

What were the "langues of the Knights Hospitaller"?



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Rhodes, the city boasts a number of historical sites and landmarks that are definitely worth exploring. One such attraction that may pique your interest is the Knights Hospitaller, a medieval Catholic order that played a critical role in providing medical care for Christian pilgrims in the Holy Land during the Crusades. What may not be as widely known is the concept of langues and auberges in the order, which we'll be exploring in greater detail.

What are the Langues of the Knights?

The Knights Hospitaller (also known as the Knights of Rhodes or the Knights of Malta) was one of the two military orders that established in Jerusalem in the 12th century before relocating to the island of Rhodes in the 14th century and their cultural heritage is strong, right until today.

From 1319 to 1798, the order was divided into eight langues or tonques, which were essentially geographic areas that represented a distinct language or language group.

The original seven langues were: Auvergne, France, Provence, Aragon, Italy, Germany (including the Holy Roman Empire and Scandinavia) and England (including Scotland and Ireland).

In 1462, the Langue of Aragon was divided with the creation of the eighth Langue of Castille, Léon and Portugal (Portugal Split).

The Langue of Aragon was one of the original seven langues divided into Castille, León, and Portugal in 1462. This division occurred due to political and linguistic differences within the langue at that time.

The Langue of England, on the other hand, was dissolved during the mid 16th century following the English Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries. It was later reinstituted as the Anglo-Bavarian Langue by Grand Master Emmanuel de Rohan-Polduc in 1784 to reflect the changing political and linguistic landscape of Europe.

Administrative division of the Knights of Rhodes

The Knights operated with an administrative division. The grand priories were administrative subdivisions within each langue, responsible for governing and managing the order's properties and resources in their respective territories. These grand priories were led by a grand prior, who held a significant position within the Knights Hospitaller hierarchy.

The grand prior reported directly to the Grand Master, who was the supreme head of the entire order.

Each grand priory consisted of several commanderies, which were local estates and properties that the order owned, used for generating income and supporting the knights.

The commanderies were managed by a commander, who answered to the grand prior. This hierarchical structure allowed the Knights Hospitaller to efficiently manage their extensive properties and resources across Europe and the Mediterranean, ensuring the order's continuing success in its mission to provide medical care and protection to Christian, Jews and Muslim pilgrims.

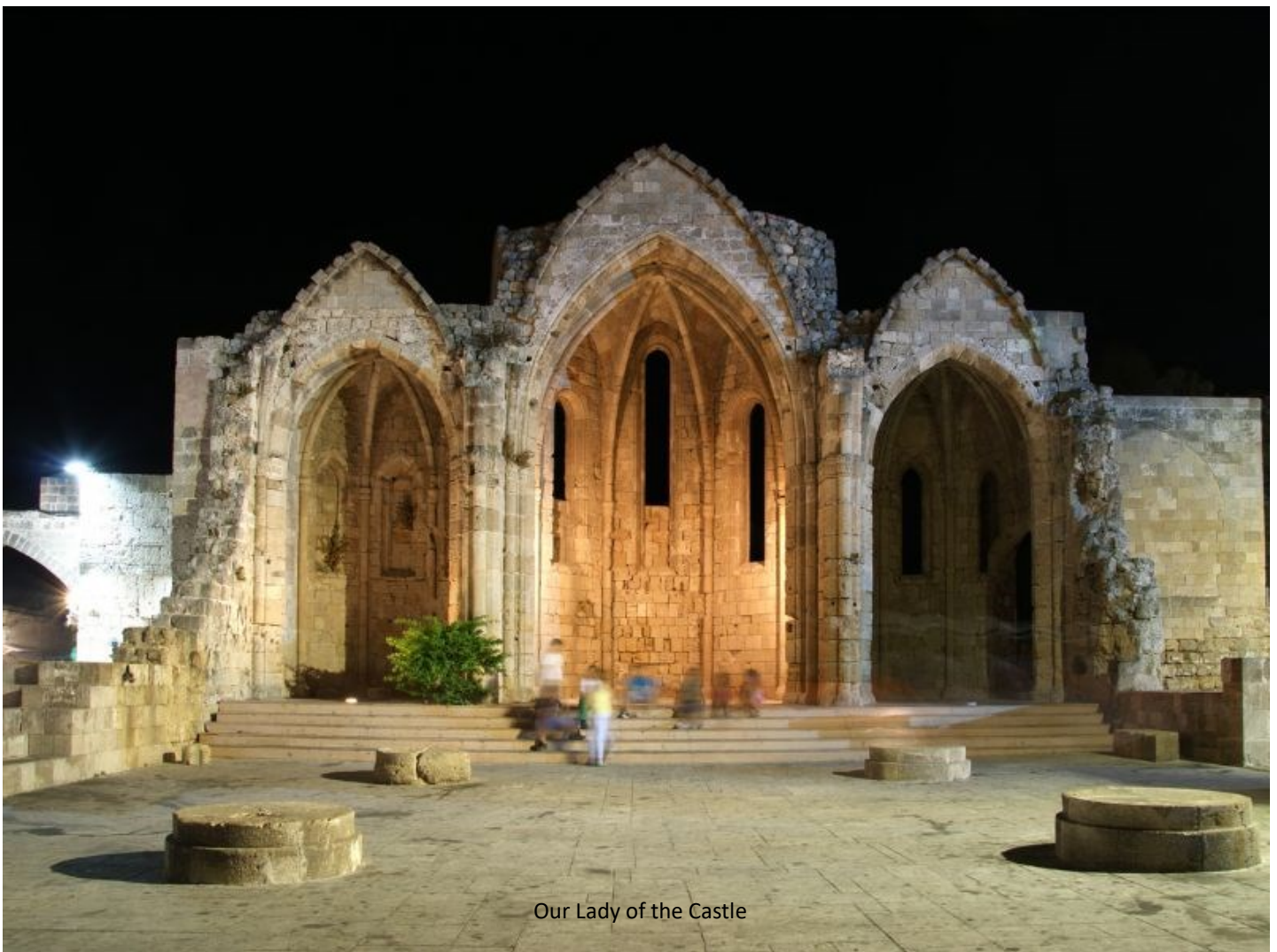
The French Auberge: A Historical Gem

The Auberge de France, considered one of the most prominent auberges, holds a unique place in the history of the Knights Hospitaller. Located in the heart of the Old Town of Rhodes, this beautifully preserved structure stands as a testament to the order's presence on the island.

As the headquarters of the French Langue, it was responsible for housing knights hailing from France, as well as serving as a centre for administrative duties and religious activities.

Constructed in the 14th century, the Auberge de France features an impressive fusion of Gothic and Renaissance architectural styles. It was significantly renovated during the rule of Grand Master d'Aubusson, who commissioned Italian architect Gabriele Tadini to enhance its imposing facade.

The entrance to the auberge is marked by an ornate door, adorned with intricate carvings and the coat of arms of the order, while the interior is said to have featured a stunning courtyard and a chapel dedicated to St. Louis, patron saint of the French Langue.



The Knights had presence to the five continents

The Knights Hospitaller had a presence in five continents. They held properties and commanderies in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and even as far away as India during the medieval period. The Order was also active in Central and South America during their expansion into the New World. In modern times, they have maintained a presence in many countries.

The official language of the Knights

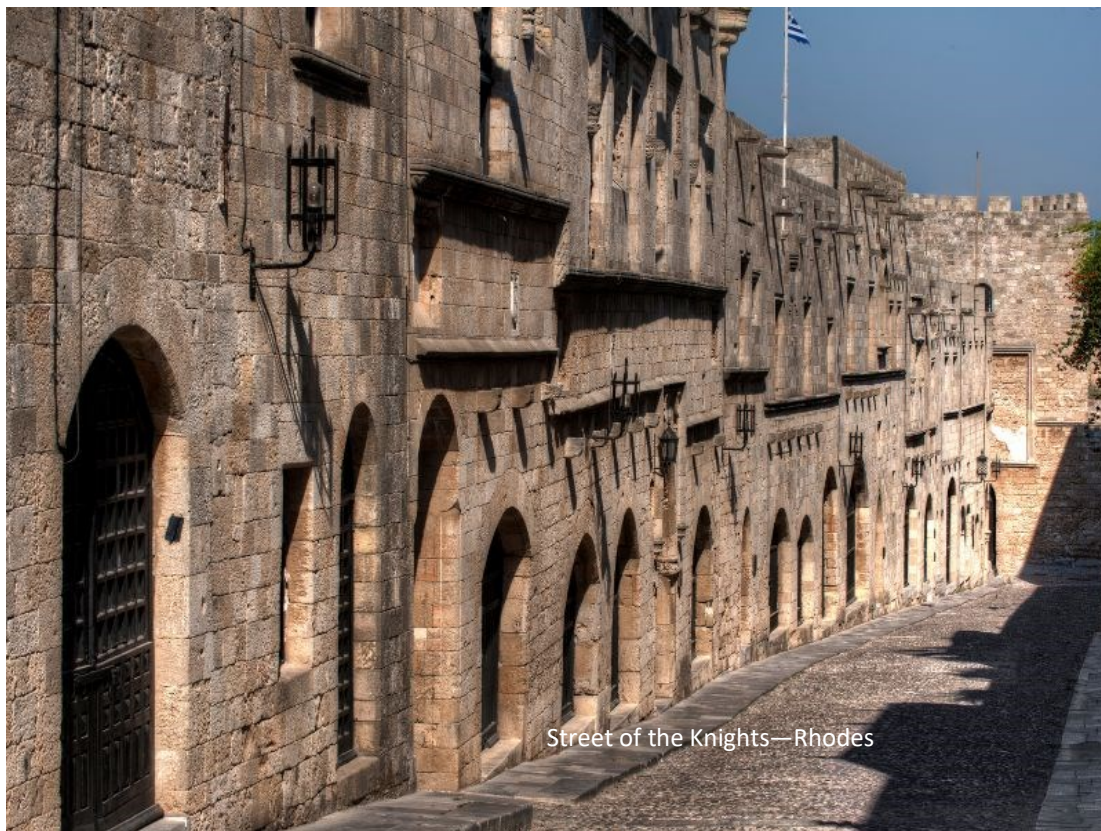
Initially, Latin was the language of choice for the Order's official communication and administration, and also used in their official diplomatic relations

However, over time, French became the preferred language of the Order. French was the lingua franca of medieval Europe, and it was already the dominant language at the French Langue. The use of French allowed the Order to communicate effectively with the other Langues and to streamline its internal bureaucracy.

French in the 14th and 15th centuries underwent significant phonological changes and orthographic complexities. French language scholars refer to this period as the Middle French period.

The Order of Saint John had to navigate these linguistic changes and adapt their written communication to conform to them.

Italian was gradually emerging as the dominant language of Mediterranean trade, banking, and diplomacy during this period. As the Order of Saint John presence in Rhodes became more urbanized, Italian became the interim language used alongside French. Venice and Florence were two cities with significant influence over the Order of Saint John, and Italian became their clear choice for communication by the 16th century.



Street of the Knights—Rhodes

The National Linguistic Identities of the Knights Hospitaller

The importance of linguistic identities within the Knights Hospitaller cannot be understated, as each langue represented a unique cultural and national heritage. The distinct languages and customs of each langue contributed to the development and expansion of the order, while also fostering a sense of unity and camaraderie among its members.

This diversity was instrumental in the order's ability to successfully carry out its mission across different regions and adapt to the cultural and political landscape of medieval Europe.

The individual langues were fiercely proud of their national linguistic identities, and this pride was often reflected in their heraldry, attire, and architectural expressions.

For instance, the knights from the Langue of France would display their fleur-de-lis insignia as a symbol of their French origins, while the knights of the Langue of Castille, Léon, and Portugal would incorporate the Spanish and Portuguese royal arms into their heraldic design.

Similarly, the architectural styles of the auberges were influenced by the national origins of their respective langues, resulting in a rich blend of architectural elements that showcased the multicultural nature of the order.

While the order was united under a common cause, the diverse national linguistic identities of its members enriched the cultural exchange within the Knights Hospitaller.

This diversity allowed the order to thrive and adapt throughout its long history, ultimately leaving an indelible mark on the regions where the knights resided and served. The enduring legacy of the Knights Hospitaller serves as a testament to the power of unity in diversity, celebrating the rich tapestry of languages and cultures that contributed to its impactful heritage



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The auberges of the Knights of Rhodes

The auberges were strategically located and served as both residential and administrative centres for their respective langues. These buildings were constructed in various locations during the medieval period and were designed to house the knights and their support staff, as well as serve as places of worship and administrative centres.

Examples of auberges include the Auberge d'Aragon in Birgu and Valletta, Malta, and the Auberge d'Auvergne in Birgu and Valletta, Malta..

Fortification and Defence

The Grand Magistry's primary focus was the fortification and defence of the island to protect its inhabitants and maintain the order's strategic position in the Mediterranean. The Knights Hospitaller transformed the city of Rhodes into a fortified haven, complete with a powerful navy and an advanced system of walls, towers, and moats.

Their commitment to the enduring defence of Rhodes not only earned them a reputation as a formidable military force but also allowed them to effectively administer the island's governance and contribute to its prosperity.

Cultural and academic life

Under the Grand Magistry's leadership, the Knights Hospitaller (Knights of Rhodes) also focused on nurturing the cultural and academic life of Rhodes. The island became a hub of intellectual activity, attracting scholars, artists, and architects from across Europe and the Mediterranean. This influx of talent contributed to the development of Rhodes as a cosmopolitan city, where a vibrant blend of cultures and artistic styles flourished.

The Grand Magistry's tenure on Rhodes ultimately came to an end in 1522, when the island was captured by the Ottoman Empire after a brutal six-month siege. Despite this loss, the Knights Hospitaller's time on Rhodes marked a significant chapter in their storied history, showcasing their resilience and adaptability as a military and administrative power.

The Grand Magistry's achievements on the island continue to serve as a testament to the enduring legacy of the Knights Hospitaller and their unwavering commitment to the order's mission of protecting Christian pilgrims and safeguarding the faith.

Filerimos Monastery—Rhodes



The Byzantine Empire's Influence on the Knights of Rhodes

The Byzantine Empire, the Eastern Roman Empire's continuation, played a crucial role in shaping the Knights Hospitaller's cultural, architectural, and military practices during their time on Rhodes.

The proximity of the Byzantine Empire to the island provided opportunities for interaction and exchange between the two powers, allowing the Knights of Rhodes to benefit from the empire's knowledge, traditions, and advancements.

Military Fortifications

One of the most significant influences of the Byzantine Empire on the Knights of Rhodes was in the realm of military fortifications.

The Byzantines were renowned for their advanced engineering techniques and their ability to construct formidable defensive structures.

As the Knights Hospitaller sought to fortify Rhodes, they borrowed heavily from Byzantine military architecture, incorporating features such as double walls, watchtowers, and a sophisticated network of moats.

These innovations not only strengthened the island's defences but also contributed to the development of a unique architectural style blending Western and Eastern influences.

Cultural Practices

In addition to military architecture, the Byzantine Empire also impacted the Knights of Rhodes' artistic and cultural practices. The Empire was known for its elaborate mosaics, intricate frescoes, and ornate iconography, which left a lasting impression on the Knights Hospitaller.

The island of Rhodes became a melting pot for artistic styles, as Byzantine artistic traditions merged with those of the Order's various languages.

This fusion of cultural influences led to the creation of a distinct artistic identity that reflected the diverse and cosmopolitan nature of the Knights of Rhodes and their community.

Orthodox Influences

Moreover, the Byzantine Empire's influence extended to the Knights of Rhodes' religious practices. While the Order was primarily Catholic, their proximity to the Orthodox Byzantine Empire fostered greater understanding and appreciation for Eastern Christianity's traditions and customs.

This mutual respect and interaction between the two Christian denominations enriched the spiritual life of Rhodes, creating a unique atmosphere of religious syncretism in which both Western and Eastern Christian practices coexisted harmoniously.

The Knights of Rhodes' ability to embrace and incorporate such diverse influences into their own practices underscores the importance of cultural exchange and the power of learning from different civilisations.



Who could become Knight of St. John

The process of becoming a Knight of St. John, also known as the Knights Hospitaller, was a selective and rigorous one, open only to a specific class of society. To join the ranks of the prestigious order, a candidate had to fulfil several strict requirements and criteria.

Noble Birth

Firstly, candidates had to come from noble birth, usually the sons of knights or other members of the nobility. This requirement ensured that the order maintained its exclusive and privileged status within the society of the time.

Commitment

In addition to their noble lineage, the order's members also had to demonstrate their commitment to the order's religious and spiritual mission. As the Knights Hospitaller were a Catholic military and religious order, only those who adhered to the Catholic faith were eligible for membership. Every knight had to believe and obey to the Catholic Pope.

Unwavering Loyalty

Beyond their noble background and religious beliefs, candidates had to exhibit the personal qualities and virtues befitting a Knight of St. John. They were expected to demonstrate unwavering loyalty to the order's mission and its Grand Master, as well as a fierce dedication to the defence of Christianity and the protection of pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land. Candidates also had to possess a strong moral character, with an emphasis on virtues such as humility, courage, and a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the greater good.

Skills and Training

Before being admitted into the order, aspiring knights underwent a period of training and initiation, during which they learned the necessary skills and disciplines for their future roles, both on and off the battlefield. This training included martial arts, horsemanship, and the use of various weapons, as well as the study of religious texts and the rules governing the order's daily life.



Bougainvillea Entrance—Old Rhodes

The conventual church of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem

The conventual church of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, also known as the Knights of Rhodes, was an essential part of their religious and communal life.

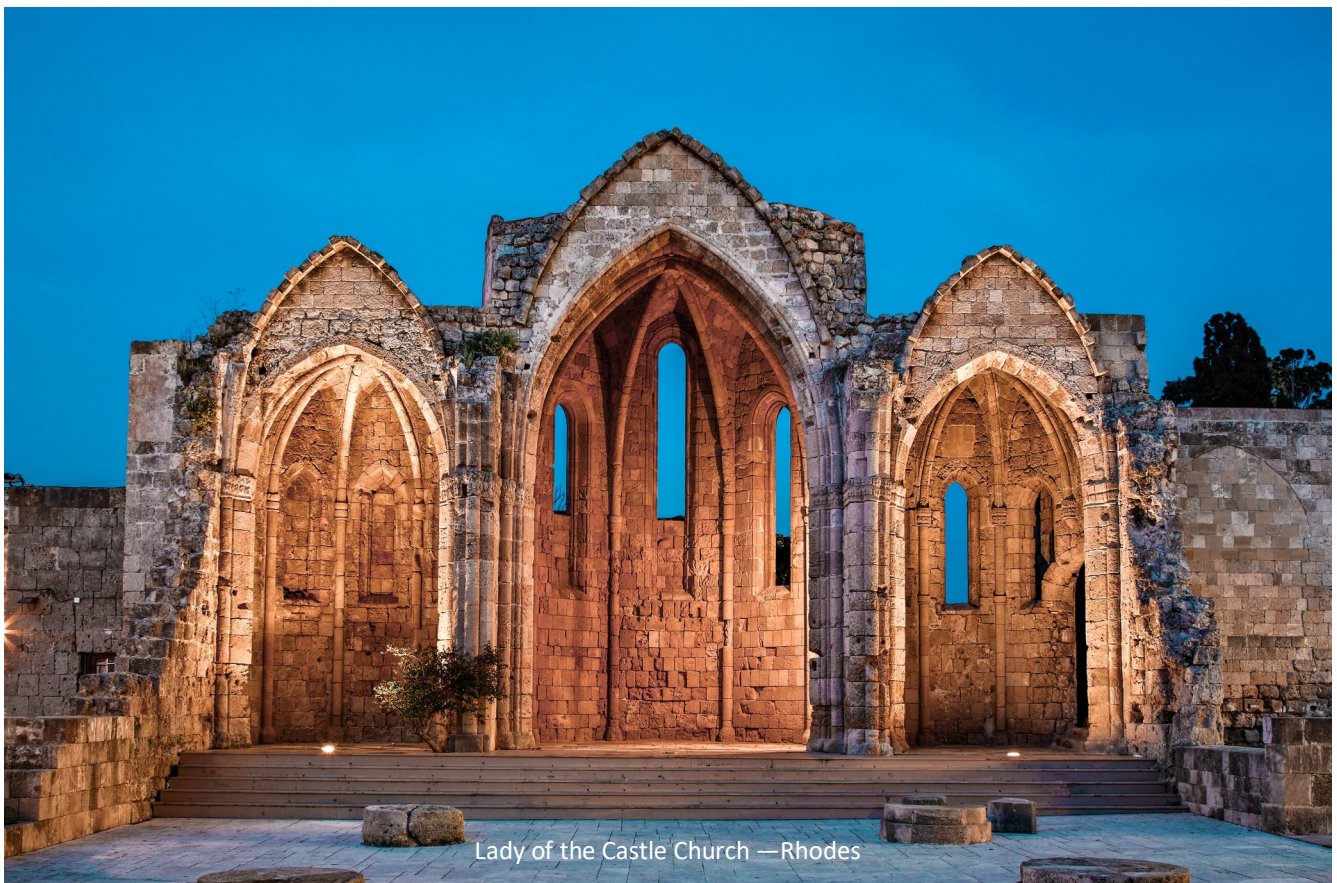
This church, located in the heart of the Order's headquarters in the city of Rhodes, served as a spiritual centre and symbol of unity for the knights and their affiliated brethren.

Constructed with great attention to detail and craftsmanship, the conventual church reflected the architectural and artistic influences of the Byzantine Empire, as well as the various European cultures of the Order's members.

Featuring intricate mosaics, frescoes, and ornate carvings, the church showcased the artistic innovation and skill that were characteristic of the Knights of Rhodes.

Within its hallowed walls, the knights would gather for daily mass, prayer, and other religious observances, reaffirming their commitment to the Order's spiritual mission.

The conventual church also played a crucial role during the investiture ceremonies of new knights, as the sacred space in which they would take their vows and receive their knightly accolades.



Lady of the Castle Church —Rhodes

Administrative changes by the time the order began until today

By the time order began, the Order of the Knights of St. John, also known as the Knights Hospitaller, has undergone numerous administrative changes, reflecting the shifting political, religious, and social landscapes of the time.

From its origins as a religious and military order, the Knights Hospitaller has evolved and adapted, maintaining its relevance and presence in the modern world.

When the order began, the Order was governed by a hierarchical structure headed by the Grand Master, who held the ultimate authority over all matters concerning the Order.

With the fall of Rhodes in 1522, the Order was forced to move its base of operations to Malta, where it would be known as the Knights of Malta.

During this period, the Order underwent significant transformations in its administrative structure, adapting to the changing political, military, and social context of the time.



The Langue Banners

In the early 14th century, with the acquisition of Rhodes, the Order of Saint John took on the features of a State. Governed by the Grand Master, the Order minted its own money and maintained diplomatic relations with other States. New knights came to Rhodes from all over Europe and it was natural for them to associate with those who spoke their language.

In 1319, the Order resolved to group the Hospitallers according to homogenous language systems, the so-called “Langues” or Tongues. The Langues did not follow the pattern of national states but rather the national-linguistic identities of western Europe.

The noun langue is uncountable. Pronounced läng almost long.

The plural form of langue is also langue.

There were initially seven Langues: Provence, Auvergne, France, Italy, Aragon, England and Germany. In 1492, Castille and Portugal split off from the Langue of Aragon and constituted the eighth Langue. Each Langue, first on Rhodes and then on Malta, possessed an “Auberge” or inn, used for accommodation, meals and meetings. The loss of Malta in 1798 ended the ancient division into Langues. The following diagram shows the banners of each Langue:

Auvergne

In 1565 the Grand Marshal was the Leader of the Langue Auvergne. He was not the commander of the army as the name suggests, but responsible for supplying both the Army and the Navy with essential armaments, ammunition, horse tackle etc. He was the superintendent of the arsenal, which of course included the control of gunpowder. His duties overlapped with those of the Admiral. Beneath him in rank was the Grand Groom, who came from the class of sergeant, and the constable who was the cavalry commander. Today the Grand Marshal's duties revolve around heraldry and ceremony. After the Siege of Rhodes in 1522, the Knights did not have time to remove their remaining gunpowder from the Crypt of the Church of St John of the Collachium, so the Grand Marshal sealed and hid it so well that the Turks never found it. It remained forgotten for 343 years when in 1865 lightning struck the church detonating the gunpowder. The church disappeared, as did the nearby Turkish Mosque, one half of the Grand Master's Palace and several houses in the Street of the Knights. Today, all has been restored except the Church of St John.



England

The Grand Turcopolier was the Leader of the Tongue of England.

Initially he was the commander of the light cavalry. The 'Turcopoli' until the fourteenth century was no more than a junior army officer, subordinate to the Marshals, but in 1304 he was placed seventh in the hierarchy.

The French Fleur-de-Lys on the English Coat of Arms is because of the large area of France captured at the Battle of Agincourt.



Italy

St Augustine and the Vision of St Jerome

In the 15th Century, the states in the north of Italy were amongst the wealthiest in Europe. At the time of the 4th Crusade the Papacy had relocated to Avignon. Rome, Central and Southern Italy, once the heartland of the Roman Empire, were largely in ruins. Consequently, the Papal States were loosely administered with little law and order. Naples, Sicily and Sardinia were under foreign domination and the ports of Pisa, Genoa and Venice provided the main trade routes through the Levant. Other city/states were Milan, Florence, Sienna, Genoa, and Venice. Consequently by 1565 when Malta was besieged by the Ottomans, the banner of 'Italy' was used to describe the general area, although most of the population would never have heard of the name. The leader of the Tongue of Italy represented all of these States, which were aligned because of a common language. He was given the posting and title of Grand Admiral. The title emerged at the end of the 13th century when the Order was an emerging naval power. The admiral was in command of the fleet and had absolute power over the ships and their crews, except when the Grand Master was present.



Allemagne

The Treasurer, or Grand Baili, was the leader of the Tongue of Allemagne, now Germany. He was the Accountant of the Order's finances. He was also the overseer of livestock rearing, i.e. poultry, swine etc. The Grand Baili was later responsible for the castles of the mighty estate. After the fall of Rhodes in 1522, the emblem of Allemagne was shown with a one-headed eagle, but by the Siege of Malta in 1565, the estates had expanded considerably and the eagle was shown, as in our banner with heads.



Provence

The Grand Commander was always the leader of the Tongue of Provence and second in rank to the Grand Master, for whom he often deputised in the event of illness or absence. His duties were not precisely defined, but it seems he managed the Order's property and he had been in control of its income, taxes, and resources. His subordinates were the Sub-Commander and the granary Inspector. The former was responsible for the stores of salt, meat, and wine, and he was probably chosen from the class of Sergeant. The latter supplied the Order with wheat and cereals.



Aragon

The Draper was the leader of the Tongue of Aragon. He attended to the dress of the members of the Order and was responsible for the workshops in which garments were produced and stored. Aragon extended over the north-eastern peninsula of the Mediterranean coast. It later joined with Castille to become present day Spain and was responsible by this union to deliver the death blow to Morrish domination in Europe. This title of Dreaper evolved into our present-day title of Grand Herald.



Castille-Leon

From 1361 onwards, the Office of Grand Chancellor was given to the leader of the recently established tongue of Castille. He was in charge of the Grand Master's Secretariat and sealed and signed original state document. These duties are continued today. The title of Secretary to the Grand Master and Grand Conservator echo the original duties the banner shows the Castel of Castille and the Lion of Leon after these kingdoms became one.



France

The Langue of France can be dated to around the beginning of the twelfth century when three gifts of land for hospitals were given to the Order. They were in the county of Hainaut, Laon, and at Theil near Cerisiers, in France. Several donations were made over the next century, but the most important donation was made by Queen Isburge, who founded a collegiate church of thirteen Hospitaller priests at Corbeil. For the next century Corbeil became the normal residence of the Priors of France. The collegiate became immensely wealthy and the seat of the Priory was transferred from Corbeil to the magnificent Temple in Paris. The Priory of France significantly lost wealth due to the Hundred Years War with England in the 14th century. The priory continued on through the ensuing years but was decimated during the French Revolution and its knights were stripped of their French citizenship and became subjects of Malta.

