Crisis and revival The convent of the Order of Malta during the Catholic Reformation (16th–17th centuries)

Anne Brogini

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The Military Orders

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17 Crisis and revival

The convent of the Order of Malta during the Catholic Reformation (16th–17th centuries)

Anne Brogini

On the first of January 1523, chased by the fleet of Suleiman the Magnificent, the Convent of the Knights Hospitaller permanently left the island of Rhodes, where it had been established since *c*.1309. Bereft of its overseas territories, the Order first turned to its spiritual leader, the pope, for assistance, but it was eventually Emperor Charles V who offered them the Maltese islands as a fiefdom. In 1530, the Convent settled for the first time of its history on the island of Malta, in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, far to the west of its earlier base on Rhodes. The geographical proximity of the Convent to a European continent torn apart by the Protestant Reformation partly explains the various religious transformations that the Order was to go through in the following years. In 1540, the English Langue was removed by King Henry VIII and subsequently most of the English Hospitallers left Malta.[1]

The Order was influenced by new ideas at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and many brethren became sympathetic to humanist and Protestant views; there were sixteen trials on charges of heresy in the Convent between 1530 and 1559 (ten in 1530–1539, five in 1540–1549 and one in 1550–1559).[2] Because of this, many conflicts within the English Langue arose after 1534, such as duels and frequent fights between the brethren.[3] The eventual disappearance of the English Langue did not stop the religious disturbances in the Convent. Protestantism was spreading throughout Maltese society and in the Convent, affecting the few Germans on Malta but having a much stronger impact on the French who represented the majority there.

The Protestant Reformation led to the loss of many Hospitaller territories in England and in Germany, as well as the end of the English Langue. However, as the majority of Hospitaller brethren came from Southern Europe, Protestantism was not a great threat to the Order.[4] Instead, the Protestant Reformation reinforced the Mediterranean identity of the Order of Malta: the South European Langues (Italy, Castile, Aragon, Provence) became predominant, and this irreversible southern domination was further strengthened by the application of the Catholic Reformation in the Convent. Thus, from the end of the Council of Trento in 1563 and until the middle of the seventeenth century, the Catholic Reformation endeavoured to reassert the five monastic engagements (obedience, chastity, poverty, crusade, hospitality) and a new religious foundation of a Hospitaller feminine monastery in Malta.

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The reminder of monastic vows

The desire for a Catholic reformation came from both the brethren and the Convent authorities. The brethren submitted their proposal for reformation to the Council of Trento through 'rolles' (proposals intended to request modifications in the organization of the Convent). The 'rolle' of Grand Master Jean de la Cassière of 1578 illustrated the ambitions of the Council of Trento: it was a type of program that aimed at conforming the Order to the clerical model redefined by the Council.[5] La Cassière denounced the sins and abuses of the Hospitallers, considered as the cause for the collapse of the Order. He condemned the 'libidinous and avaricious behaviour' of the brothers and the regular disobedience of the brethren, suggesting that they return to residing in a *Collachium* separated from the world by walls, as was the case on Rhodes.[6] Indeed, the Council of Trento called to mind the necessity of monastic enclosure and cancelled the *licentia extra standi*, which allowed the possibility for the religious to temporarily live outside the Convent, for example in order to study.[7] La Cassière also wanted to better educate the brothers, proposing to provide each novice entering the Order with a volume of rules and statutes.[8] He also believed that the chaplains should live in an exemplary manner, by residing in a community house, having perfect knowledge of the Holy Bible, and speaking Latin fluently. Influenced by the reformation led by St Charles Borromeo in Italy during the 1560s, La Cassière perfectly embodied the decisions taken by the Council of Trento, such as the promotion of priests and their role as teachers, and the morals of the clergy considered to be responsible for souls (*cura animarum*).[9]

The spread of the Catholic Reformation was also the result of decisions taken by the authorities. Between 1560 and 1650, 83 rules were voted by the Grand Masters and the Council to reform the Hospitallers' life and morals.[10] In 1554 and in 1577,

Table 17.1 Rules to remember Hospitallers' vows (1540–1649)

	Obedience	*Chastity*	*Poverty*	*Hospitality*	*Crusade* (corso)	*TOTAL*
1540–1549	2					**2**
1550–1559	6					**6**
1560–1569	11		1			**12**
1570–1579	9		2	1		**12**
1580–1589	12		2		1	**15**
1590–1599	5		1	5		**11**
1600–1609	1			1	1	**3**
1610–1619				1		**1**
1620–1629	2		1	1		**4**
1630–1639	5	3	3	3	2	**16**
1640–1649	2	2	1	4		**9**
TOTAL	**55**	**5**	**11**	**16**	**4**	**91**

Malta Cod. 85–116, *passim*.

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two rules were imposed to discipline the behaviour of brethren at mealtime, with the obligation to eat together in silence, quietly and modestly, and to show respect and obedience to the *Pilier* (chief of the Langue).[11] Several other rules were also observed in 1570, 1588, 1596 and 1622, making it strictly prohibited for brethren to be out of dormitories and cells during the night, under penalty of imprisonment.[12] Many other rules made attendance at Mass mandatory, thus they prohibited walks outside of the church[13] and chatting or playing cards, dice or ball inside the church during Mass.[14]

Bearing arms raised the issue of monastic and noble double identity for the Knights of Malta. There was a repression of violence through prohibition of certain weapons: between 1551 and 1645, thirteen rules were voted to ban acts of aggression against seculars or between brothers, and also to limit the right to have weapons, in accordance with the Council of Trento which outlawed duels.[15] The numerous rules and sentences resulted in an important decrease of violence and in the number of duels after the 1570s (see Figure 17.1).

Anything contrary to the vow of poverty was sentenced without remission. Thus all forms of excess clothing were banned, such as the wearing of clothes of a colour other than black or dark,[16] or of clothes made from a fabric other than simple cotton (e.g. velvet or silk, or displaying gold, silver or silken threads).[17] There were many prohibitions pertaining to excesses in the consumption of food or drink. For example, in 1559, some brethren were condemned for stealing wine to organize a secret banquet in their Auberge.[18] The reason was not only individual appetite, but rather the special desire of nobles to feast together, organize banquets and to receive and maintain supporters.[19] Similarly, the Convent prohibited gambling, in particular if it promoted betting. There was a multiplication of sentences in 1551, 1567 and 1587, and in general an increasing number of rules against fun and games involving betting, cards, dice and balls can be observed after the 1570s.[20]

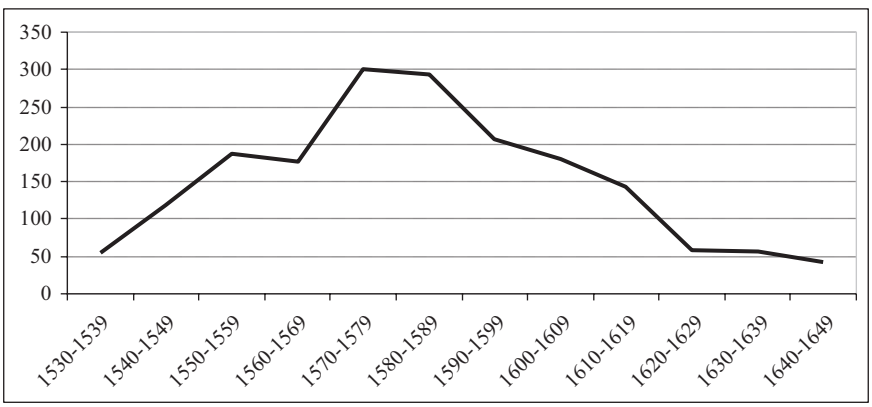

Figure 17.1 The evolution of violence in the Convent (1530–1650)
Malta Cod. 85–116, *passim*.

The unexpected consequences of the Catholic Reformation

This radicalization of monastic life had unexpected consequences, namely the growing discontent of the brethren and the progressive acceptance by the Convent of a few breaches to the Rule. The new austerity caused a significant increase in the number of desertions and refusals to come to the Convent.[21] From 1580 onwards more and more Hospitallers escaped, abandoning their galley when they put in. In 1586 two Italian knights secretly left their galley at Messina,[22] and over the winter from 1618–1619, twelve French brothers (nine brothers in arms and three knights) deserted the Convent at sea in small groups at every call.[23] As well as deserting, the Hospitallers categorically refused to appear at the Convent once they had returned to Europe: in 1607, twenty-two Italian noblemen abandoned convent life by refusing to present themselves at Malta, and in 1637,[24] 3 French knights refused also to go to Malta once they had returned to their kingdom.[25] There was an inverse relationship between the evolution of the curve of desertions and that of violence: between 1560 and 1610, one can notice two important increases because of a strong aversion for the increasing strictness of convent life during the Catholic Reformation (see Figure 17.2).

Likewise, the number of convictions for 'bad morals' increased (see Figure 17.3). This term referred to several things, including mingling with unsavoury people (e.g. thieves and murderers) and disrespect for the vow of chastity and anything related to money (e.g. theft, fraud, betting and debt). There was a sharp increase of convictions between 1560 and 1590 as a result of the Catholic Reformation which punished the brothers more severely. This trend continued throughout the seventeenth century.

From the end of the sixteenth century, the Hospitallers adopted a more comfortable way of life different from the one they had before; this phenomenon reflected

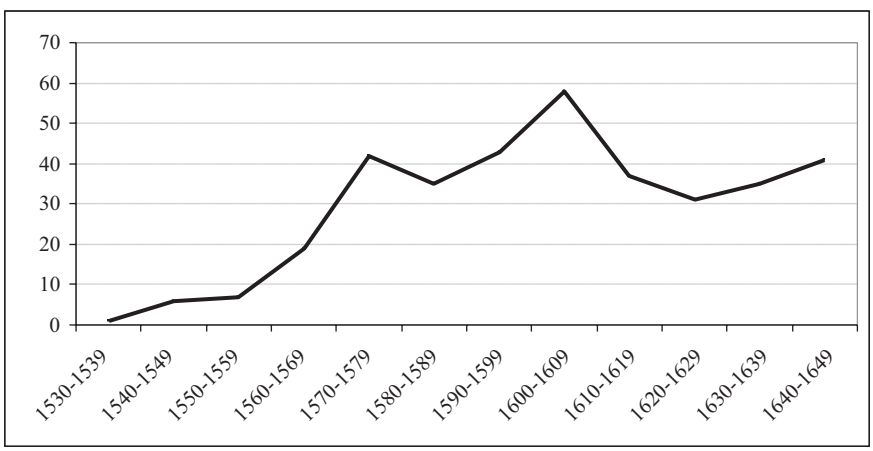

Figure 17.2 The evolution of defections (1530–1650)
Malta Cod. 85–116, *passim*.

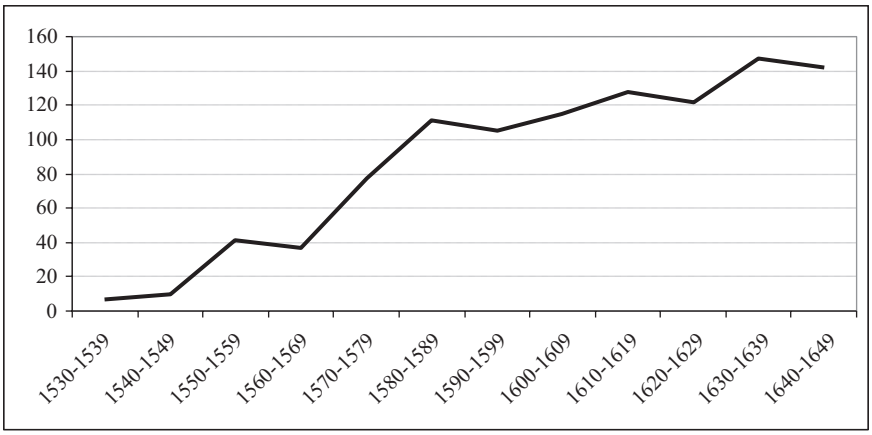

Figure 17.3 The evolution of 'bad morals' (1530–1650)
Malta Cod. 85–116, *passim*.

the change of the European nobility at the same time.[26] The knights began to live in private mansions, construct villas in Valletta and live beyond their financial means.[27] Meanwhile, there was less respect for the vow of chastity. In 1631, the prior of Messina proposed that all women in the city should keep their faces uncovered so that the brethren could immediately distinguish between honest women and prostitutes, saying that 'if they could not be chaste, they should at least be careful'.[28] Indeed, at that time, as elsewhere in Europe, syphilis was spreading.[29] It was rife in the Malta harbour and so many Hospitaller brothers were infected that in 1596 a special room was built in the *Sacra Infirmaria*, to treat all Hospitallers and lay persons who were sick from syphilis.[30]

The return of the Hospitaller sisters overseas

Most military orders accepted women and this was especially the case for the Hospital, probably because of its initial vocation of hospitality.[31] But after the departure of the Hospital from the Holy Land in 1291, women disappeared from the Convent overseas: in Cyprus and Rhodes, for example, it is possible to detect the presence of only a few sisters or maids.[32] Hospitaller women were consequently restricted to Continental Europe, in convents which were all founded between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. There was a spatial distribution between gender and religious duties: whereas women were confined to convents in Europe, men were present both in Europe and overseas conducting war and giving hospitality.

The Catholic Reformation represented a major change with the reappearance overseas of Hospitaller women. In the 1580s, the Grand Master Hugues de Loubens Verdalle (1582–1595) founded the Convent of St Ursula in Valletta, and at the end of his government in 1595, Sicilian nuns from the convent of Santa

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Maria in Aracœli moved from Syracuse to Malta.[33] Two years later, in 1597, the pope placed the monastery under the jurisdiction of the Order, and under the full authority of the Grand Master who could set the rule of the Convent in accordance with the decisions of the Council of Trento and the statutes of the Order.[34] The nuns of St Ursula depended on the prior of the conventual church and could dress like male Hospitallers, wearing a white half-cross on their left upper arm, except the prioress, who could wear a full cross.[35] They were dedicated to prayer and silence.[36] Gradually, the nuns of the convent originally from Sicily came from Maltese and European aristocracy. The Order accepted only rich and noble virgins who were not illegitimate children and did not have any Jewish or Muslim blood/ancestry.[37] The convent accepted very young girls, but they had to be sixteen years old in order to take their vows after a year of novitiate, in accordance with the Council of Trent.[38]

St Ursula was the first Hospitaller female convent to be founded overseas since the thirteenth century. The Order had thus returned in the seventeenth century to a medieval religious tradition. Like their sisters in Europe, the nuns led a contemplative life, but they also prayed for the success of the *corso*. As a consequence, the monastery received a share of corsair spoils. That way, sisters and brethren both defended the Catholic religion: the brothers with weapons and the sisters with prayer. Like men, Hospitaller women lived for the Crusade and by the Crusade, because their monastery was partly funded by privateering.[39]

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Convent of the Hospitallers faced the very rapid spread of the Protestant Reformation, it experienced many conflicts and it became an actor and a model for the Catholic Reformation in the Mediterranean. After this religious revival, it grew stronger, becoming a place where the violence of warriors had disappeared, except in the *corso* against Muslims. The Convent became a place of vibrant Catholicism, which reinforced its position with regard to the king of Spain and the pope. From the middle of the seventeenth century, the Order of Malta became both a religious and warrior model, with the Hospitallers being considered as perfect monks, perfect crusaders and the essence of European Catholic nobility.

Notes

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2 Malta, Cod. 86–90, *passim*: Malta, Cod. 86, f. 51r (13 December 1536); Malta, Cod. 89, f. 25r (5 November 1554); ibid., f. 127r (12 October 1557), readmission into the Order of Frà George Dudlay, who had become knight on 3 July 1545 (Malta, Cod. 87, f. 61r) and who had become protestant shortly after; ibid. 90, f. 22r (3 July 1588), readmission into the Order of an English knight who had become protestant during the 1550s.
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36 Ibid., f. 6v.
37 Ibid., ff. 8r–v.
38 Ibid., f. 3r.
39 Malta, Cod. 101, ff. 165r–v (17 June 1605, "*le monache verginelle di Sant'Orsola del habito nostro hoggi di sono in questa città Valletta, quali di continuo orano per la vittoria contro de Infedeli*").

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