

Fra Matthew Festing and the case of Grand Master Francisco Ximénez de Texada (1773-1775)

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Fra Matthew Festing the 79th Grand Master of the Knights of Malta was laid to rest on 3rd December amongst some of the most formidable of Grand Masters that include Grand Master Jean de Valette. Festing was born in Tarsset, Northumbria, a descendent of Sir Adrian Fortescue. He dedicated his life to diplomatic work and the humanitarian mission of the Order. Festing was laid alongside unmarked stone slabs.

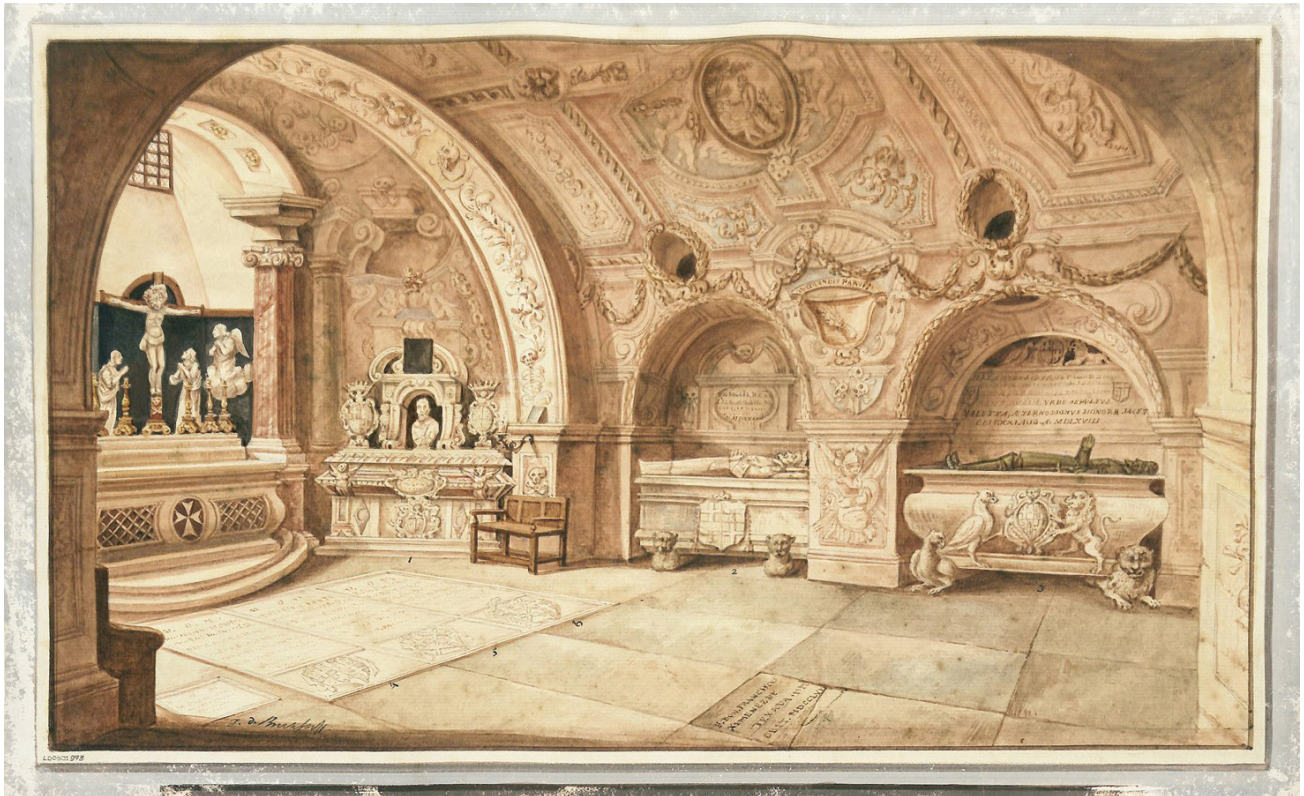
Whilst preparations were made to lift up the stone slabs to prepare the grave, new insights of the burials carried out in the crypt emerged. Naturally, this led to some serious research. It has long been believed that one of the unmarked slabs is the grave of Grand Master Ximénez de Texada. Grand Master Ximénez was criticized for reducing expenditure and increased prices, bringing forth the Rising of the Priests. Ximénez is listed in the register of deaths *Liber in quo describunt nomina Religiosorum Ordinis Sancti Joannis Hierosol Protepore defunctorum* (AOM 1948, f. 199) as having died on the 9th November 1775. His is a strange case as he is the only Grand Master of the Order to have died in Malta and does not have a proper funerary monument either in the Grand Master's crypt or in the nave of the Church. Of the 28 Grand Masters who ruled in Malta between 1530 and 1798, two, Fra Didier de Saint-Jaille (1535-1536) and Fra Ferdinand von Hompesch died and are buried outside the Island; the rest, numbering twenty-six, are all interred in St John's.

The register notes that Franciscus Ximénez de Texada, Bailiff of the Langue of Aragon and Prior of Navarre, died at the age



Portrait of Grand Master Ximénez de Texada, Museum of the Order of St John, London, UK

of 72 succumbing to a pulmonic fever. His body was exposed within a hall in the Palace until the tenth day of the month. On the eleventh day, a procession was held, with usual pomp, towards St John's Church and the Grand Master was buried there, during solemn mass, in the Chapel of the Holy Cross, another term used for the crypt of the Grand Masters. There is no mark for his grave, but an 1840s watercolour of the crypt



Charles Frederick de Brocktorff, 1st View of the Vault of St John's Church, in the island of Malta, 1831, Museum of the Order of St John

by Charles Frederick de Brocktorff does show that one of the pavement stones, in front of the monument to Grand Master Jean de La Cassière contains an inscription marking the grave. The stone paving was possibly changed at some stage as the present paving is different in size. The reason however as to why Ximénez de Texada was never given a proper tombstone remains unclear and highly out of character especially since by this period it was customary for the Grand Masters of the Order to erect an elaborate monument within the chapels of the conventual church.

Previous research indicates that Grand Masters were first buried in the crypt as the chapel had also endowed with it a special ecclesiastical privilege accorded in 1579 by a Bull of Pope Gregory XIII dated 1st of December. The privilege, sought by Grand Master La Cassière, conveys a perpetual Plenary Indulgence, applicable to the Souls in Purgatory. The Plenary Indulgence was gained only on those days of the year when the Mass for the dead may be said. Certainly, the Grand Masters wished to be laid in the crypt and their bones interred and commemorated in the Chapel of their own Langue a year later.

Thus, on the death of a Grand Master, while his monument in the Church was being made, his remains rested in a tomb under the pavement of the Crypt, whence after not less than a year, they were transferred to their permanent tomb in the Church. The Ceremonial Book of the Order, AOM, Arch. 1952 Chapter 38, contains very exact directions for the ritual to be observed when transporting the corpse of a Grand Master from the Crypt to his monument in the Church. The ceremonial states: *Transacto anno, vel amplius transfertur Cadaver a monumento [...] ad Eius tumulum, seu Mausoleum in aliquo Maioris Ecclesiae Sacello constructum*. According to the same Ceremonial, close to the day of the transportation, the Officials and the Knights who had held Office under the deceased Grand Master were notified by his Major Domo and, at the appointed time, they would be waiting in the Crypt with a number of Knights Grand Cross, all holding a lit torch, under the direction of the Prior of the Church. When the moment arrived, the Vice-Prior of the Church would reach the Crypt, arrayed in surplice, mozetta and black stole, accompanied by the Ceremoniere of the Order and the Sacristan.



The grave of Grand Master Ximénez with the edge of the coffin visible



The grave of Fra Matthew Festing along side the tomb of Grand Master Ximénez

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Die 19. Novembrij 1775.
 Comy, et Amiy Dny m. magister Fr^s Ximenez de Texada
 V^o Lingue Aragonie Bajulipuy, et Navarre Prior in septuagesimo se-
 cundo gratij anno Palmarum febre correptus omnibusq; S. matris
 Eccl^e Sacramentis roboratus Animam suam Creatori constanti-
 simè reddidit; ejus cadaver in Aula sui Palatii die decima expo-
 situm ut de more die vero undecima cum solita funebri pompa
 in nra^m majore^m ~~Deloiana~~ delatum, post missam Solemnem
 ceterasq; exequias in Saello S. Crucis sepulturam habuit.

Die VIII. Decembrij 1775

The entry describing the death of Grand Master Ximénez, *Liber in quo describunt nomina Religiosorum Ordinis Sancti Joannis Hierosolymitanorum* (AOM 1948, f. 199)

Then, bearing the coffin, on their shoulders, they proceeded from the Crypt to the body of the Church or the Chapel of the Langue wherein stood the Grand Master's monument. Here the coffin was opened, and the remains were identified by the Chief Medical Officer of the Order. The coffin having been resealed, the Obsequies were intoned by the Vice-Prior and the remains were enclosed in the monument.

Salvatore Micallef, in his book *La Chiesa di San Giovanni Battista in Malta*, notes: *Quivi è pure spolto il despota gran maestro Francesco Ximénez de Texada, in un sepolcro però miserabile per terra, ed una rozza pietra lo cuopre senza contenere nè il suo nome, nè alcuna indicazione di sua memoria: l'istesso corpo dei gerosolimitani avea dannato all'oblio il nome di quell'inumao! E per quanto rispetto professiamo all'opera dei Visconte L. F. de Villeneuve Bargemont dei "Monumenti dei gran maestri gerosolimitani," non possiamo tacere di essere egli incorso in errore nell'aver riportato la iscrizione lapidaria di esso Ximénez, ad

equivoco di chi gli avea somministrato i materiali di quell'opera.

He claims that there was no inscription at the time he was writing but refers to a document by Visconte de Villeneuve Bargemont who he said was incorrect in writing that the tombstone had an inscription.

But as a result of the recent excavations, a coffin made from lead and that was once covered with wood was uncovered and we can now be certain that Ximénez was laid in the crypt and never moved. The position of the tomb can now also be confirmed. Bargemont describes Ximénez as one who was excessively haughty who introduced harsh measures that alienated him from those around him and the Maltese. None were attached to him for his ingratitude and even contempt for the services they rendered to him. This was the fate of this Grand Master, to rest in peace in an unmarked tomb.

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