

St John's Conventual Church in Valletta, Malta: Memento Mori and the floor of floors

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The floor of St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta, Malta, is in many ways exceptional. The quality and quantity of its polychrome marble intarsia sepulchral slabs deserve our attention as much as the remarkable story of the floor's survival and revival. Its culture of memory, initiated by the Order of St John during its stay at Malta, has been preserved and nurtured. The floor and its commemorative character have thus become an integral part of Malta's heritage.

The unknown author of a seventeenth-century Latin eulogy inscribed in one of the many marble floor slabs in St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta, Malta, offered passers-by a powerful reminder of eternity as he entreated them: 'Flecte lumina, quisquis es, mortalitatem agnosce' (Bend down with your lighted candles, whoever you are, and acknowledge your mortality). Contemporary visitors would have crossed over a dimly lit floor on their way to visit the grave of a confrere, treading upon images of skulls, skeletons, angels, and other symbols of life and death, victory and eternity on the many sepulchral slabs covering the church floor. Lit by the visitors' candles, these images would have sprung forth from the darkness. Bending over, visitors would have looked for a particular name and, once they had found it, stood to read out the inscribed text, murmur prayers and remember their lost confrère. Intercessory prayers were said in the hope that through these suffrages the souls of dead comrades would be released more quickly from purgatory. Visitors realised that where now their peers were lying beneath that 'ice-cold marble', they themselves might in time be laid to rest nearby to await their perfection and resurrection.

The 'Flecte lumina [...]' text is inscribed on the polychrome marble intarsia floor slab of Frà François de Vion Thesancourt, Grand Prior of the *tongue* (division) of France (d. 1649). It is placed among the other floor slabs at St John's Co-Cathedral, the former conventual church of the Sovereign Military and Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta. Although the church has many fabulous collections of sacred art, a major defining characteristic of St. John Co-Cathedral is its

memorial floor of marble inlaid commemorative slabs. Many regard this pavement as the floor of floors: some 407 inscribed texts in this church illustrate the importance of being commemorated as a member of the Order of St John.

This extraordinary collection of sepulchral commemorative slabs owes its existence to the Order of St John. Public display of those slabs forms part of the collective identity of the Knights of St. John and shows the solidarity between the living and the dead Knights. Besides, the inscribed eulogies always had an educative and inspirational intention, whose validity, one hoped, would serve as a message in immortality.

Many of the inscribed eulogies on the sepulchral slabs contain two or more distinguishable styles. The descriptive part, in which the deceased Knight is introduced to the reader, contains his full name, and often his ancestry and place of origin, his *cursus honorum* (comparable to a short *c.v.*) and *res gestae* (his achievements). This part is composed in a military style, so typical of Latin, and up to expectation in harshness and brevity. The other part is of a much different style, where one may find poetic notions, sentimental feelings, philosophical thoughts about life and death, and occasionally, some wit. Mentioned here may be the last deeds or moments of the deceased, composed in a more emotional style.

The aim of a panegyric, chiselled on a sepulchral slab, is to identify and identify with the deceased, whose mortal remains are reposing beneath. It needs to record information necessary for proper identification, such as the name, ancestry and coat of arms. There must be words of consolation and instruction, and words of praise for the deceased's achievements, but also his relatives and dedicators are lauded, in the hope that their virtue will be an example to countless others. The Baroque mentality allowed a relatively larger freedom in writing eulogies, as long as they were doctrinally sound, than at present. In many countries today wit is not allowed on tombstones, and epitaphs may not be presumptuous or laudatory, although this rule is probably more honoured in the breach than in the observance. In early Christianity it was deemed arrogant and pagan to eulogize the dead, rather than to simply pray for their souls. Humanism changed this custom to the opposite, and the virtues of the deceased were emphasized to the extent that the epitaph became a summation of the

late person's achievements and character. The iconography of the slabs at St. John's shows us Angels of Fame who never seem to be out of breath when sounding their trumpets and blowing the deceased's reputation to the four winds, while other allegorical figures are also playing to the gallery, prompted from the grave.

The victory of the Order of St John, or rather its survival, in the Great Siege of 1565 had brought it immense popularity throughout Europe. Although at present simply part of Malta chequered history, yet two hundred years after the fact Voltaire said that "nothing is better known than the siege of Malta". It made the Order's treasury and ranks swell as many aristocratic families offered landed property and monetary gifts as well as, more importantly, their children as novices to the Order. Having their sons as potential heroes greatly enhanced the status of aristocratic families amongst their peers.

The importance of the Great Siege as a benchmark against which heroism and triumph could be measured cannot be underestimated. St John's was the Order's conventual church and its *aula heroum* or hall of fame, a place which grew from humble beginnings into a showcase of the High Baroque in Malta. The church and its floor have undergone consecutive stages of artistic developments, of which Mannerism and the Baroque have had the greatest impact.

Baroque, with its capacity to shock and to capture the eye, was an excellent vehicle to describe a person by means of symbols, such as we find in *memento mori* (remember thy death) and *vanitas* ideas. St John's funerary art typically contains many *memento mori* symbols. The religious ideas and military ideals of the Knights and the Order did generally not lend themselves very well to a civic atmosphere and the Knights of the Order gave a different meaning to the Renaissance concept of *utile et dulce*, instructive and delightful which characterised the *vanitas* paintings. Instructive the tombstones definitely were, but the delightfulness was achieved not through showing a beautiful lady next to a bush of withered roses and shiny fruits with worms coming out, but through the intensity of the Knights' spirituality and piety.

Although the Knights took the reminder of their mortality to heart, they did not accept Death as a *triumphatrix*. Death's role is simply as an active agent, unavoidable but necessary in pursuit of higher goals. It frequently occurs in the texts as *mors invida*, *jealous Death* or *mors praematura*, *premature Death*, but nowhere is it allowed to be victorious. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death itself", 1 Corinthians 15:26 tells us. Whereas elsewhere Death was feared for its ugly face, the Knights of the Order, at least as evidenced in the marble slabs at St John's, simply regarded Death as a temporary inconvenience, an obstacle in the way to their ideal of eternal life and Resurrection with Christ.

Like many other church floors, the one at St John's has developed and changed over the centuries. Slabs were added and removed or repaired when worn, but many were also subjected to a total make-over. Even the configuration of the floor itself was changed over time, sometimes drastically and on a large scale. During the reconfiguration of the floor by the Maltese artist Giuseppe Hyzler, completed in 1833, the movement of bones was not recorded. Therefore, if there are remains beneath a sepulchral slab, they do not necessarily belong to the person commemorated on the slab. Moreover, a large number of slabs are cenotaphs, the remains of the deceased having been buried elsewhere.

The Order's sense of collective identity and culture of memory has spared the pavement at St John's the fate suffered by so many other floors, *i.e.* when an old floor, considered out of date or irreparable, was replaced by what was considered a superior new floor. Ironically, a large amount of wear and tear was caused through the wearing effect of the shuffling feet of those for whom the texts were initially meant to be read, and later by large masses of visitors and worshippers, oblivious of the cry for eternity embedded in the inscribed texts under foot. The vast collection of marble-inlaid sepulchral slabs at St John's has suffered significantly, even though the iconoclasm during and after periods of Reformation or revolution never reached the shores of Malta.

The floor of St John's Co-Cathedral was dear to the Order and, as a result, it was both developed and preserved. This has been crucial for its survival into the twenty-first century. Yet even when the Order was evicted from Malta by Bonaparte in 1798, the beauty of the floor was recognised as something worth keeping.

The sepulchral slabs at St John's are in their majority rendered in various artistic expressions of Baroque. Just as in paintings, the chiaroscuro technique is present, although it is much more difficult to create a sense of three-dimensionality on marble inlaid tombstones than on canvas. However, seen under the right lighting, or rather the absence thereof, the whole floor of St John's comes to life as one gigantic chiaroscuro with larger-than-life *memento mori* images. At present the interior of St John's is bathed in bright light, for the comfort of parishioner and visitor alike, but to really appreciate the art of the slabs and the effectiveness of the *memento mori* contained in them, we should switch off the bright interior light. Then one should try to find one's way through the church with a candle in hand. Once accustomed to the surroundings, with the eyes squinting in the dark and the mind wide open, something truly amazing happens. When one is thus roaming the floor in twilight, with only the candle lighting up a small area before one's feet, suddenly the *memento mori* images spring forth from their dark background, just as they were intended to do. The shock is a pleasant one of a lost treasure found. For Frà. François de Vion Thesancourt this was a regular exercise, 'Flecte lumina [...]'.

St John's Conventual Church

After the Great Siege of 1565 the Order of St John built its new, heavily fortified capital city of Valletta, one of the earliest designed cities of Europe. The Order's new conventual church was inaugurated there in 1578 and was dedicated to the patron saint of the Order, St John the Baptist. Gerolamo Cassar (1520-c.1586), the Order's Maltese military engineer and architect, started work on the new conventual church in 1571, commissioned by Grand Master Jean de la Cassière. He had previously been sent to

Brief outline of the history of the Order of St John

There have been Christian refuges in Jerusalem since the sixth century. Two decades before the First Crusade marched to Jerusalem on the feast of the Ascension of the Holy Virgin on 15 August 1096, a man named Gerard had taken over the management of one of those refuges and turned it into a hospital for Christian pilgrims and the poor. In 1113 Pope Paschal II granted the hospital many privileges, which formed the basis of the religious Hospitaller Order it would later become. It was only around 1136, after the Knights Templar had arrived in Jerusalem in 1120, that the Hospitaller Order also established a military arm to protect pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land.¹ Gerard had set out to form a network of land and sea routes to Jerusalem with a large number of hospitals to cater for pilgrims and the sick. The institution of the Sovereign Military Order of St John still exists, albeit now only engaged in charity.¹

After the Holy Land had been recaptured by the Mamluks in 1291, the Order of St John found a base first in Cyprus and shortly thereafter in Rhodes. However, the new Ottoman sultan Suleiman I the Magnificent (1494-1566) managed to expel the Order from Rhodes and on 1 January 1523 the Knights sailed back to Europe. After eight years of homelessness the Order was given Malta as a fief by Emperor Charles V. Malta's key location between Ottoman and Spanish spheres of influence and also the role of the Order of St John in policing the Mediterranean inevitably attracted Ottoman attention. The relentless corsairing activities of the Order and of the Maltese privateers were a continuous source of frustration for their Ottoman neighbours. Bent on annihilating the Order, Suleiman decided to attack Malta and the Ottoman Siege of Malta ensued in 1565. After nearly four months the engagement was decided in favour of Malta.

John" and "St Jerome".

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