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*Cultural components of the Grand Masters’
power in early modern Malta
(sixteenth - eighteenth centuries)*

THE CREATION OF THE NEW CITY of Valletta and the installation of the Order in this town in 1571 coincided with the end of the military conflicts between Spanish and Ottoman empires (1577) and with the development of the *corso*, which constituted the economic power of the Maltese island. In the island’s new context, the power of the Grand Masters of the Order of St John greatly increased. They wanted to become political leaders and princes of Malta, and thus showed their power by new representations and a daily cultural life in the Order and in the port (courtship rituals, images, art).

The gradual strengthening of the Grand Masters’ authority

The will to “monarchise” the figure of the Grand Master, which became a reality in the eighteenth century,¹ emerged from the second part of the sixteenth century, with Grand Masters Jean de la Valette (1557-1568) and Jean de La Cassière (1572-1581). It became the subject of many discussions in the Convent, and it was the object of symbolic events that reflected a political power in gestation. As a historical subject, the Grand Masters’ correspondence reflects the political demands of the Grand Masters, from the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Like everywhere

1 Blondy 2002, pp. 29-30.

else in Europe at this time, and even before in Italy,² the Grand Masters' correspondence entered into a "political age": it became an object of power and a reflection of their growing authority. The use of correspondence by Princes or by religious leaders can be studied in different ways. First, as an example of the expression of their *for privé*,³ then, it can also be analysed as a cultural community united by common ideas and practices (the famous *République des lettres*). It can also be seen as a reflection of a political power seeking to control its area of influence, and lastly, it can be studied as a useful element in the construction (around the sovereign) of a political space for discussions, opinions and commitments.⁴ Signatures show that the letters can express the submission of their author, or his will of authority and his claim to public power: the letters serve as a tool to master political influence that thus is partly conquered by pen.

Then, from the second half of the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries, the Grand Masters' letters, and mainly their signature, show their power claims. In the 1550s, the Grand Master Claude de la Sengle (1553-1557) signed his letters to the Cardinals of the Curia with humility, proof of his status as a religious leader - *Il Maestro de l'Hospital de Hierusalem*⁵ - followed by his signature. In the 1560s, this signature was also that of Jean de La Valette (1557-1568); and if the Grand Master proudly added his name, he called himself "brother": *Il Maestro de l'Hospital de Hierusalem, frère Jean de La Valette*.⁶

Everything changed after 1565. From 1570, Pietro del Monte (1568-1572) no longer mentioned the Hospital, and added the adjective "Grand" to the word "Master", signing with these words: *Il Gran Maestro, frà Pietro del Monte*.⁷ This habit quickly took on, and by 1572, the Grand Master Jean de La Cassière had removed the title of "brother" - *Il Gran Maestro La Cassière Jean Levesque*⁸ - followed by his signature. In the mid 1570s, the Grand Masters did not need to quote the Hospital or their status as brother to be recognised and respected by the European courts. Having become more powerful after the victory of the Great Siege in 1565, they

2 Taddei 2009, pp. 92-98.

3 Bardet - Ruggiu 2014. The "for privé" refers to private cultural practices and applies to all writing in which the writer speaks in the first person and leaves a trace of his experience, his daily and personal opinions.

4 Boutier, Landi and Rouchon 2009, pp. 10-12 and pp. 17-18.

5 BAV, Barb. Lat. 5699, f. 111r, 29 October 1555; f. 112r, 31 October 1555; f. 117r, 20 November 1551.

6 BAV, Barb. Lat. 5699, f. 129r, 18 May 1563.

7 BAV, Barb. Lat. 5699, f. 140r, 21 August 1570.

8 BAV, Barb. Lat. 5699, f. 146r, 6 February 1572.

expressed a new haughtiness: they were “the” Grand Masters, known by everyone and forgotten by none; and the proud capital letters of the title “Grand Master” proved that it was from then on useless to specify of which order they were the masters. Signatures did not change very much in the seventeenth century: in 1615, Alof de Wignacourt (1601-1622) signed as *le Grand Maître, de Wignacourt*,⁹ and in 1624, the Grand Master Antoine de Paule (1623-1636), writing to the French ambassador in Rome, signed with the classic expression *le Grand Maître de Paule*.¹⁰

As well as the signature, the Grand Master's titles showed his status and his political claims. Except for the Pope, who always called him *Dilecti Fili* between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the clergymen gave him the title of “Your Eminence” or “Monsignor”, and the European Princes, great nobles and ambassadors, called him “Excellency” or “Highness”. The Grand Duke of Tuscany definitively associated the Grand Master to the island, giving him the title of “Grand Master of Malta” (*Eminentissimo et Reverendissimo Signore Grand Maestro di Malta*).¹¹ The assignation of the title of “Highness” to the Grand Masters probably appeared at the beginning of the seventeenth century. In 1626, a French nobleman, who begged the Antoine de Paule to accept his son as a page, gave him the title of “Highness”.¹² In 1631, even the Knights used this title in the Council of the Order, such as Frà Durro who asked “Your Highness to support the vow of hospitality in the Convent”.¹³ Finally, in 1641, the Cardinal Richelieu himself called the Grand Master “Highness”.¹⁴

This political title offended several Knights, and in 1631, the Bailli of Saint-Euphemia publicly refused it and asked the General Chapter to use the title of “Eminence” instead, which Pope Urban VIII also defended.¹⁵ However, this demand was not met, and from the middle of

9 BNF, ms Français 23 054, *Recueil de lettres et de pièces originales plus particulièrement relatives à l'histoire d'Espagne, de France, d'Italie et de l'Ordre de Malte, de 1589 à 1626*, ff. 358r-v, 7 December 1615; ff. 359r-v.

10 BNF, ms Français 23 617, *Recueil de minutes des lettres écrites par Philippe comte de Béthune, ambassadeur à Rome (1624-1626)*, f. 308r, 6 May 1624.

11 ADBR, 56 H 83, *L'institution de l'Ordre de Saint-Jean de Jérusalem* (beginning of the 18th century, anonymous, unpaginated).

12 AOM, 1200, *Lettres de la cour écrites aux Éminentissimes grands-maître de Paule, Lascaris et Redin, depuis 1626 jusqu'en 1659*, f. 8r, 2 December 1626 (“Je me suis voulu promettre que Votre Altesse ne me dénierait la supplication que je lui fais de vouloir recevoir un mien fils naturel page près sa personne...”).

13 AOM, 310, *Ruoli presentati ai Capitoli Generali*, 1612-31, f. 344v, 12 May 1631.

14 AOM, 1200, *Lettres de la cour de France écrites aux Éminentissimes Grands Maîtres de Paule, Lascaris et Redin depuis 1626 jusqu'en 1659*, f. 64r, 13 November 1641 (“Je sais qu'il y va de l'intérêt et du contentement de Votre Altesse...”).

15 AOM, 310, f. 333r, 12 May 1631.

the seventeenth century, most of the Knights, clergymen and European Princes accepted and used the titles of “Highness” or “Eminentissimo”.¹⁶ The question of the Grand Master’s title was accompanied by the privilege given to them by the Pope in 1581: that is, to sit a crown on top of their own coat of arms linked to the Order’s arms.¹⁷ It was the beginning of a demand of a princely power, which was illustrated in the eighteenth century by the Grand Master Emmanuel Pinto de Fonseca (1741-1773): he succeeded in drawing a closed crown on his coat of arms, and in obtaining to be officially called “Grand Maître de la Sanctissime et Éminentissime Religion, Prince souverain de Malte, Gozo et Tripoli”,¹⁸ who had the title of Highness.¹⁹

Grand Masters’ portraits - a political art

The crown was not the only way to assert the Grand Masters’ power: the portraits represented a staging of power developed from Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt (1601-1622). Thanks to many representations of Princes in armour, the art of portraits symbolized a political reflection by the princely power at the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century in Europe.²⁰ The armour gave the Prince’s body a new majesty and brought it closer to the body of Christ. The Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt ordered a full-length portrait by Caravaggio, that illustrated the triple political, military and monastic identity of his power.

Historians and Art Historians wonder about a second Caravaggio painting that would represent the Grand Master: some think that the portrait represented Alof de Wignacourt,²¹ others that the portrait represented a Knight named Frà Antonio Martelli, member of the Council of the Order.²² The Grand Master’s full-length portrait showed the Prince dressed in a shining armour, with his body in motion and his face without any physical defect. The two paintings reflect the quiet

16 Vertot 1753, p. 316 (About the Master, General Chapter, 1631).

17 ADBR, 56 H 83.

18 Blondy 2002, p. 31.

19 ADBR, 56 H 83.

20 Grell and Michel 1988; Ghermani 2009.

21 Gregori 1974, pp. 594-603.

22 Gash 1997, pp. 158-59; Marini 1999, p. 145; Sciberras 2011, p. 213.

strength and the imposing dignity of a Master who wants to show his undisputed authority.

The beautiful portrait bust exalts the religious dimension of the Knight, dressed in black with a white collar and an imposing cross which draws our attention. Pure white, the cross focuses and reflects the light of the painting, and symbolises the divine light. Indeed as a Knight of Christ, he is holding a rosary in his right hand, and his meditative expression symbolises the relationship between God and the Knight of Christ. In his left hand, he firmly holds the handle of the sword, illustrating the brother's warrior role.

Paintings of the Grand Master Aloff de Wignacourt (perhaps Frà Martelli ?), Caravaggio (1607-1608)

The full-length portrait is exclusively military: wearing a brilliant armour, the Grand Master is ready to go to battle. Proudly standing, he is holding the military command baton with both hands, and seems ready to order his Knights to follow him. From the 1560s, the armour representation constituted a break with the art of the Renaissance dominated by portraits of Princes wearing a coat. While the armour lost its protective function on the battlefield and the role of chivalry decreased, armour was reinvested by European nobility, nostalgic of a medieval chivalric ideal. Armour became a collector's item decorated with artistic patterns, mimicking clothes, and covered with ancient or Christian allegories. Exhibited at major political events, an armour was the principal ceremonial attire; in all paintings of the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, it was the Prince's only dress, protecting his physical body and embodying the political body.²³ Near the Grand Master, a young page brings the Knights' uniform - red with a white cross - and the helmet with a red and white plume. The religious dimension is not absent: the Grand Master looks up at Heaven, in communion with God before going to war. The painting shows us an ecclesiastical Prince, and his three identities of monk, warrior and political leader.

23 Ghermani 2006, pp. 11-12.

Ceremonial and etiquette

During the Early Modern period, the Grand Master's power underwent the same evolution as that of the Spanish or the French Monarchy's: political life was subjected to rituals accepted by nobility that recognised the supremacy of the sovereign, of his court and of his favourites.²⁴ In return, the nobles were guaranteed a high social position and their proximity to the Prince. So, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Grand Masters established a ritual of precedence that was inseparable from nobility, and which established and reflected their own power. This ceremonial placed the Grand Master in the centre of everything and everyone, such as a Pope in his Curia.²⁵

The Knights "Grands-Croix" (highest dignity in the Order), and especially the "Piliers" (Pillars, chiefs of the "Langues") who had more precedence over the other "Grand-Croix", could not kiss the Grand Master's hand, could sit in front of him and could keep their hats on. Each Pillar was assisted by a "Lieutenant" who was of inferior rank and had to remain standing in the presence of the Grand Master, but who could eat at the Grand Master's table for some feasts, such as Christmas and Easter.²⁶ All other members of the Order, even the priests, had to kiss the Grand Master's hand when he gave them an audience.²⁷ When the Grand Master went for a walk, he would choose several "Grand-Croix" to join him. Usually, he invited two "Grand-Croix" into his personal coach, but from the middle of the eighteenth century, the ceremonial added some horse-drawn carriages and several Knights, chosen among the Grand Master's courtiers, could be invited to join the Grand Master's walk.²⁸

The ritual of the Grand Masters' funeral revealed their political power. The Master of the Order of Malta was quite similar to a Pope: childless, he faced the political vacuum inherent to his physical disappearance and the obligation to glorify his function to ensure its permanence.²⁹ From the Renaissance onwards, Popes abandoned the medieval funeral which exalted the body of the Church rather than the

24 Cosandey 2009, p. 41.

25 Visceglia 1997, pp. 134-39 Ago 1997, pp. 230-31.

26 ADBR, 56 H 83.

27 Blondy 2011, p. 147.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 194-95.

29 Caffiero 1997, pp. 281-84.

body of the Pope: they demanded to be buried in a white and gold dress, in order to keep alive the memory of their person at the same time as the memory of the Church. They also established the visit of the tombstones of precedent Popes, which included the new Pope in a kind of lineage.³⁰ In 1634, the Order set a solemn and symbolic organisation of the Grand Masters' funeral,³¹ which looked like a Papal funeral.

When the Grand Master felt his death approaching, he appointed a Lieutenant to lead the Order during his agony. The Prior of the Church of the Convent gave him the extreme unction, and the biggest bell rang to call the brothers to prayer. After the Grand Master's death, the Council elected a new Lieutenant and broke the Grand Master's seal, to show the end of his political authority. The funeral ceremony would start: the body was eviscerated and the entrails were deposited close to those of his predecessors', in the Church of Our Lady of Victory, in Valletta. The body was embalmed, clothed in the black coat with the white cross, with a sword at his side and was exposed all day in the Grand Master's apartment draped with black for the occasion, decorated with the coat of arms of the deceased and the story of all his past actions. The Grand Master's body was laid on a bed covered in black velvet and placed high on a dais with six steps. In each corner, four Knights were seated on a stool, carrying a banner with the arms of the Order and that of the Grand Master. Four pages stood next to the body - two by the head and two at his feet - holding a black fan. Torches remained lit all around the dais. The deceased's arms were also hung on the front door of the Grand Master's Palace and on the front door of the Convent Church, and all the brothers could pray before them; the day of the Grand Master's death, all Knights would attend the Mass.³²

The day after his death, the whole Convent would appear before the Palace to pay a last homage to his body, and then it was taken to the Convent Church. After the Mass, the Lieutenant would go around the body and the "Maître d'Hôtel" would shout three times before the crowd: "Our Master is dead!". After the first cry, the "Maître d'Hôtel" would break his mace - symbol of his office - throwing it at the foot of the coffin; at the second cry, the "Cavalerizze" would break his spurs; at the

30 Buttay 2003, pp. 67-80.

31 ADBR, 56 H 83, non folioté.

32 ADBR, 56 H 83.

third cry, the Receiver would throw his purse onto the coffin. These three officers, the most important among the Grand Master's courtiers, thus showed the vacancy of their office, which depended only on the Master and which lasted as long as the Grand Master lived. After the funeral, the body was placed in the Chapel of the Grand Masters, and the Council of the Order would ask the 'Langues' to give a list of Knights eligible to become Grand Master.³³

Throughout the Early Modern period, the Grand Masters' political power became a kind of princely power. The Grand Masters became sponsors who attracted artists to their service; they ranked their court and their entourage, imposing an etiquette based on social value; they developed a new political and economical authority on an island which had undergone a very important growth, thanks to *corso* since the late sixteenth century. However, the Knights' vassalage to the Kings of Spain since 1530 prevented all Grand Masters' political claims to the Government of Malta; in the same way, the Order's pretensions in political autonomy were always prevented by European Princes, who regarded the Order of Malta only as a social promotion for their noble favourites. When the Grand Masters resisted and asserted their political autonomy, the Princes threatened the Order for depriving it of its "commanderies". And if the European Princes accepted the Grand Masters' political power over Malta, they refused to acknowledge their independents as head of State outside Malta, and they constantly reminded them of their vassalage, their dependence on temporal powers and their monastic identity.

33 ADBR, 56 H 83.

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*CULTURAL COMPONENTS OF THE GRAND MASTERS'
POWER IN EARLY MODERN MALTA*



Fig. 1: Caravaggio, *Portrait of the Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt (perhaps Frà Martelli ?)*, 1607-08



Fig. 2: Caravaggio, *Portrait of the Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt*, 1607-08