



Photo: Daniel Cilia

The niche in which Grand Master de Valette's hat and sword are kept

De Valette's Sword and Hat: New Evidence

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It has been ten years since I first wrote about Grand Master de Valette's legendary sword of Birgu.¹ Since then it has taken central attention in my book on Hospitaller weapons,² but also mentioned in other publications, featured in television documentaries, used in public exhibitions and activities and even sold as jewellery.³ It has also inspired a second replica by Balefire Blades⁴ (the first replica being by Danelli Armouries in 2013⁵); Balefire Blades donated one to the parish museum in 2024 for patrons to be able to hold while seeing the original safely in situ. This spike in national (and international) interest is evident especially through the increased online content on this relic in the past decade.⁶ I like to think it is partly due to the research by myself and my colleagues of the Malta Historical Fencing Association who first studied it in 2012. But one must not fall into the trap of rediscovering the wheel and forgetting past voices. The sword was never lost; it was always there, unmoved from 1565, and anyone from Birgu would raise an eyebrow at the sudden sensationalism it now receives.

De Valette's Hat

The hat of Grand Master de Valette was a ceremonial headpiece worn during celebrations and official occasions. It is a symbol of authority and of the Grand Master's office as head of the Order. In fact it can be seen in many official portraits of Grand Masters as part of the symbolism of headship of the Order. Thus the hat itself is of likewise importance, even though it has tough competition against a sword, and is frequently ignored in preference to its more alluring partner. It however bears testimony to an age old tradition of symbolism; honouring defenders of the faith since the fourteenth century.

The presentation of a sword and hat together was not, therefore an original idea. It echoed the papal tradition of presenting a stock and pilier (sword and hat) by the reigning Pope to European Princes who distinguished themselves as defenders of the faith. Such presentations were in fact given to de Valette's successors, Grand Masters Manoel de Vilhena, Ximenez, Pinto and von Hompesch.⁷ Could de Valette's presentation of these two particular items to the Madonna he most revered have been influenced by this tradition?

The Hat and Sword of
Grand Master Jean de Valette.
Photo: Pierre Balzia



Shrouded in Mystery?

Contrary to my statement in 2015, I cannot say the sword and hat are shrouded in mystery anymore. In fact, deeper study of their actual historiography reveals frequent mention of them through the centuries. True, as specified in my past paper, no official record is found on their donation in the Order's archives, nor do official historians such as Giacomo Bosio or contemporary writers such as Balbi di Correggio mention them. The only fragments of authentication being the marble plaque directly under the display case, their actual resting place, being the same chapel the venerable Grand Master was known to use for his prayers during the siege. The Plaque translates:

'Emmanuel Rohan, Grand Master of the Gerosolomitan Order, restored with adoration the sacred chapel of the Virgin Mother of God in the year 1779, which had fallen into disrepair and ruin. Through his providence, he took care to preserve the neglected relics of earlier times in a more fitting place, the sword and the hat, which Jean de Valette, supreme Master of the same Order, joyfully hung there in the year 1565, after repelling the Turkish invasion of Malta and preserving the liberty of the Republic, with the protection of the Mother of God.'

For me the above are already enough testimony to the sword and hat's authenticity but what follows further strengthens their position as being the actual battle-sword



and hat of Jean de Valette. Past references to the two objects are found in a number of publications throughout the centuries. Some of which (at least that I know of) are listed below.⁸

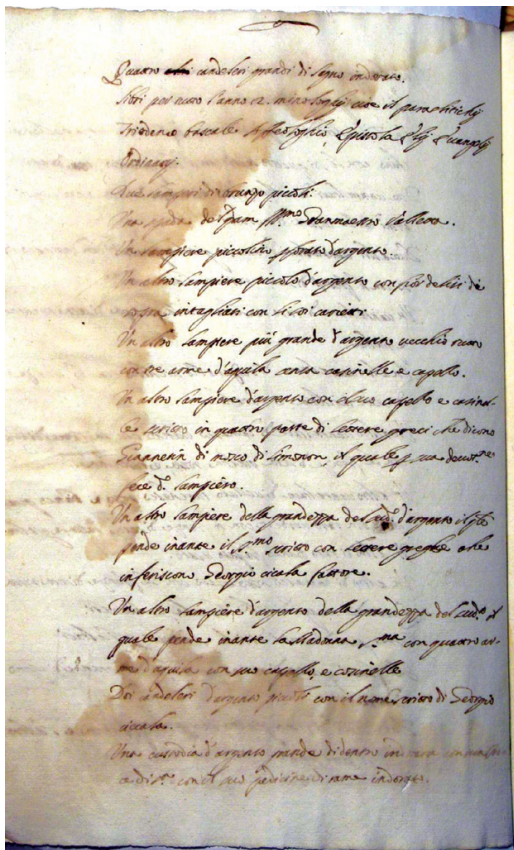
‘We were in search of two especial objects of interest, besides any stray gleanings we might fall in with – the ancient Palace of the Inquisition, and the sword and hat of La Valette. The former is a large edifice now serving as officers’ quarters; the lower part, from its ponderous gothic pillars, evidently belonging to the same period as the ancient buildings already described, and serving as foundation for the more modern edifice above. Finding that it presented but little attraction, we hastened down to the Greek church of St Lorenzo, in quest of the relics of La Valette.’ (William Bartlett, 1851).⁹

‘In questa ultima cappella sono conservati, dentro una nicchia, il cappello e la spada della quale si cinso il Gran Maestro La Vallette, nel memorando assedio del 1565. Ed il Popolo che a questa citta, di belle memorie accorre numeroso nel di sacro a San Lorenzo, non guarda senza emozione quelle preziose relique.’ (Achille Ferris, 1866).¹⁰

‘Il distribua ensuite tous ses biens entre ses freres, et ordonna le depot de l’eppee et de l’armure qui lui avaient servi durant le siege, dans l’eglise grecque de la Victorieuse, comme un temoin de la gratitude de l’Ordre envers les anciens habitants de Rhodes qui avaient pris part a la defense.’ (De Salles, 1889).¹¹

'But they still show in the Borgo, the old town by the sea where the most intense and fervid days of his long and eventful life were lived, his Grand Master's hat, with its high flaring crown and wide brim, and his magistral sword. They are in the little Oratory of St. Giuseppe (formerly the Greek church, set aside for the people of Rhodes), just back of San Lorenzo, looking as old and battered as if they had borne their part in all the calamities of the Siege, with the lilies of France and the olive of Peace beside them, and the crossed palms of Victory below; and every year, on San Lorenzo's day, the people of the Borgo come to the Oratory to venerate them.' (Elizabeth Schermerhon, 1929).¹²

'Not bent by age, with legitimate pride, but not strutting along like a French general or a captain of the Highlanders, Jean Parisot de La Valette approached the altar of the Madonna and in its steps laid down his sword and his hat, as a votive offering. I will lead the rejoicing crowd into the house of God, amid cries of gladness and thanksgiving, the throng wild with joy (Ps.41:4). A plaque, put up on the wall by Grand Master Emmanuel de Rohan (1775-1797), saves from oblivion this glorious event.' (Vito Borgia, 1992).¹³



A page from the report of the pastoral visit conducted at the Church of Our Lady of Damascus in Birgu in 1646 by Bishop Miguel Juan Balaguer de Camarasa. Thanks to Archivist

Michael Buhagiar

An Important Find

The above quotes reveal very moving words by leading scholars from the last two centuries who would not have fallen into the trap of fantasy and sensationalism in their research. They however remain secondary sources of the objects and the events that put them there. But finally, another brick in the wall reinforcing their authenticity was found only recently by my friend Mr George Agius, secretary of the Vittoriosa Historical and Cultural Society who would not accept my claims that no written primary source apart from the marble plaque was found. His perseverance in fact bore fruit since, as he revealed last November (2024), he finally found a written description of de Valette's sword inside the chapel of Our Lady of Damascus in an inventory list written during Bishop Miguel Juan Balaguer de Camarasa's apostolic visit of the site in November 1646

stating simply but factually: ‘una spada dell’illustrissimo Gran Maestro Valletta.’¹⁴ This is a very important piece of evidence since it is an official document written for purely practical reasons only eighty one years after the great siege attesting the sword’s existence, provenance, and location.

Another decade passes marking another anniversary rightfully honoured, but the objects themselves and the collective memory of their events will outlast us as they have done generations past. While this unforgiving flow of time carries on in spite of us, I am glad this generation, with all its negatives, has managed to add its own positive marks to this memory. Other than replicas, restorations, and the revival of the practical use of the sword we have strengthened the authenticity of these relics in a manner which will stand the test of time.

Una spada del Gran M^{ro} Donmaestro Valletta.

Detail regarding the reference to Grand Master de Valette’s sword, taken from the inventory found in the report of the Pastoral Visit conducted at the Church of Our Lady of Damascus in Birgu in 1646 by Bishop Miguel Juan Balaguer de Camarasa



Historical photograph showing Grand Master de Valette’s hat and sword displayed on a cushion in the Oratory of St Joseph. Thanks to Ms Catherine Patiniott

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.medievalists.net/2015/04/de-valettes-battlesword/> [retrieved 5th April, 2025].
- 2 Franco Davies, *Swords of The Religion* (Malta, Heritage Malta, 2021), 190-197.
- 3 <https://www.avmjewellery.com/de-valette-sword> [retrieved 5th April, 2025].
- 4 Alicia Adams & Chris Adams, *The Balefire Guide to the Sword of Jean de Valette* (Balefire Blades, 2023). & <https://www.balefireblades.com/post/the-vittoriosa-rapier-and-dagger> [retrieved 5th April, 2025].
- 5 <https://www.historicalfencingmalta.org/research/weapons/sidesword/de-valette/> [retrieved 5th April, 2025].
- 6 See <https://www.timesofmalta.com/article/Sword-carried-in-the-siege.474577> & <https://www.timesofmalta.com/article/Copy-of-the-real-de-Valette-sword-again-used-in-battle-.474176> [retrieved 5th April, 2025].
- 7 Franco Davies, *Swords of The Religion* (Malta, Heritage Malta, 2021), 202-207.
- 8 Not quoted below but equally deserving are two articles written in Maltese in the last century. I have not quoted them as they are full papers solely dedicated to the Sword and Hat (special thanks to Mr Neil Grech for revealing these to me): Kan GM Farrugia, 'Il-Kappell u S-Sejf ta La Valette', *Il-Malti* (Malta, Akkademja tal-Malti, 1925), 104-107. Dun Karm & Guze Gatt, "Il-Kappell u S-Sejf ta La Valette, Daksxejn Ta' Tiswija", *Il-Malti* (Malta, Akkademja tal-Malti, 1926), 35-36.
- 9 William Bartlett, *Gleanings on the Overland Route: Pictorial and Antiquarian* (London, T Nelson and Sons, 1851), 74.
- 10 Achille Ferris, *Descrizione Storica Delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo* (Malta, 1866), 280.
TRANSLATION: In this last chapel, inside a niche, are preserved the hat and sword which the Grand Master La Vallette himself wore during the memorable siege of 1565. And the people who flock to this city in great numbers with beautiful remembrance on the day sacred to San Lorenzo, do not look without emotion at those precious relics.
- 11 Felix de Salles, *Annales de L'Ordre de Malte* (Vienna, St Norbert, 1889), 132.
TRANSLATION: He then distributed all his possessions among his brothers, and ordered the deposit of the sword and armour which had served him during the siege, in the Greek church of Vittoriosa, as a witness of the gratitude of the Order towards the ancient inhabitants of Rhodes who had taken part in the defence.
- 12 Elizabeth W Schermerhorn, *Malta of the Knights* (London, W. Heinemann, 1929), 66.
- 13 Vito Borgia, *Our Lady of Damascus. The Story of an Icon* (London, Incorporated Catholic Truth Society, 1992), 5.
- 14 *Visitationes Apostolicae et Pastorales* (VAP) VP00016: VP 15, Balaguer, 1644-1646 (Archbishop's Curia, Malta). TRANSLATION: 'A sword belonging to the Most Illustrious Grand Master Valletta'.



A replica of De Valette's sword was donated to the Parish Museum in December 2024 by Balefire Blades, in collaboration with the Malta Historical Fencing Association