THE ARMOURY OF VALLETTA
AND A LETTER FROM SIR GUY LAKING
by Edward Sammut, LL.D.

Fra Pietro dei Cocchi del Monte San Savino, Seventh Grand Master of the Sovereign Military Order of St. John to hold sway over the Maltese Islands, was a man who coupled swiftness with judiciousness of action and was in many ways the direct antithesis of his predecessor, Jehan de la Valette, Hero of the Great Siege, of whom in his old age it was said "lungo di corpo così è lungo all'eseguire e alle risoluzioni!"

The outlines of the new city of Valletta had hardly been traced when Del Monte took over the reigns of government three years after the Siege; but by 1576 the ramparts were fast nearing completion and, although there was still much to be done, the Grand Master decided it was high time the residence of the Order was transferred from the Borgo di Castello to the new City. For his own residence, he took over a large house newly built in the centre of the town by his nephew, Fra Eustachio del Monte which, as enlarged and enriched through the centuries, was to be the official residence of the Grand Masters until the expulsion of the Order from Malta in 1798.

The Palace of the Grand Masters is a building which, except for its size, one might easily walk past half a dozen times without in the least imagining the inestimable treasures to be found within. Not the least of these treasures is the Armoury of the Knights.

Although, as such collections go, the Valletta Armoury is not remarkable either as regards the number or the antiquity of the specimens it contains, it is probably unique in that, among the 5,700 pieces it houses, there is not a single forgery; and all of them have actually been used for the purpose for which they were intended. Moreover, as a record of
the Armourer's art during the long period of transition between the middle of the 16th and the beginning of the 18th century, and as a reflection of the activities and way of life of the glorious Order of Chivalry who brought it together, it is sufficiently comprehensive to rank among the most precious treasures bequeathed by the Knights.

For all practical purposes, the Armoury collections may be said to date from 1531, when King Henry VIII sent a gift of Artillery as a contribution towards the defence of Malta. It will be recalled that the Knights had been expelled from Rhodes in 1522, and it is highly improbable that, during the subsequent years of wandering, they were able to retain more than a few side arms and items of equipment.

During the following centuries, the fortunes of the Armoury varied with the times; and, on several occasions, it came very near to complete dispersal. Fortunately, something always intervened at the last moment to save it for posterity. The Statutes of the Order contained stringent rules for the care and maintenance of the Armoury and its contents; and, as early as the year 1555, Grand Master Claude de la Sengle decreed that all arms and armour included in the estate of a deceased Knight should be deposited in the Armoury, the key of which was kept by the Commandant of Artillery (1).

It was inevitable that, besides suffering from the ravages of war, the Armoury should also feel the effects of “progress”, even in those days. A major blow was dealt in 1763 when, on the instructions of the Venerable Treasury, the Chevalier de Saint Tropez, Commandant of Artillery, was ordered to overhaul and repair the contents of the Armoury and to clear it of all old pieces (2). One shudders to think of what must have been lost as a result of this action.

Shortly after the advent of British Rule, the Armoury was emptied of its contents and was filled with “modern” weapons, including several thousand muskets, pistols and boarding-pikes, which remained there until removed by the Governor, Sir William Reid, in 1855. A couple of years later, the British Government decided that the best specimens could best be preserved in England and, with that in view, Sir Charles Robinson was sent to Malta to make the selection. Fortunately, he was delayed on the way and shortly afterwards received fresh orders which took him to Rome, and the Armoury was saved (3).

The fact that the Armoury survives in its present condition is due in no small measure to Sir Gaspard le Marchand (1838-64) who set to work to recover the collections from the lumber rooms in which they had lain for many years, and rearranged them as best he knew in the state-rooms and corridors of the Palace. Unfortunately, far from providing any scientific record the arrangements were, to say the least, haphazard and helped to perpetuate a number of utterly fantastic appellations which were the stock-in-trade of various illiterate guides and were repeated by several writers who should have known better.

At the turn of the century Lord Francis Grenfell (4), the Governor of Malta, rightly considered that, as presented, the Armoury was more confusing than helpful to students and to the general public; he therefore decided that it should be properly classified and catalogued, and rearranged to the best possible advantage. Luckily, his choice for the purpose fell on the person who was most eminently qualified to carry out the work and, in the year 1900, Mr. (later Sir) Guy Francis Laking, M.V.O., F.S.A., was engaged.

(3) LAKING, Malta catalogue, pp. x-vi.
(4) LIEUTENANT-GENERAL (LATER FIELD-MARSHAL) THE RIGHT HON. LORD FRANCIS GRENFELL OF KILVEY G.C.B., K.C.M.G., Governor of Malta from 1898 to 1903. A distinguished soldier and statesman, he was also a keen antiquarian and connoisseur. He inspired the late Sir Tem Zammit to institute the National Museum of Valletta, towards which he donated a large and varied collection of Egyptian and other antiques.

Though not yet thirty, Sir Guy held the ancient office of Keeper of the King's Armoury in the Royal Household. The only son of Sir Francis, the first Baronet, Physician to the Prince of Wales, he joined the staff of Christie's as a very young man and remained till the end of his life. When he died at the early age of 44, his reputation as a great judge of armour was firmly established. Although he himself was too modest to claim to be an expert, his opinion on mediaeval and renaissance works of art, as well as on furniture, porcelain and tapestry, was widely sought. His Malta catalogue was preceded by a catalogue of the arms and armour in the Wallace Collection, written at the age of 22, which is considered a milestone on the road of research into the subject. The following year he published his catalogue of the Armoury of Windsor Castle, then came numerous articles in the leading English art reviews and, finally, his masterpiece, the five magnificent volumes of "A Record of European Arms and Armour through Seven Centuries", which, unfortunately, he did not live to see completed (5).

Sir Guy spent some time in Malta where, with characteristic thoroughness, before undertaking his task he carried out considerable research into the Archives of the Order of St. John, and other public and private records. When he had completed his survey, he wrote a letter to Lord Grenfell, outlining the guiding principles he had followed in arranging the Palace Armoury and in preparing the Catalogue. This letter is of such great interest, not only because of its contents but also as a reflection of the character of the man who wrote it, that it deserves to be published in full (6):

(5) Published by G. Bell and Sons Ltd., London, 1922. The fifth volume was edited by Mr. Francis Henry Cripps-Day, and is prefaced by a biographical note from which most of the foregoing information regarding Sir Guy is taken.

(6) Unfortunately, I have been unable to trace the original of this letter; but I have a contemporary copy, made at the Palace as soon as the original was received. I am indebted to Colonel the Lord Grenfell, of Potter's Bar, Middlesex, for permission to print it.

"To His Excellency General the Rt. Hon. Lord Grenfell &c., Governor of Malta.

My Lord,

I beg you will accept this report on the Armoury in the Palace, Valletta, Malta, as the result of a most careful examination of its contents. I have endeavoured to look at the collection from three points of view; its historical and sentimental interest, its artistic value, and its pecuniary and mercantile value. From the first point of view, viz. its historical and sentimental interest, I venture to say that no armoury or arsenal in Europe can boast of being its equal, for it has been brought together under conditions that affect most closely the history of Malta. It represents to-day all that remains to us beyond glorious traditions, of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem; it was their armoury, therefore it is imbued with an interest naught else could give to it; it was from this armoury their Knights were armed; it was to this armoury the armour and arms of the Knight returned after his death. The vast collection in the armoury of to-day clearly shows what its magnitude must have been before it was permitted in the past to remove without a second thought and with no compunction vast quantities of the armour and arms for the decoration of private houses. This was since the time of Napoleon.

From the point of view of its artistic value a little less enthusiasm may be felt; for fine as a good deal of the armour undoubtedly is, and superb as a few of the suits and separate pieces are, a vast quantity is of a type too often duplicated to be of any particular artistic merit. It is the good serviceable well made armour of the men-at-arms which, while possessing many charms of manufacture, cannot be placed in the category of works of art.

Viewed from its monetary value, let us for a moment compare it with some of the large collections which have
been sold, viz., the Meyrick (7), the Londesborough (8), the Nieuwerkerke, the Carrand, and in later years the Spitzer (9), the Brett (10) and the Zschille (11), taking at the same time into consideration the advance in the prices of works of art. The Spitzer must take the foremost place as regards value, for it realized, when sold in Paris in 1894, the sum of about £40,000. So I am reluctantly obliged to admit that the Spitzer collection was finer in quality than our own Malta Armoury, though not a sixth of its size. Comparing, and carefully balancing collection with collection, I would venture to place the monetary value of the Malta Armoury at a figure between £18,000 and £24,000 and of that sum six or seven thousand pounds alone can be accounted for in the magnificent suit made for Alop de Wignacourt, without doubt the most precious possession of the Armoury (12).

May I say, Sir, a few words on the very pleasant task set me in the Armoury, and of what it has been my endeavour to do for the protection and good keeping of the collection. I have tried to bring together all the various pieces of interest whether armour or weapons,

(7) Sir Samuel Rush Meyrick F.S.A., of Goodrich Court. A large number of the best pieces are now in the Wallace Collection; many of them are illustrated in The Illustrations of Ancient Arms and Armour, by Joseph Skelton.

(8) The Earl of Londesborough. Sir Guy Laking prepared the catalogue of this collection, which was sold at Christie’s on the 9th July, 1888, for £18,513. I am indebted for this information, and for that concerning the other sales mentioned to Messrs. Christie, Manson and Woods Ltd.

(9) The Spitzer collection was sold in Paris on the 10th June, 1895. Sir Richard Wallace purchased a large quantity of arms en masse for the Wallace Collection for £73,000. Most of the specimens so acquired had previously formed part of the collection of the Count de Nieuwerkerke.

(10) The collection of Mr. E.J. Brett was sold at Christie’s in 1895 for £11,774. The catalogue was prepared by Laking.

(11) This was the collection of Herr Richard Zschille of Crossen-Hain near Dresden. The bulk was sold at Christie’s in 1897 for £11,281; and the remainder was sold by Rudolf Lepke of Berlin in 1900.

(12) Laking, Malta catalogue, page 39 and plate XXV.

and to so arrange them that they might be within easy view of all. To facilitate this, two large screens have been built in the armoury, where they play the double part of filling the centre of the formerly somewhat rather bare gallery, and forming a suitable background to the especially selected suits &c. All the objects on these two screens, and in the cases round the gallery have been catalogued in full and many of them illustrated (13).

The armour and arms upon the walls have been inventoried, for to describe them in full would have made the catalogue too bulky. The figures arranged round the walls of the armoury are in the same condition as when I found them, save that they have been freed from superfluous dirt, and a little more carefully dressed, the circular shields and 18th century halberds taken from their grasp, and the absurd cuissart-like gauntlets removed from them. These figures must always be somewhat unsatisfactory, as they are, without exception, dressed in armour of a very composite nature, that is to say no two plates of any suit really match each other. But as these paper maché figures are dressed so they must remain, unless a considerable sum of money be spent upon them; a step I could not recommend, as it would in no way enhance the value of the armour.

With this letter already too long will arrive your number of catalogues, which, on reading, will I hope prove some little help and guide as to the nationality and date of the various possessions of the armour.

As regards its present good keeping, I should hardly like to presume upon your Excellency’s indulgence by venturing to offer suggestions upon a matter which is hardly my business to approach. I gather that Captain

(13) Prior to this, there was a double row of painted wooden columns, of ridiculously slender proportions and with trumpet-shaped capitals, down the centre of the gallery. They had been erected by Sir Gaspar le Marchant (1558-64) and were rightly removed by Laking.
Galizia (14) has been appointed the Curator of the Armoury; if that is the case I am more than delighted, for he took so much interest in the collection, and I had the opportunity of telling him some of my own experiences as regards the proper keeping of an armoury. Under him should be two good cleaners. One excellent man I remember in the armoury, though unfortunately I am not acquainted with his name (under the old régime he was second armourer), should be made first cleaner, a second man should be found and taught under the very able guidance of the first cleaner. With matters so placed, and with the careful supervision that would follow, so that no piece of armour may be handled by the visitor, the Armoury of the Palace will remain in good order for many years to come, and will in no way detract from the pleasure and instruction of its many visitors but will triumphantly remain as visible proof of the past greatness of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem (15).

It now only remains for me to say how deeply I appreciate the kindness and courtesy I received from Your Excellency, and indeed from your entire council during my delightful stay in Malta, and to assure you with what happy recollections I look back upon my visit to your sunny island, where my task was made for me such a pleasure.

I have the honour to be
My Lord,
Your Lordship's most obedient and very humble servant,

GUY FRANCIS LAKING.

7 Norfolk Square,
Hyde Park.

(14) Major the Hon. James A. Galizia C.B.E., formerly Government Treasurer and Director of Contracts, who kindily gave me the document I am publishing.
(15) After a long period of almost total eclipse, the Order of St. John was at that period gradually beginning to recuperate. In 1879 Leo XIII appointed a new Grand Master in the person of the Venerable Bailiff Fr. Giovanni Battista Ceschi a Santa Croce and since that date, the Order has continued to gather strength, reviving its old philanthropic activities, until it has now reached as high a peak of prestige as it ever enjoyed in the past.

is this suit which Laking estimates at between five or six thousand pounds, a price which may now be multiplied at least five times.

Another full-length suit known as the Verdelin Armour (cat. no. 139) which Wignacourt wears in his Louvre portrait by Caravaggio, and in another portrait in the Church of Our Lady of Victories, Valletta, also probably belonged to the Grand Master himself (17). It is a finely decorated and well proportioned suit, of Italian workmanship and fashion, circa 1650, for which Laking suggests the name of Lucio Piccinino, of Milan, one of the best armourers of the period. The half suit of armour in the Wallace Collection, which Piccinino made for Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, has been pronounced one of the most splendid, if not the best, in Europe (18).

The third is the so-called sapping armour of Aloph de Wignacourt of which several pieces, including the chape-d’-fer, breastplate, backplate and shield have been recovered and brought together (cat. no. 414-420). When complete, this suit must have been one of the heaviest in existence, the total weight of the surviving pieces being over 110 pounds. Deeply engraved in the breastplate, as though hanging by a chain from the neck of the wearer, is an oval badge with the Wignacourt arms. This armour was meant to be worn for only very short periods at a time, either when actually under fire or when in imminent danger of being struck by missiles.

One of the finest exhibits in the Armoury is undoubtedly the full-length panoply made for Wignacourt’s predecessor, Grand Master Martin Garzes (1595-1601) towards the end of the 16th century (cat. no. 359). It is a masterpiece of the armourer’s art, and is very probably the work of Sigismund Wolf, of Landshut in Bavaria. Wolf is known to have made several suits for Philip II of Spain, two of which are to be seen in the Armoury of Madrid (19).

There is no doubt that, during the brief but troubled French occupation, as well as during the early years of British rule, a large number of pieces from the Armoury and elsewhere disappeared in various directions. In the Apollo Gallery, in the Louvre, there is a richly decorated sword and poniard to match, which were sent to Grand Master La Valette in 1755, by Pope Pius IV. These are attributed to an Augsburg goldsmith, Hans Muelich, and, according to the Louvre catalogues, they were presented to Napoleon when he took Malta in 1798. They should not be confused with the magnificent Toledo blade, the hilt of which is of gold enriched with translucent enamels and encrusted with precious stones, which was presented to La Valette after the Great Siege by Philip II of Spain and which is now preserved, together with the dagger belonging to it, in the Bibliothèque Nationale, also in Paris.

Much of the artillery from the forts and bastions appears to have suffered a similar fate. In 1838, on the instructions of the Governor, Sir John Lintorn Simmons, a number of brass guns which had been taken to England during the early years of the century were returned to Malta and were placed in prominent positions in various parts of the Island (20). At least one fine specimen remained in England and is now kept in the Tower of London, together with the standard of Grand Master Hompesch, said to have been recovered from a French man-of-war.

Most of the recommendations made in Laking’s letter to Lord Grenfell were adopted without question. His arrangement of the Armoury, with the best pieces exhibited on two large screens in the centre of the gallery, remained

(20) Blanche Lintorn Simmons, Description of the Governor’s Palace in Malta, Valetta, 2nd ed., 1895; pp. 88, 215.
practically unaltered until the outbreak of the Second World War. With the arrival of that calamity, all the contents of the Armoury were removed for safe-keeping to the Inquisitor's Palace, Girgenti, together with most of the works of art in the Palace, the Museum, St. John's and various other public buildings. There they lay for five long years, gathering rust and dust; and, when they were brought back, it took another five years to clean them and restore them to their former glamour. However, it was just as well, because the explosion of several bombs behind the Palace seriously damaged the south wall of the Armoury, which had to be demolished and rebuilt.

After the war, the Armoury and its contents were officially transferred to the custody of the Museum Department. A number of modern show-cases were purchased, the exhibits were more rationally displayed and properly labelled, and there is no doubt that the present arrangement of the Armoury is as satisfactory as it has ever been. When the various odds and ends left over from two wars have been removed, the Valletta Armoury will once again become not only a visible and tangible symbol of the past glories of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, but also, one may venture to hope, auspicium melioris aeti!

The fact that the resplendent history of Malta under the knights of Saint John concentrates most of the attention of the student, should not make us forget that Malta has had a history before the arrival of the Hospitallers and that it continues to have one after the capitulation of its masters (1) in 1798 who already for this latter reason should not insist too much on the name of knights of “Malta” (2).

A curious aspect of Malta's anterior history is its being attributed as a fief already before the famous investiture of 1530 (3), to several lords who, strange coincidence, were in connections with the knights of Saint John in quite distant a land where both had great material and political interests. Already the famous Roger de Flor, chief of the Catalan mercenaries, who had helped Peter of Aragon during the conquest of Sicily against Charles of Anjou, had received the county of Malta in 1300 (4) before entering the service of the Emperor of the East, Andronicus II, whose son and co-regent Michael IX got murdered the too insolent “Caesar” at Adrianople in 1305 when Malta returned to the crown of Sicily.

After having slain Walter V. of Brienne, duke of Athens, and the Latin chivalry of Greece in the battle of lake Copais in 1311, the Catalan mercenaries (5) conquered the dukedom of Athens as well as that of Neopatras which, until 1318, had belonged to a Greek dynasty (6). Putting

(1) FRANCESCO SINCARTINO, Storia dei feudi e dei titoli nobiliari di Sicilia, Palermo, 1924-1941, IX, 1444, 203, only mentions the lordship of the Order but not that of its predecessors.

(2) See our observations in this review, 1954, p. 172-173.

(3) As the document says clearly that Malta has been given “in feudo” to the Order, we fail to understand HANNIBAL PLANCHON, Siciluna, The Church of St. John in Valletta, San Martino 1985, p. 17, who pretends that Charles V. vested (at Syracuse) in the Order “complete and perpetual sovereignty of the Islands of Malta and Gozo”.


(6) LOENERTZ, op. cit., p. 104.