John.

This presented a problem. Having just returned from battle, the Duke went through his wardrobe and found that he had no suitable clothes to wear for the occasion. Not wishing to be outdone, he immediately sent for new clothes to be bought for him and the captains on board his ships. The group eventually made its way to the Palace bearing gifts and dressed, as was fitting for a party led by a grand Spanish adventurer, in what must have been a collection of impressive new outfits. The Duke was right to be particular about his clothes. In his autobiography he later described the knights who hosted him as dressed from head to toe in black silk and black capes, and waited upon by a large number of well-dressed pages and servants.

The Grand Masters' Palace was the focus point for a wide variety of activities during the Hospitaller period, when the Grand Masters would divide their time between living and working in Valletta or enjoying the tranquillity of their summer residences elsewhere on the island, such as San Anton Palace in Attard, or Vilhena Palace in Mdina. The square outside the Palace was itself also used for entertainment or processions. During the eighteenth century, for instance, the feast

known as the '*Calendimaggio*' was given great importance each year, with musical recitals performed in the public squares of the city.

The most important performance in honour of the '*Calendimaggio*' customarily took place on the 30th of April in the principal square outside the Grand Masters' Palace. All preparations were seen to by the '*Capitano*' of Valletta, and a large crowd of both the upper classes and the general masses would gather around for the spectacle, clapping and shouting "*evviva*". The Grand Master himself was probably positioned on a balcony of the Palace overlooking the square, from where he would oversee the musical and dramatic performances and recitals going on below. Much of the drama was conducted by poets who belonged to colonies of the Arcadian school of poetry, to which, for example, the celebrated Maltese poets Giovanni Antonio Ciantar and Abate Luigi Rigord were both attached. The Grand Masters themselves were also members of Arcadia, as was of course fitting for princes of their rank, whether they liked poetry or not. At the end of the evening, the Grand Master was presented with a gift of flowers. The following day, the May Tree, or the '*Cuccagna*', was erected in the Palace Square and celebrations and games around the tree would continue throughout the day – the first of May.

One controversial visit during the Hospitaller period was that of the famous and talented charlatan and alchemist known as 'Count Alessandro Cagliostro', more accurately named Giuseppe Balsamo. Cagliostro claimed to be the son of the Portuguese Grand Master Manoel Pinto de Fonseca, and came to Malta sometime around 1762, apparently blown adrift by strong winds on his way from Rhodes to Cairo. Whether Cagliostro was the son of Grand Master Pinto or not, he certainly was persuasive enough to obtain special permission to be dispensed from the obligatory quarantine imposed on passengers originating from harbours in the Levant. He was also given accommodation in the Grand Masters' Palace itself, where he quickly made himself very much at home and busied himself in the Palace laboratory concocting elixirs and potions to assist the Grand Master in his alchemical experiments.

The Palace had hosted another talented resident guest during the sixteenth century – the Italian painter Matteo Perez d'Aleccio, who came to Malta at the request of the French Grand Master Jean Levesque de la Cassière after some trouble with the authorities in Italy. La Cassière commissioned d'Aleccio to paint the frieze of twelve frescos which depict a narrative cycle related to the Great Siege of 1565, ending with the departure of the Turkish army. D'Aleccio also painted other works at several churches around Malta, and left for Rome in 1581 bearing letters of praise and recommendation from

La Cassière for the work that he had carried out on the island.

During the sixteenth century, the Grand Masters' Palace was visited by the German Duke August the Younger of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, who was also taken to see the Grand Master's stables. His visit was followed by that of another German aristocrat, Duke Ludwig von Anhalt-Köthen, who was informed that the incumbent Spanish Grand Master Garcès was not very sociable and preferred to dine alone. Yet the Duke was taken around the Palace and other important sites in Valletta, and noted that the Grand Master had date palms in his garden – which may be a reference to the Grand Master's garden overlooking the harbour of Valletta. The famous traveller George Sandys came to Malta in 1611 and later described the Palace in his travelogue as "a princely structure".

Other visitors include the Italian adventurer Pietro della Valle in 1625, and the Englishman John Ray who visited both the Palace and the Armoury. In 1663, the German Ferdinand Albrecht zu Braunschweig-Lüneburg visited the Palace and Armoury, admired the frescos by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio, and was invited to dinner by Grand Master Cotoner. In 1588, the German scholar Hieronymus Megiser – who compiled the very first printed list of Maltese words translated into German – had visited Valletta and noted that, "Here the Grand Master of the Knights of St. John has his residence and town court. In his beautiful Palace there is a large hall used for gatherings of the knights and officials of the Order. The walls of this hall are decorated with twelve beautiful paintings. The pictures depict in a detailed and realistic manner the siege and eventual retreat of the Turks. Next to the Palace there are the stables and garden of the Grand Master. In the latter there are many interesting objects including beautiful springs and fountains. This seems all the more wonderful when you consider the dry location and climate of the place".¹

How did travel patterns in Europe change over the centuries, and how did reasons for visiting Malta change accordingly? The purpose of travel is often purely individual, but it can safely be assumed that most of the distinguished visitors who came during the period of the knights came because of the presence of the Order – perhaps invited specifically for political or cultural reasons, or due to some personal interest, or simply out of curiosity on the way to or from the Levant. During the eighteenth century, Malta became an outpost stop of the famous 'Grand Tour', undertaken by young European gentlemen of the upper classes as part of their cultural education. During these journeys many fell ill, were attacked by highway robbers on land on their way through Europe or by pirates at sea once reaching the

Mediterranean, and a large percentage were acutely homesick and miserable. The 'Grand Tour' was no easy vacation.

For the braver and sturdier of this class of men, at a time when travelling conditions were still very uncomfortable and often dangerous, Malta was either visited as a final stop before turning back home, or as a port of call on the way further south. Already then Malta offered inns and hotels with friendly and honest enough landlords, together with an adequate standard of hygiene and food, and easily available transport facilities, to make the detour worthwhile. There was also plenty to see, including the Palace, which was an obligatory stop for any touring visitor to view at least from the outside, apart from the more fortunate or important men who were hosted there by the knights. Then as now, a typical travel itinerary for visitors to Malta in the eighteenth century was firmly laid out, and was followed quite rigidly by many. Apart from the Palaces, Auberges and churches of Valletta, the schedule included a coach or donkey ride up to Mdina and Rabat, where those with enough time on their hands would view almost twenty different sites, including the Archbishop's Palace, the church of St Publius, the Seminary, the Carmelite, Augustinian, and Dominican convents, the Armoury, St Peter's monastery, the Curia, and of course St Paul's Grotto.

From the early nineteenth century onwards, visitors naturally often came to Malta for reasons connected to its status as a British Crown Colony. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, came not only for health reasons but also to seek administrative work with the colonial government. Sir Alexander Ball employed him as Under Secretary, and initially Coleridge both lived and worked in the Grand Masters' Palace, occupying a suite of rooms just underneath the Palace observatory. He eventually moved to different rooms in the Treasury building opposite (today the site of the *Casino Maltese*), from where he could watch the frequent military parades which took place in the Palace Square (formerly *Piazza San Giorgio*). The square was used by the British for all their important military ceremonies, and

Coleridge referred to the square as 'the Parade'. Yet even after Coleridge's move to the Treasury, he continued to dine with Sir Alexander Ball at the Palace almost every day, enjoying Ball's fondness for telling stories about his experiences in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and during the blockade of the French in Malta.

One important difference to life at the Palace from this period onwards was that it was now also frequented by women. The Governors' wives must surely have influenced not only the daily running and catering carried out by Palace staff, but also the interior decoration of the building, and then of course there were many dinners and balls with music and dancing. Lady Hester Stanhope, for example, niece of the British Prime Minister William Pitt, was a frequent visitor at the Palace at dinners for fifty or sixty guests during her stay in Malta. The Governors and their wives would, however, always move away from the Grand Masters' Palace and the humid heat of Valletta to San Anton Palace in Attard during the summer months, while many other British residents liked to spend their summers at St. Julian's Bay. Coleridge also spent time at San Anton, living in a room immediately under the tower, from where he could look out at an expanse of countryside and see Mdina in the distance across the fields.

A large number of other famous visitors to Malta during the nineteenth century viewed and admired the Grand Masters' Palace and left a record of it in their letters and diaries, including Benjamin Disraeli, Gustave Flaubert, Hans Christian Andersen, and Sir Walter Scott. This is a pattern which has not ceased; the Grand Masters' Palace today remains a major landmark and tourist attraction of the city of Valletta, and visiting dignitaries are received there by the President of Malta, who uses the building as his office but resides at San Anton Palace in Attard. It still houses Malta's parliament, and has thereby continued to function as Malta's most important and prestigious seat of government from its building during the early period of the knights until the present day.

NOTE

1. "Hier hat der Großmeister des Johanniterordens seine Residenz und stattliche Hofhaltung. In seinem schönen Palast befindet sich ein großer Saal als Versammlungsort der Ritter und Komture des Ordens. Dieser Saal ist an den Wänden mit zwölf schönen Bildern geschmückt. Die Bilder zeigen in detaillierter und realistischer Form die Belagerung und den schließlichen Abzug der Türken. Neben dem Palast befindet sich der Marstall und Garten des Großmeisters. In letzterem befinden sich neben anderen interessanten Dingen schöne Springbrunnen und Fontänen. Bedenkt man die trockene Lage und das Klima des Ortes erscheint dies um so wunderlicher".

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