

THE PERSONAL ARCHIVES OF GRAND MASTER HOMPESCH

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My intention in this short communication is threefold, namely to discuss the existence, extent and location of the Hompesch papers, to make some detached comments by way of evaluating their importance and thirdly to provide a summary description of the papers according to their present arrangement.

I feel the subject is of particular significance in view of the bicentenary of that eventful period of Maltese history (1798-1800) which witnessed the termination of the rule of the Order of St. John in Malta, experienced the French occupation and the subsequent Maltese insurrection against their new overlords and saw the beginning of British administration. Much has been written on the subject and the documentation is scattered in many archives across Europe, including of course, Malta. However, very limited use has been to date made of the Hompesch papers, even though a few researchers have occasionally referred to them.

Personally I may say that my interest in tracing these papers was provoked by a recent article on Grand Master Hompesch written by Carmel Bonavia.¹ In that article it was stated that Prof. Chrestien, Grand Master Hompesch's physician, took care of all documents in the Grand Master's possession and sent them to the Pope. Hompesch, it is stated in the article, was known to hold those documents close to his heart and wished to save them for posterity.² Bonavia quotes Oliviers de Lavigerie in this regard.³ Lavigerie, however, erroneously states that the Hompesch papers were donated to Pope Pius IX by Havier Bourguenod-Chrestien, the nephew of the Grand

1 Carmel Bonavia's article was first featured in *The Times* [Malta]. An expanded version, entitled 'Hompesch il Gran Mastro li raġat ismu ma' Haż-Żabbar: Tifkiriet Storici f'ghelug il-190 sena minn mewtu' was published in *Lehen is-Santwarju Madonna tal-Grazzja, Żabbar*, 78 (Malta, 1995), 15-29.

2 Bonavia, 25.

3 Oliviers de Lavigerie, Baron de, *L'Ordre de Malte depuis la Revolution Française* (Paris, 1889), 115.

Master's physician and placed in the Vatican library. This was, in fact, not the case since the papers were actually donated, in July 1850, to the Grand Magistracy of the Order and not to the Pope by Bourguenod-Chestien. Indeed on 25 July 1850 the latter was reimbursed the expenses incurred for his voyage to Rome and decorated with the Cross of the Order as a Donat of Devotion. All this is confirmed by three letters written by Bailiff Era Filippo de Colloredo, Lieutenant of the Magistracy (1845-64), to the bishop of Montpellier and to Mgr. Fallon in Rome.⁴

These papers today form the first section of the Central Archives of the Order in Via Condotti in Rome. They occupy two whole units, that is about thirty to forty feet of shelving. I had the opportunity to have a brief look at them and consult their inventory. I have utilised the latter for the following brief description of the collection.

The anonymous inventory, running into 113 folios, is entitled *Catalogo Dettagliato di tutte le carte appartenenti alio Spoglio del Gran Maestro Hompesch contenute in 21 Buste*. The inventory itself is located in G. Busta No. 13. The archive is divided into 24 sections (*classi*) and comprise over 746 files, each file ranging from a single document to a whole bundle of papers. In essence, this means that the 746 files are equivalent to much more than 746 documents. To give some examples, file 707 contains a collection of letters of Hompesch written in Trieste in 1798. Files 675 to 682 consist of secret correspondence of the Grand Master for the years 1798 to 1805 respectively. At the end of some of the sections, a note added in the inventory indicates that they contain other undescribed material deemed to be of lesser importance. Thus, the material of the *Spoglio Hompesch* is very extensive, with all the important items being briefly described in the inventory.

The *Spoglio Hompesch* is divided into two parts, namely *Corrispondenza Passiva* (Letters Received), containing over 466 files and *Corrispondenza Attiva* (Letters Sent), containing over 310 files. Under the title *Corrispondenza*, however, the compiler has also included a number of documents and reports among which, for example, is the original of the *Convenzione* agreed upon between Napoleon and the Order for the latter's cession of the Maltese Islands. The inventory is in turn followed by an appendix which lists about 68 files which had at one time been held by the lieutenant grand master but which were eventually returned and located in their appropriate sections.

⁴ Letters dated 6 and 23 July 1850 and 24 April 1850 respectively.

Evaluation

The proper assessment of these documents I shall leave to specialised scholars. I am, however, in a position to make some comments as to their background and historical value. Essentially, the intention of Hompesch in treasuring these papers and indeed the spirit behind the way in which they have been organised suggests an attempt to make a case for the innocence of Grand Master Hompesch against the accusation that he had betrayed the Order, indeed that he himself was the one betrayed. A number of letters deal with the alleged document of Bali de Tigné accusing Hompesch as being a traitor, and particularly with Tigné's formal denial that he had authored that document. File 157, dated 13 December 1800, contains correspondence received by the Archbishop of Orvieto regarding Tigné's assertion of the Grand Master's innocence, while file 150, dated 24 January 1801 contains similar material received by Cardinal Borgia. File 322, dated 3 November 1801, contains Bali de Belmont's remark regarding what was described as [la] *perfida condotta di cavalieri che si servirono del name di lui* [Hompesch]. File 331 then comprises a report by a French knight regarding the death of Bali de Tigné two days after the latter's declaration of innocence. File 429 contains a request by the nephew of the Grand Master to cite in the lawcourts from the work entitled *The Revolutionary Plutarch*, since he intended to defend the reputation of the Grand Master and prove the latter's innocence.

The material contained in the Hompesch archive does not include any memoirs or diaries, but only correspondence and documents. Moreover, most of the material is probably already known about, being available in the original or in copy format in other archives. As a compact corpus of material covering the period 1798 to 1805, however, the archive has its own intrinsic value. What is more it contains the original autograph version of a vast correspondence received by the Grand Master from various sovereigns, cardinals, ministers, diplomats and other persons of note. File 185, dated 20 June 1798 thus contains an autograph letter from Horatio Nelson assuring Hompesch that he was soon to defeat the French. A presently unquantifiable amount of material is definitely unknown. The latter documentation comprises several eyewitness accounts by members of the Order describing the events of 1798 and the situation in Malta immediately following the French takeover.⁵ A considerable amount

⁵ Egs. files 312, dated 9 January 1799, *Besa di Malta*, by Gaetani; 332, dated 26 October 1798, by knight Riccard; 334, dated 5 September 1798, by knight Firrau; 335; 344, by knight del Pozzo; 366, by knight d'Osasco; 371, *Cattivi trattamenti sofferti dai maltesi, condotta scandalosa di alcuni giacobini maltesi*; 378/9, Caruana-Dingli; 383, report by knight Perring regarding events in Malta; 410, the brothers Burò against Bali Tomasi, the Grand Master's agent.



Portrait of Grand Master Von Hompesch

of material, while being of lesser importance for Maltese history, deals with the person and problems of the Grand Master. Examples of this include documentation regarding the Grand Master's health, his financial affairs and well-wishing letters. Other material records movements of personalities, such as the pope's visit to France for the coronation of Napoleon and Madame Letizia's visit to Rome. Several letters deal with the Order's property in Germany, Spain, Portugal and Provence, while other documents discuss Hompesch's position and whether he was to abdicate or not. Moreover, the archive also includes material which was in the Grand Master's possession, namely his correspondence as ambassador under Grand Masters Pinto and de Rohan, the execution of papal briefs and older documentation, including some pertaining to Grand Master La Cassière's deposition in 1581. Published works belonging to the Grand Master and included in the archive comprise works by Caravita, Gamgemi, with the latter's work dedicated to the Grand Master himself, as well as editions of the Order's Statutes.

Conclusion

While some use of the material in the Hompesch archive has been utilised by a number of historians, restricted facilities for the consultation of the documentation held at *Via Condotti* has up until recently made familiarisation with the material difficult. The collection certainly merits greater attention as may further be confirmed by an examination of the list of contents of the catalogue to the collection (Appendix, below).

APPENDIX

Contents of Catalogue describing the Hompesch Archive

Indice della Corrispondenza Attiva e Passiva di Sua Altezza Ema. il Gr: Maestro d'Hompech [sic]

| | | |
|-----------|--|-------------|
| Classe I | Corrispondenza passiva = Questa classe contiene molti documenti riguardanti l'invasione francese dell'isola di Malta, della sortita dell'Ordine, sulla cospirazione, su li traditori, sulli Cavalieri, sul Gr. Maestro, e su tutto quanto accade dopo la presa di quell'isola, scritti da alcuni cavalieri in sostegno dell'Ordine, da poter servire all'istoria di quell'epoca. | Foglio 1 |
| Classe II | Molte scritture su quanto successe e si fece nel Priorato Russo dopo l'abbandono di Malta = Paolo I Imperatore eletto Gran Maestro = Permesso ai sudditi russi di fondare Commende = Diversi Decreti del Consiglio in S. Pietroburgo, &. | 4 |

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| Classe III | Autografi della pensione accordata dal Generale Bonaparte a S.A. Ema. Il Gran Maestro. | 5 |
| Classe IV | Lettere di Sommi Pontefici, Sovrani, Emi. Cardinali, Generali e Ministri. | 6 |
| Classe V | Lettere di Vescovi e Prelati. | 16 |
| Classe VI | Lettere dei Ministri e Rappresentanti dell'Ordine in varie Corti. | 18 |
| Classe VII | Lettere dei Gran Priori e Bali dell'Ordine. | 37v |
| Classe VIII | Lettere dei Cavalieri e Particolari che servono all'istoria dell'Ordine. Lettere della famiglia d'Hompech [sic]. | 42 |
| Classe IX | Conclusioni ed atti di varie Assemblee e Priorati riguardanti l'interna | 53v |
| Classe X | Un fascicolo di lettere, conti ed atti capitolari dei Priorati di Alemagna scritti in lingua tedesca. | 55v |
| Classe XI | Lettere dei Gran Priori, Bali e Cavalieri delle lingue di Spagna e Portogallo coi rispettivi Atti e conteggi e decisioni di quei Priorati scritte in spagnolo. | 56 |
| Classe XII | Lettere dei Religiosi e Particolari la maggior parte di complimento, di offerta di servigi e di rammarichi. | 56 |
| Classe XIII | Apertura del Convento Gerosolimitano in Trieste, Allocuzione del Gran Maestro ed altri Atti. | 56v |
| Classe XIV | Lettere di alcuni creditori del Gr. Maestro che insistono per esser pagati. Diversi inventari di biancherie ed argenti. Altre carte di affari particolari. | 58 |
| Classe XV | Istituzione del Priorato Russo ed invio fatto in S. Pietroburgo del Bali Litta come Ambasciatore Straordinario presso S.M.I. Paolo I. | 58v |

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|--------------|--|-----|
| | Corrispondenza Attiva Di S.A. Ema. Il Gr. Maestro Con diversi Sovrani, Emi. Cardinali, Ministri, Generali, Religiosi, Vescovi e Particolari | |
| Classe XVI | Lettere scritte a diversi Sovrani. | 62 |
| Classe XVII | Lettere scritte a diversi Cardinali. | 70 |
| Classe XVIII | Lettere scritte a diversi Ministri e Generali. | 88 |
| Classe XIX | Lettere scritte a persone incaricate da S.A. Ema. A rappresentarlo in varie Corti. | 101 |
| Classe XX | Un registro delle lettere scritte ad alti personaggi, Ministri, Generali, Religiosi e particolari. | 102 |
| Classe XXI | La maggior parte di quanto contiene la Classe 21 fa parte dell'istoria di quei tempi. | 103 |
| Classe XXII | Gran Maestro Pinto, alcune esecuzioni di Brevi ed altre carte. | 104 |
| Classe XXIII | Corrispondenza del Barone Bali d'Hompech [sic], Ministro Cesareo presso il Gran Maestro in Malta. | 105 |
| Classe XXIV | Corrispondenza dell'Abate Boyer con Sua Altezza il Principe De Kaunitz. In questa Classe 24 vi si contiene altra corrispondenza del Ball Colloredo e del Ball de Schönau, altri libri e manoscritti. | 107 |

N.B. Nel foglio 109 vi è la nota di tutte le carte che stavano presso Sua Eccellenza il V. Sig. Luogotenente ed ora formano un aggiunta al presente inventario.

Le carte sono state notate e descritte secondo la classificazione a cui appartenevano e poste nei fascicoli delle rispettive Classi.