

MALTESE HISTORY

LO5 ghij - The Decline of the Order of St John in the 18th Century



Year 9

Third Edition – 2022

For History SEC 2025



Curriculum Centre Annex

LO5g - The rule of the Order over the Maltese



1. The Order's government over the Maltese

The Hospitaller Order was an aristocratic religious congregation bound by vows and governed by a **Grand Master** elected for life. The number of Knights varied between 250 and 350, divided into five languages: French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and German. The Order had numerous landed estates in Catholic Europe. These estates provided an annual income of money that supported the Order's headquarters in Malta. The Grand Master was subject to the Statutes and to the **Chapter-General** of the Order. The latter had been convoked only once between 1631 and 1776.

A 17th century engraving depicting the Great Council of the Order presided by the Grand Master.

In the day-to-day administration of the islands, the Grand Master was helped by a group of Senior Knights called **Grand Crosses**. They met in the **Great Council** to discuss matters of state and issue decrees. The Maltese nobles and professional classes were represented in the **università** of Mdina, Valletta and Gozo (a sort of local council). There they elected the **Captain of the Rod** (or *Hakem*) and four **Jurats** (Magistrates). On the other hand, the Grand Masters ruled over the Maltese as a despotic prince. The Maltese had no say in the government. But in the final resort his powers were limited by the Pope who was the supreme head of the Order.

2. Malta's economy in the 18th century

The Order kept a small navy, an arsenal and a workforce of some 2,000 Muslim slaves. Commercially and politically 18th century Malta depended upon French commerce in the Mediterranean. The bulk of merchant ships entering harbour was French. In the 1780s, the Order's finance minister **Bosredon de Ransijat**, had managed to restore the Order's finances, after the heavy debts incurred during Grand Master Pinto's (1741-1773) long reign.

Malta's economy flourished under the greater part of the Order's rule. The Order fed and defended a large and growing population. Most food items were imported, money poured into the Treasury from the Order's properties in Europe; many Maltese found employment with the Order; grain was imported from Sicily free of duty (*tratte*); agriculture and cotton production and export flourished, Maltese merchants were engaged in commerce or in the *Corso*. The Order offered excellent dockyard and quarantine facilities, low tariffs and newly-build warehouses (known as Pinto Wharf) for transit trade.

Two 18th century paintings depicting village life in Malta at that time.



The astonishing rise in population (60,000 in 1700; 100,000 in 1798) forced the Order to expand food production during the 17th century. Rocky land was turned into fields and terraces for cultivation, marshes drained, and irrigation was regulated. In the 18th century the cultivation and export of **cotton** brought for the first time more money into the island than the Order's foreign estates. Raw cotton was spun at home as a cottage industry by women and children. Maltese merchants sold it abroad, in Marseilles and Barcelona.

However, the **standard of living** of the common people is difficult to gauge. Eye-witness accounts of foreign visitors observed that the country people lived on a frugal diet, walked barefoot, and sometimes prostituted their daughters. Valletta swarmed with street beggars. As

elsewhere in the Mediterranean, the Maltese peasants lived close to the bone and were hard-hit at moments of crisis when the poor had to eat barley-bread and carobs. Yet the population continued to rise at a remarkable rate and there was no systematic emigration. In times of prosperity, the island contained numerous foreigners made up of Knights, mercenary soldiers, sailors, galley-convicts, slaves and merchants. In the 18th century Valletta became a **cosmopolitan** (international) city, an administrative and a cultural centre and the **Three Cities** (or Cottonera) were its industrial suburbs. The Maltese middle and upper classes living in the harbour area had reached a high degree of sophistication on a European scale.

The countryside was less affluent, cut off from the urbanised harbour area and less directly dependent on the Knights. It was the town people who were mostly directly employed by the Order. Wealth in both town and village could be observed in private palaces and houses, in the quality and quantity of their furniture, their gold, silver and artisan products, in richly decorated parish churches and chapels. Judging by the standards of the 18th century Mediterranean world, the material life of the Maltese was well provided for by the Order.



A banquet of a Maltese noble family in the 18th century.

3. Problems which the Order faced in Malta in the 18th century

By the 18th century the Order's rule over the Maltese became increasingly centralised and at times despotic as in other European countries. The common people who were mostly illiterate, were submissive to the Order. The nobles kept friendly relations with the Knights and quite often nobles occupied the higher offices in the government and the Church. The **Bishop** and the **Inquisitor** were never Maltese. In 1749, a revolt by the Muslim slaves in Malta caused panic within the Order when it was discovered that the aim of the revolt was to assassinate the Grand Master (Pinto) and take over the island with outside help from the Berbers of Tunis.

In 1775, with debts standing high, poor harvests in Sicily and a high price of grain, a small, discontented, poorly organised group from the lower clergy organised a revolt. The rebel leaders were led by a priest named **Dun Gaetano Mannarino**. They expected a general insurrection by the people. But despite their initial success in taking Fort St Elmo, no one rose to support them. This event became known as the **Revolt of the Priests**, and it was the only instance when an open armed revolt against the Knights in Malta took place.

By the late 18th century many of the literate Maltese became tired of the Knights. They knew of what was happening in Revolutionary France where men were claiming new rights and freedoms. These groups of people hoped that a French take over of the islands would bring these changes to Malta too. But the government of the Order under Grand Master De Rohan was despotic in a benevolent way and in many ways still very efficient. There were grievances and complaints, but life was not intolerable. One great drawback for the Order was that, despite the Age of Enlightenment, it was unable to change its character to meet the new demands of a changing world. By this time the Order had become an **anachronistic** (outdated) institution. It had lost much of its original crusading ideal. The Ottoman Turks and the Barbary States were also in decline and the 'holy war' against Islam had nearly been forgotten. Even Grand Master de Rohan, who ruled as an enlightened despot, ruled out appointing Maltese nobles as Knights and excluded the Maltese from all decisions taken by the Order's government.

4. Developments in 18th century Europe that impacted upon the Order

The greater problems for the Order lay outside the island and beyond its control. The *philosophes* and the ideas of the **French Revolution** certainly had some effects on the middle and upper classes of the Maltese and the French Knights in particular. But in the end, it was the confiscation of the Order's estates in France in 1792 that marked a final, decisive, and irrevocable disaster. It was only a matter of time that the fall of the **Ancien Regime** in France and in other parts of Europe occupied by the French would bring about the downfall of the Order as well.

LO5 g - The rule of the Order over the Maltese

1. Fill in the matrix table below about the Order's rule over the Maltese. Answer from points number 1 and 2.

	Positive aspects of the Order's rule	Negative aspects of the Order's rule
(a)		
(b)		
(c)		
(d)		

(8)

2. How was the standard of living of the Maltese of the Grand Harbour area different from that of the rural villages under the Knights? Under from point number 2. Describe **two** differences.

(4)

3. Mention **three** local problems (that took place in Malta) which the Order faced in the 18th century. Under from point number 3.

(4)

4. Briefly describe **one** external problem which the Order faced in the last decade of its rule in Malta. Answer from point number 4.

(4)

(Total: 20 marks)

LO5h - The Conspiracy of the Slaves in 1749

1. The organisation of the plot

Mustafa Pasha was a captive slave brought to Malta during one of the Order's corsairing expedition. As an Ottoman prince, he was treated with great cordiality. He was permitted to live in a house near *Porta Reale*. Grandmaster Pinto (on the right) even received a formal request from the King of France for his release. During a meeting of the Muslim community of slaves, the plot against the Order was planned in greater detail.



An 18th century painting depicting the slave prisons in Valletta.

As it was the custom, the feast of St Peter and St Paul on 29th June (*I-Imnarja*) was celebrated by the Order by a lavish banquet at the Grand Master's Palace. After lunch, the palace was practically left in the hands of the guards and the many slaves employed in the kitchens and stables. The plan was as follows: a small group of slaves were to stab the Grandmaster in his afternoon sleep. About 100 palace slaves would then rush upstairs and overpower the guards. The slaves would then free the other slaves in the Slave Prisons. Another group were to assault Fort St Elmo. The **Beys** (Governors) of Tunis, Tripoli and Algiers would then come to their aid. With foreign help, Valletta and the whole island would then fall in the hands of the Barbary States.

2. The discovery of the plot and its consequences

An unforeseen event however wrecked the whole plan at the very last moment. **Giuseppe Cohen**, a Jew residing in Malta, had a coffee shop in Valletta. Three of the conspirators got involved in a quarrel in his coffee shop and one of them disclosed some details about the plot. Later that night Cohen reported what he had heard to the Grandmaster. The three plotters were arrested and tortured on the rack. The leaders of the plot were discovered but since Mustafa Pasha was protected by the King of France, he was only arrested. Thirty eight leaders of the plot were tortured, tried, and executed. The prisoners were carried in an open mule-driven cart to the execution place at Floriana (near Hotel Phoenicia) and in the middle of Grand Harbour. The lifeless corpses were then quartered and beheaded. Eight slaves, who were not directly involved in the plot, were branded on their forehead with the letter R (for *ribelli*) and sent on the galleys for life. In the end, the plotters were left to act on their own, since no help was sent from the Berbers of North Africa.

The Grandmaster reported the plot to the Order's ambassadors in Europe. Cohen and his family were given an annual grant of 300 *scudi* and a furnished house in Merchants' Street. The *università* of Valletta granted him another 200 *scudi* annually. Soon after the plot, the laws that restricted the movement of slaves were tightened. All slaves including those freed by their masters, were to return to the slave prison for the night. No slaves could go out of the city-gates, board on a boat, travel to the countryside or approach the coast unless accompanied by his master. All fortifications were forbidden to slaves, to carry arms in public and to keep keys of government stores. The captains of the Order's ships could no longer employ slaves as domestic servants on board their vessel. Slaves were not allowed to gather in streets, in public places and in private houses. They could gather in their mosque but for religious functions only.



The public execution of the slaves who participated in the conspiracy.

Source: *The Life and Times of Grandmaster Pinto*, Carmel Testa, Malta 1989, pp. 120-127.

LO5i - The Revolt of the Priests in 1775

1. The Causes

The agitation subsided with the election of Grand Master Ximenes in 1773. He gave assurances to the people that he would reduce the cost of living. But faced with an empty Treasury he rushed reforms by an unwise austerity policy. He issued an edict forbidding the hunting of hares (wild rabbits) to give these creatures enough time to breed and thus ensure cheap meat for the people. This measure however caused protests by the farmers and by some of the clergy. The Bishop, Mgr. Pellerano, complained that the increase in the number of hares was damages the crops cultivated in his estates. So the Grandmaster granted the Bishop permission to hunt for hares on his estates. But then some clergymen availed themselves of this permission as well. Ximenes protested with the bishop against this practice. In the end the hunting edict was repealed in July 1774. But the quarrel between the Order and the clergy continued. A group of clergymen from the parishes presented a petition to the Bishop. They demanded that the clergy be given immunity from similar future decrees.



*From left to right: the protagonists during the Rising of the Priests:
Grand Master Ximenes
Bishop Pellerano
Dun Gaetan Mannarino
Grand Master de Rohan*

Ximenes became more unpopular when he took drastic steps to reduce government expenditure. He dismissed all foreign professors from the University and reduced the number of courses. He abolished some government offices and reduced the salary of others. He increased the price of grain, causing more discontent and misery among those people having bread as their staple diet. When the Bishop was called back to Italy, this event was interpreted by some of the clergy as a triumph for the Grand Master, resulting in more discontent among both the clergy and the people.

2. The revolt and its consequences

This discontent was to cause an armed revolt by a group of priests. The night of 8th September was chosen when the Knights celebrated the anniversary of the Great Siege. The leaders of the plot counted on the support of the people, but on the agreed day only a few turned up. But Dun **Gaetan Mannarino** decided to carry on with the plans. The rebels included priests, clerics, and laymen. One group of thirteen assailed Fort St Elmo. Here the guards were taken by surprise and quickly unarmed. Another group captured St James Cavalier. The flag of the Order was lowered down and the banner of St Paul was hoisted instead.

Grand Master Ximenes immediately called the **Council of State** to deal with the rising. From time to time, the rebels fired shots from St Elmo. The Council sent the Vicar General to see what the demands of the rebels were. But at one point the Council decided to recapture the forts from the rebels. Fort St Elmo was fell after a few shots were fired by the rebels. The rebels then dispersed or surrendered. Of the 28 clergymen who were involved in the uprising, 10 did not turn up on the appointed day, 6 escaped and 12 resisted until their arrest, including their leader Mannarino.

The rebels were imprisoned in kept in Fort St Elmo. The rebels (7 clergymen and 5 laymen) were put on trial in October at the Castellania Court. The trial continued after the Ximenes' death in November. The new Grand Master, **Emmanuel de Rohan** was more disposed towards clemency. The leaders of the uprising, Gaetan Mannarino and the Cleric Giuseppe Dimech, were sentenced to life imprisonment in Fort St Angelo. The other rebels who were less involved in the uprising were exiled or set free. The new Grand Master set in a series of reforms to improve the economic situation. A new Code of Laws was issued in 1782; the *Regimento di Malta* was set up made of Maltese militiamen; and the Order's finances were put on a sound basis, so much so that by 1788 the Order's annual budget registered a surplus after many years of deficits.

Source: *The Rising of the Priests*, Philip Callus, Malta, 1961.

LO5 hi – The Conspiracy of the Slaves and the Uprising of the Priests

1. The Conspiracy of the Slaves took place in (1729, 1739, 1749, 1779) when (Perellos, Pinto, Ximenes, de Rohan) was the reigning Grand Master. Underline one correct answer from each bracket. (2)

2. What was the aim of the slaves who took part in the conspiracy?

 (2)
3. How was this conspiracy discovered?

 (2)
4. Two of these punishments were inflicted to the leaders of the slave plotters. Underline the correct answers. (*exile, life imprisonment, torture, execution, rowing on the galleys*). (2)
5. How did the failure of this conspiracy effect the other slaves that were not involved in it?

 (2)
6. The Rising of the Priest took place in (1722, 1741, 1773, 1776) when (de Vilhena, Pinto, Ximenes, de Rohan) was the reigning Grand Master. Underline one correct answer from each bracket. (2)
7. Briefly explain **two** causes that contributed to the uprising.

 (4)
8. Name the leader of the uprising. _____ (1)
9. Mention **one** immediate and **two** long-term consequences of this uprising.

 (3)

(Total: 20 marks)

LO5j - The Order of St John and the French Revolution

1. The impact of the French Revolution on the Order of St John

Some of the Maltese middle and upper classes and some of the Knights were acquainted with some of the writings of the Enlightenment thinkers and the principles of the French Revolution (**Liberty, Equality** and **Fraternity**). From the early phase of the French Revolution, most of the French Knights left France and joined the **émigrés** (exiled nobles) against the Revolution.



*From left to right:
Grand Master Hompesch;
Czar Paul I of Russia dressed as a
Hospitaller Knight;
Napoleon Bonaparte at the time he was
appointed General in 1796.*

When the French Revolution broke out in July 1789, relations between the French Government and the Order did not change very much. So long as the revolution followed a moderate course and France remained a constitutional monarchy, the Order adopted a neutral position like other European states. But when from 1791 extremist factions started taking control of the revolution, relations with the Order became gradually more unfriendly, as shown in the table below:

September 1789	The property of the Church in France was confiscated but the property of the Order was spared.
June 1791	The Order contributed a large sum of money from its revenues in France to help the royal family escape to Belgium.
July 1792	The National Assembly withdrew the citizenship of the French Knights.
August 1792	The Order condemned the attack upon the Palace of the Tuileries and the deposition of the King. The Order's ambassador in Paris escaped to Savoy.
September 1792	The Assembly abolished the monarchy and established France as a republic. It confiscated the Order's properties in France and sold them by auction.
November 1792	the National Assembly held a debate on the invasion of Malta.
January 1793	The execution of King Louis XVI caused a 'deep and painful commotion' in Malta and in Europe. The Order joined the European Coalition against the Revolution. The Grand Master prohibited French ships to hoist the <i>tricolor</i> when in Grand Harbour, refused to acknowledge the French republican government and to accept its ambassador.

2. The final crisis – the French invasion of Malta

The end of the **Reign of Terror** (1794), its replacement by a moderate republican government (The Directory) and the French military victories in Italy in 1796–1797 made the Maltese 'patriots' and most of the French Knights more sympathetic to the Revolution. Faced with imminent bankruptcy, the Order turned to the Russian Czar Paul I for support. When the Order concluded a treaty of friendship and assistance with Russia in 1797, the French Government issued orders to General **Napoleon Bonaparte** to take over Malta from the Order on his way to Egypt.

LO5j - The Order of St John and the French Revolution

1. How did the principles of the French Revolution reach Malta?

_____ (2)

2. Name the **two** Grand Masters of the Order that had to deal with the French Revolution?

_____ (2)

3. (a) What was the connection between the Order and Czar Paul I of Russia?

_____ (2)

(b) Why was this connection displeasing to the French Revolutionary Government?

_____ (2)

(c) How did the French Government decide to solve the issue concerning the Order in Malta in 1798?

_____ (2)

4. Use the matrix table in page ---- to answer the following questions.

(a) Give the date of the measure taken by the French Revolutionary government that had no negative effect on the Order of St John. _____ (1)

(b) Give the date of the event which showed that the Order was secretly supporting the King against the revolution. _____ (1)

(c) Mention the event that made the Order condemn for the first time the French Revolution? _____ (2)

(d) How did the declaration of France as a republic effect the Order in France? _____ (2)

5. Briefly explain how the execution of the King worsen relations between the Order and the French Revolutionary government.

_____ (4)

(Total: 20 marks)

LO5ghij - The Decline of the Order

Source Question

Carefully read the following source and then answer all the questions.

'The first founders of our Sacred Religion judged it indispensable to call frequently a Chapter General to maintain in vigour our laws and to censure, and recall to their duty, those who had not followed him. Just reasons prevented recent Grand Masters from following so useful a practice from which came our good conditions...

His Eminence Ximenes, seeing the abuses which had been introduced in many branches of our administration and principally in that religious discipline to which we are bound, [after] representations made to him by the Venerable Chamber, moved to call the Chapter General.

I have no other merit than in following the good intention of my predecessor. With great satisfaction, I see realised the desire of our Brethren [Knights] who in general have endeavoured for many years to put into practice our wise rules. The sentiments of these true Religious allow me to hope that with the same zeal they will be able to put aside personal interest and seek only the benefit and success of our Sacred Religion and the security of this fortress.

By means of our rules and our statutes we will remove any abuses which may have been introduced into our administration, and in reminding our Brethren [Knights] of the three virtues – poverty, chastity, and obedience – which they have promised God, Holy Church and our great protector St John the Baptist, they would follow, we will reach the happy end set before us in this Chapter General.'

Grand Master de Rohan addressing the Chapter General of the Order in 1776. Adapted from Michael Galea, *Grand Master Emanuel de Rohan (1775-1797)*.

1. To what the following terms in the source refer to?
 - (a) Sacred Religion (line 1) (1)
 - (b) Chapter General (line 1) (1)
 - (d) Fortress (line 12) (1)
 - (e) Holy Church (line 15) (1)
2. Who was De Rohan's immediate predecessor? (1)
3. Which internal problem did he encounter when he was Grand Master? (2)
4. Mention **two** ways by which the Knights were not following the Order's rules by de Rohan's time. (2)
5. Mention **two** reforms which Grand Master de Rohan enacted during his rule. (2)
6.
 - (a) Why did the 'first founders of the Sacred Religion' stipulate that a Chapter General had to be summoned frequently? (2)
 - (b) The previous time that a Chapter General of the Order was summoned was in (1530, 1566, 1631, 1698). Underline the correct answer. (1)
 - (c) Suggest a reason why it was not summoned for so many years before 1776? (2)
 - (d) Suggest a reason why the newly elected Grand Master de Rohan decided to convoke the Chapter General in 1776. (2)
7. Is the above extract a primary or a secondary source? State why. (2)

(Total: 20 marks)

LO5ghij - The Decline of the Order in the 18th century

Carefully read these essay titles and answer ONE using the following word count guide (350–400 words for MQF 2-3 and 200–250 for MQF 1-2).

PAPER MQF 2-3

1. 'The successes of the Order of St John in Malta during the 17th century seemed to slowly fade away during the last few decades of the 18th century, leading to a rapid decline.' Discuss. (20)
2. Between 1749 and 1775 the Order of St John had to face two major local crises. (10)
What were these crises and what was the Order's reaction to them? (10)
3. Discuss how the outbreak and the subsequent events of the French Revolution hastened the end of the Order of St John in Malta. (20)

PAPER MQF 1-2

1. (a) Why did the Order of St John decline during the second half of the 18th century? (10)
(b) How did this decline affect (i) the Order itself and (ii) the Maltese populace? (10)
2. Describe what happened during these following events:
(a) the Conspiracy of the Slaves in 1749 (10)
(b) the Rising of the Priests in 1775 (10)
3. The Order and the French Revolution.
(a) How did French Revolution effect the Order of St John? (6)
(b) How did the Order react to that Revolution? (6)
(c) Mention four measures which the French Revolutionary government take against the Order? (8)