



## Spanish knights at Birgu

The great admiration which the Order enjoyed in Spain culminated in the cession of Malta, then part of the Spanish realm, to the order by the Emperor Charles V in 1530. This gave the Spanish knights a feeling of superiority over other members of the Convent at the time of their arrival in Malta. Only four years after settling at Birgu, the Spanish knights petitioned the Council of the Order for a reduction in the annual dues



that each knight was obliged to pay towards the Order's Treasury. Grand Master L'Isle Adam obviously refused their claim as such a preferential treatment would have enraged the other Langues.

But Spanish Grand Master D'Omedes, elected in 1539, gave in to their request which immediately sparked off harsh resentment from the other Langues. The animosity was particularly acute between knights from the Spanish and from the French Langues. The explosive situation was further strained by the adverse relations between the Spanish Emperor and the King of France at the time.

Hostilities between Spain and France came to end in 1544 and this happy occasion was celebrated with great pomp by the Order at Birgu. However, the spell of peace had a short duration because in 1546 differences between the two kingdoms resurfaced with renewed vigour. Differences likewise cropped up again between Spanish and French knights. Spanish and Italian knights also litigated.



## Spanish knights in the defence of Birgu

Knights from the Spanish Langues also expected superior treatment from the Order because of the boldness and great skill that distinguished them in battle and the influence they therefore wielded on the Order's defences. In 1551 after the heavy Turkish invasion led by Dragut and the loss of Tripli, the Grand Master appointed a defence commission to improve the walls of Birgu. The Spanish knight and engineer, Pietro Pardo, was responsible for the design of reconstructions works at the existing fortifications, including the strengthening of the Post of Castille at Birgu and of Fort St Elmo on the Sciberras Promontory, and the erection of Fort St Michael at Senglea.

In the Great Siege of 1565 many Spanish knights excelled in courage and valour. De Guerras, Negropont and La Cerda, who died at St Elmo are honoured as heroes. The mighty De Guiral saved Senglea from Turkish invasion while Maldonado commanded the forces at the Post of Castille. Garzeranros led the defence of St Angelo and the protection of the Order's 'Tolo', ie. the treasures and the archives. Mesquita controlled Mdina. The most illustrious chronicler of the Great Siege, Francesco Balbi di Correggio, was himself a Spaniard.

The two main landside defence posts at Birgu during the Siege were the Post of Castille and the Post of Aragon. The former, facing Kalkara creek, withstood fierce attacks during the Siege and one of its bastions was actually breached by the Turks but they were pushed back, with La Vallette heading the onslaught. The Post of Aragon stood at the other end of Birgu, facing the Galley Creek. It was completely destroyed by an accidental explosion in 1812 when it served as gunpowder depot for the British Colonial Government

*Lorenzo A. Zahra*

Design & Printing Veritas Press, Malta



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Auberge de Castille,  
Lèon et Portugal



## The Spanish Langues and Auberges of the Order in Birgu

Since the early years of its foundation, Spanish knights joined the Order of St John in the pursuit of chivalry while combining the roles of hospitallers and soldiers. As the years rolled by the Spanish peninsula developed into different provinces, namely Aragon, Castille, Navarre, Catalonia, Leon and Portugal. So it was only natural that knights from the respective provinces would group themselves with colleagues speaking the same language. For many years, the Spanish knights formed one big community. In 1462, however, as part of a reorganization of the Order's structure, they were formally divided into two separate Langues, that combining Aragon, Catalonia and Navarre whose head was a high dignitary of the Order, usually a Bali', called the Conservator, and that of Castille, Leon and Portugal which was led by the Grand Chancellor. The Conservator was responsible for the purchase and storage of clothing and supplies for the Holy Infirmary and for the troops. He was also referred to as the Venerable Draper. The Grand Chancellor was also a highly respected knight who had the sole authority to sign documents and affix the seal on all decrees adopted by the Order's Council.

### The Spanish Auberges

The main problem facing the Order upon its arrival in Malta in 1530 was the acquisition of suitable dwellings to house the Order's entourage. This was on the agenda during the Council meeting held in December 1530 in the Grand Master's palace at Birgu. Grand Master L'Isle Adam placed the Spanish knights in a house having numbers 36-38, St Anthony Street. The site of old Spanish auberge at St Anthony Street is clearly marked in a site plan dated 1724. The building was bombed during the war and the site replanned during reconstruction.

Since the Spanish knights were numerous and since the Order was seeking to locate all the auberges within the *Collachio* as was the practice in Rhodes, the Spanish knights were assigned two different houses. The Auberge d'Aragon, Catalonia et Novara is recognisably the building at numbers 28-30 Hilda Tabone Street, corner with Ancient Street in which it has a back door. It is a 16<sup>th</sup>

century two storey building with a central doorway and two overlying balconies, one on each side, and is now privately owned. Part of the façade was recently covered with stone slabs but it still preserves its original character. The building is at the end of the block, with one side in the stepped alley alongside.

The Auberge de Castille, Leon et Portugal is at number 56 - 60 Hilda Tabone Street, corner with Quarter Front Street. The façade in Hilda Tabone Street has disappeared, the only remnant being a Siculo-Norman pilaster at the corner juncture that wraps around the building, while at numbers 5 -6 Quarter Front Street the three large decorated windows show that the auberge must have been of palatial size. The building is also private property.

Like all other Langues, the Spanish knights started to make preparations for the move from Birgu to the new city in Council meetings held in 1569. Although the crowns of Aragon and Castille had been joined for almost a hundred years by Ferdinand and Isabella, the Spanish knights still preferred to segregate under the two banners. In Valletta, they retained two auberges, the Auberge d'Aragon and the magnificent Auberge de Castille.

