

## **HISTORY OF JEAN PARISOT DE LA VALETTE .**

**Jean Parisot de (la) Valette** is recorded as being born on **4<sup>th</sup> February 1495\*** (although dates vary between 1495 -1498.He. was born in Quersy South-Western France, into the noble La Valette family which had been an important family in France for many generations,

Christian Crusading was in his blood with generations of his family having participated in earlier Crusades. Jean Parisot's grandfather, Bernard de Valette, was a Knight and King's Orderly, and his father Guillot was a Chevalier de France.

Jean Parisot joined the Knights Hospitaller in the Langue de Provence when he was about 20 years old in around **1514**, and never returned to France or his family estates from that day on.

La Valette was described by his contemporaries as being a very handsome man, speaking several languages fluently including Italian, Spanish, Greek.

He was present, and fought with distinction against the Turks at Rhodes during the Siege of **1522** where his prowess as a warrior was demonstrated. When the Order was defeated by Sultan Suleiman the First's forces and the Order expelled from Rhodes, some reports suggest he was part of the Grand Masters Household or Bodyguard and accompanied the Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle-Adam. during the Orders stay in Sicily and later its transfer the Maltese Islands and Tripoli when it was ceded to the Knight Hospitaller Order by Emperor Charles V.

He distinguished himself early on as a capable leader rapidly climbing the ranks of the Order. He was appointed the Governor of Tripoli, then Grand Preceptor, then General of the Galleys, more of which later, and the Grand Commander, before becoming the Grand Master

### **Guilty and Imprisoned**

It seems that Jean de Valette failing was his short temper, which got him in trouble. On one occasion he was charged with resorting to extreme violence against a non-member of the Order; after some kind of argument with a layman, he assaulted him and the man subsequently died from his injuries and a very severe punishment was meted out. Initially, de Valette was sentenced to four months' imprisonment in Gozo, spending his time in an underground 'guva', a dry well, with insufficient room to lie down and from which there was no possibility of escape, with food and water being lowered down to the prisoner.

Gozo prison was a place of incarceration from the mid-16th century it hosted the rowdiest or most riotous knights, as a place to cool down or to serve harsh sentence. This site is well preserved, and one can find a large amount of graffiti etched into the walls often of ships, handprints, crosses, names, dates.,

Following his release, he was posted as Military Governor of Tripoli(Libya). Tripoli was extremely vulnerable to attacks by the Barbary corsairs, and being sent there was no reward. de Valette was credited with restoring order, displaying his power of organisation, and re-establishing discipline among the lacks Christian troops both in their devotions and military training. Following his return to Malta, some two years later, another criminal charge was levelled against him; that of having brought back with him a black person as a slave, when

the individual was not liable to servitude. Once again, de Valette was tried and condemned, I have not been able to establish his punishment for this offence.

### **Malta`s Seafaring importance.**

The importance of Malta as a seafaring base to secure control of the Mediterranean was evident and the strength and command on the Orders Galleys was a priority if they were to repress the ravages of the Moorish rovers and pirate attacks.

Despite his earlier misdeeds, de Valette continued to enhance his status, making a name for himself both as a warrior and leader and given command of one of the Order's galleys, the *San Giovanni*. In **1541**, during a naval battle off the Barbary coast, his galley was captured, and the wounded de Valette was taken prisoner. He was to spend the next year as a slave, chained to a bench, rowing on the galleys. Even here he seems to have made the most of his time, where he learnt to speak fluent Arabic and Turkish, to add to his command of languages. Luckily for him, he was eventually freed as part of an exchange of prisoners, but this experience marked him for life, his ill-treatment during captivity increased and hardened his contempt towards the 'infidels',

In **1554** he was elected Captain General of the Order's galleys. This was an important position and a great honour to the Langue of Provence from which you will recall he emanated , as throughout most of the Order's history, the position of Grand Admiral or Captain General was usually held by a Knight Grand Cross of the Italian Langue.

Upon the death of Grand Master Claude de la Sengle, the Knights, mindful of the threat of attack from the Turks , were in need of a strong leader. On **21<sup>st</sup> August 1557** the Order unanimously chose and elected La Valette to be 49th Grand Master of the Order.

He formed an early alliance with the Habsburg Empire to reconquer Tripoli, but the expedition resulted in a Christian defeat at a sea battle off the coast of Tunisia. The Order lost scores of fighting galleys , many support vessels and hundreds of men the remaining Order's galleys were able to rescue several other Christian vessel and made it back to safety., These losses however prompted La Valette to greatly strengthen the Order's Navy .The Orders enhanced naval strength soon became feared throughout the Mediterranean. by the Moors, pirates and even by the Turks.

### **Unpopular amongst the Maltese**

Whilst popular within the Order, the same cannot always be said when it came to the Maltese, they considered him to be tyrannical. Many saw him as arrogant, and extremely harsh with anyone who dared criticise him. One such episode concerned the Maltese doctor Matthew Callus, a member of the Mdina University, who dispatched a letter to the King of Spain to inform him of de Valette's controversial decision to reduce the power and funding of the University. Unfortunately for him, the letter never reached the King, it was intercepted and lead to Callus' being execution for the crime of treason.

## Great Siege of Malta

On the **18 May 1565** began what we know as the Great Siege of Malta

As Grand Master, Valette became the Order's hero and most illustrious leader, commanding the resistance against the Ottomans . de Valette organised the defence of Malta, fought during the siege, successfully repulsed the Turks on **September 11<sup>th</sup> 1565** .

The vastly outnumbered Christians forces (estimated at around 10,000 men) held out for over 3 months against an Ottoman force containing around 40,000 soldiers, as well as the Sultan's fleet of some 193 ships. The Ottomans objective was to siege and capture Fort St Elmo. This engagement continued for a month with fierce fighting and proved to be a serious disruption to the Ottomans plans, they had calculated they would capture Fort St Elmo within three days. During these engagements many thousands of the Ottomans forces were killed or wounded but the Turks eventually succeeded in taking Fort St Elmo on **23 June**, after an assault lasting in excess of seven hours.

Mustapha Pasha the Turks Commander, exasperated by the resistance of the Knights, ordered the slaughter of the captured knights . La Valette, for his part retaliated by ordering all the Turkish prisoners beheaded and thereafter forbade the taking of any prisoners .

The Order under Vallettes command continued to hold out in two of the other fortified cities to the south of the Grand Harbour (Birgu and Senglea ).The heroic defence of Fort St Elmo had bought the time needed for Christian reinforcements to arrive.

Knight Commander Le Sande, had sailed from Sicily and commanded the reinforcing Christian army of approx. 8000 men, the Knights as a ruse started rumours that the force was significantly larger. The Commander having taken stock of the situation ordered a general charge from the Maltese hills toward the besieged areas. They kept up the attack and the Ottoman forces were forced to retreat to their galleys and later withdrew from Malta.

Malta was saved and remained under Hospitaller rule for some 268 years until Napoleon took the Island.

As a result of the Order's victory La Valette gained much prestige in Europe, The Pope offering him a Full Cardinal's hat. His decision to decline has been attributed to his sense of modesty and his humility as a warrior monk. but was in reality, was probably more about maintaining the Orders independence from the Papacy. What is often overlooked is that as a Grand Master of the Order, he automatically had the precedence of a junior Cardinal within the Church so enjoyed a Cardinal's distinction without being involved in the internal politics of the Holy See.

## To Rebuild

Following the victory there was a need to fortify and rebuild, As Grand Master he commissioned the construction of the new city in **1566**, on the site of Fort St Elmo which had been raised to the ground. laying the first stone with his own hands. Over his remaining years he commissioned and oversaw the commencement of the building of many of the grand structures still standing to this day. The “ new city” known as **Valletta** became the most

aristocratic and exclusive fortress in Europe - a city is often referred to as "The Most Proud". Valletta of course remains the Maltese capital to this day.

### **Personal life**

He has been referred to as one who never broke his vows ,however it is known that he had a mistress while in Rhodes called Catherine and had an illegitimate son by her who was called Barthélemy de La Valette, and documentary evidence has been found that proves Barthélemy was legitimized in **1568** by a decree of King Charles IX of France. Claims have also been put forth that La Valette had at least another child, a girl named Isabella, after an affair with the wife of a nobleman of Florentine descent to whom de Valette was very close. Isabella later married a Florentine gentleman, who murdered her, sometime after their marriage. After the murder, he escaped the islands with Isabella's wealth and was never heard from again.

### **His Death**

Following the victory La Valette's health appeared to slowly deteriorate, he had been wounded in the leg in the final days of the Siege as the 70 year old led his men against the Infidel. He is also said to have been greatly upset by the murder of Isabella., He is reported to have suffered a stroke while praying in a chapel, whilst another account suggests the stroke occurred whilst out hunting with falcons (in which case he would almost certainly have been taken to a chapel) he developed a fever and died soon after on **21 August 1568**, exactly eleven years after he became Grandmaster.

He was originally buried at the Church of our Lady of Victories.

This was the first church and indeed any structure of consequence built in Valletta. It was built on the spot where a religious ceremony was held to inaugurate the laying of the foundation stone of the new city that commemorated the victory over the Turks following the 'Great Siege'

La Valette never saw the completed city of Valletta. But following its completion he was re-interred. His tomb (in the form of a sarcophagus) can be found in the Crypt of the Conventual Church of the Order (now St. John's Co-Cathedral), situated within Valletta. The inscription on his tomb, which was composed by his Latin Secretary, Sir Oliver Starkey, who is believed to be last Knight of the English Language following the Great Siege, it states in Latin:

*Here lies La Valette.  
Worthy of eternal honour,  
He who was once the scourge of Africa and Asia,  
And the shield of Europe,  
Whence he expelled the barbarians by his Holy Arms,  
Is the first to be buried in this beloved city,  
Whose founder he was.*

## **His Legacy.**

Throughout Malta la Valette is honoured as the Grandmaster who won the Great Siege and founded Valletta. La Valette's image has been featured on Maltese stamps, coins, banknotes and telecards a number of times

A statue 2.5m high, cast in bronze, stands in Pjazza Jean de La Valletta Square he is shown in armour and holding Valletta's plan in one hand and a sword in the other. Some of you will know doubt have visited Jean de Valette Square

## **Footnote.**

Of interest is the title **Jean Parisot de la Valette**, various branches of the Valette family actually used both de and de la versions at the time, but the Grandmaster himself never used the *La* In fact, all 138 coins and 19 medals minted by the Order during de Valette's reign show his name as *de Valette*, *de Valetta* or just *Valette*.

I think it also interesting to note that history suggests the largest contingent of the Knights of the Order who exhibited such devotion and zeal to their Faith were from France and Southern Europe, it is suggested that this probably in part due to the fact that at this time theological thought in Northern Europe was changing. Martin Luther the Augustine Friar had commenced what is now known as the Protestant Reformation and, Henry VIII had broken away from Rome, resulting in a reduction of the obedience, dedication and commitment to the Holy See and that had previously encouraged such zeal in the earlier Crusades.