

# Jean de Vallete

by Peter E. Lewis



Fort St Elmo, guarding the entrance to Grand Harbour, Malta. (Wikimedia Commons).  
Inset pic: Reverse of a 1 Zecchino coin issued by the Order of St John of Jerusalem in 1965.

IN the collection of St John's Cathedral in Brisbane there is a silver coin that bears the name of Jean de Vallette, who was the Grand Master of the Knights of Malta from 1557 to 1568. The coin is unusual because although it has at some time been vigorously cleaned there are still patches of carbonized material indicating that it had been in a fire. (Figure 1) What terrible conflagration might this have been? It was probably a fire that occurred during the siege of Malta in 1565. In that year the Ottoman Turks, who were Muslims, attempted to capture the island but were repulsed by the Christian knights and the people of Malta, led by Jean de Vallette (English: John of Vallette). Many historians consider that this event changed the course of history. In fact, they say that the Knights of Malta saved Western civilization and Christendom, and that the

person most responsible for this amazing achievement was Jean. (Figure 2)

The Ottoman sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent (Figure 3), intended to use Malta as a base for an invasion of Italy and then Europe. He already controlled North Africa, the Middle East, Greece and the Balkans, and only needed to take Malta. He sent a large fleet carrying more than 30,000 soldiers, and they landed at a bay on the south-east coast. (Figure 4) There were only 700 knights on the island, although they were supported by about 8000 Maltese and mercenary troops; and Jean was an elderly French nobleman about 70 years old. The people all fled to Mdina, which was a walled town in the centre of the island, or to the fortresses of St Angelo and St Michael, where the knights were based. These fortresses had been built by the knights on two promontories that jutted out from the

eastern side of the harbour known as the Grand Harbour. (Figure 5)

On the coin in Figure 1, Jean's name and emblem are on the obverse. The Latin inscription is + F.IOANNES DE VALLETTA.M.HOSP.HIER, which means 'Brother John [French: Jean] from Valletta, Magister [Master] of [the Order of] the Hospital of Jerusalem'. 'DE' is a Latin word meaning 'from' and it indicates that Jean came from the town of La Valette du Var in Provence. Various spellings of this town occur on John's coins: VALLETTA, VALETA, VALLETTA, VALLET, but the commonest is VALLETE; and the name "Jean de la Vallette" is the one used by Felice Restelli and Joseph Sammut, the authors of the standard reference for



Figure 1a – Obverse of a 4 Tari silver coin of Jean de Vallette showing his emblem, which has a cross in two quadrants and a falcon and a lion in each of the other quadrants.



Figure 1b – Reverse of a 4 Tari silver coin of Jean de Vallette showing John the Baptist holding a staff with a cross at the top and pointing to a lamb.

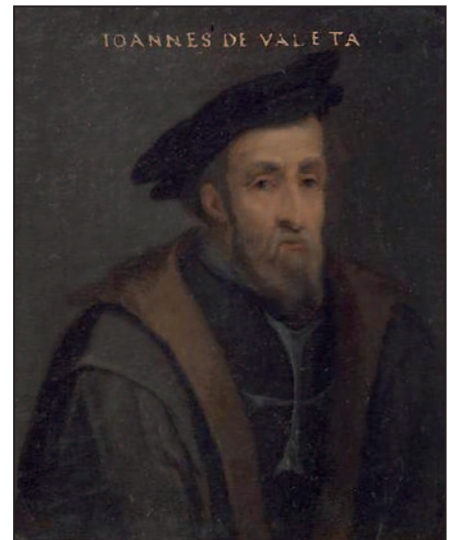


Figure 2 – Painting of Jean de Vallette by an unknown artist in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Oil on panel. It is in the Kunsthistorisches Museum. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 3 – Suleiman the Magnificent, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire from 1520 to 1566. Portrait attributed to Titian c.1530 (Wikipedia).

these coins, *The Coinage of the Knights in Malta*, published in 2 volumes in Malta in 1977.

On the reverse of the coin there is the figure of John the Baptist with a lamb at his feet. He is pointing to the lamb who is looking up at him. The lamb represents Christ whose sacrifice of himself on the Cross is at the heart of the Christian faith. The scene depicts an episode described in John's Gospel: *The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29) The

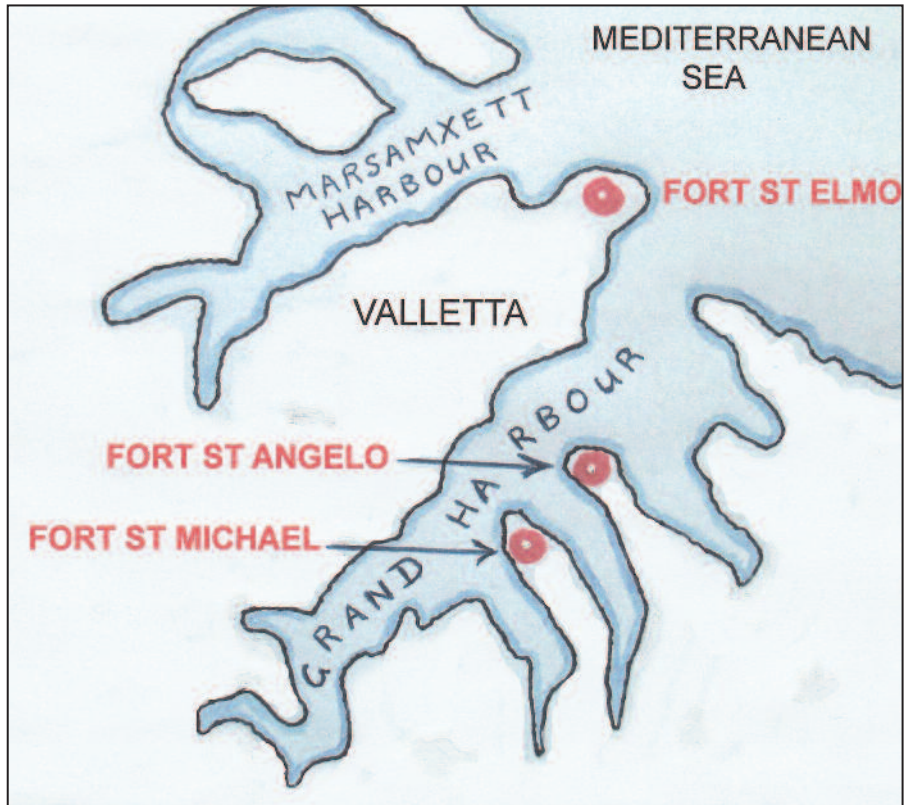


Figure 5 – Map of the Grand Harbour in 1568. The town of Valletta was built and named after the siege. (Drawing by the author)

Latin inscription on the coin is + ECCE QVI TOLLIT PECCATA (Look who takes away sin). The Latin words are followed by a symbol that looks like a figure 8 on its side. This represents a scroll, and in medieval art John the Baptist was some-

times depicted holding a scroll with this Latin inscription or just ECCE on it.

Why should John the Baptist appear on these coins? In 1070 AD before the First Crusade a hospital and guesthouse for poor pilgrims was founded in Jerusalem by merchants from Amalfi in Italy, and the complex expanded to include the little church of St John (John the Baptist). The soldier monks who worked in the complex took on the role of protecting pilgrims in the Holy Land, and they became the Knights of the Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem, or Hospitallers for short. When the Crusaders were expelled from the Holy Land by the Muslims the Hospitallers went to Cyprus, then to Rhodes and finally to Malta. So their full name is now the Sovereign Military and Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta. Some Protestant branches of the Order are known simply as the Order of St John of Jerusalem. So the Order, right from its beginning was associated with John the Baptist.

This explains why some coins of Jean de Vallette show a gruesome image: the severed head of John the Baptist on a plate. (Figure 6) The Latin inscription around the head is + PROPTER VERITATEM ET IVSTICIA +, which means 'For the cause of truth and justice'. This comes from Psalm 45, verse 4: *In your majesty ride on victoriously for the cause of truth and to defend the right.* (NRSV) This image appeared regularly on the coins of the knights of Malta until they were expelled from the island by Napoleon in 1798.



Figure 4 – Map of Malta. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 6 – 4 Tari silver coin of Jean de Vallette showing the head of John the Baptist on a platter. (Fritz Rudolf Künker Auction 246, Lot 2828)

The story of John's beheading is well-known, how Salome did the erotic 'Dance of the Seven Veils' and how this strip-tease so excited Herod Antipas that he promised to give her whatever she asked for. When she asked for John's head, *the man went, beheaded John in the prison,*

*and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl.* (Mark 6:28) In a painting by the famous Italian painter, Caravaggio, (Figure 7) the man is presenting the head to Salome, and the depiction of the head on a platter is similar to that on John's coin. One needs only to rotate

the coin 90 degrees to the left to align the head with the head in the painting. Has Caravaggio copied it from the coins of the Order, or at least been influenced by them? How could this happen?

Although Caravaggio had a great artistic talent he was a wild character with a violent temper. During an argument in Rome in 1606 he killed a man. He fled to Malta where the knights, aware of his great talent but probably unaware that he was a murderer, admitted him to the Order. It was in Malta in about 1608 that he painted this masterpiece. What immediately strikes one on looking at it is that Salome is modestly dressed and cannot bear to look at the gruesome sight, turning her head away. This is contrary to the usual image of the sexy dancer, but surprisingly Caravaggio is correct in his depiction. In Mark's Gospel it simply states that *when the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.* (NIV) There was no strip-tease. She was only about twelve



Figure 7 – 'Salome with the head of John the Baptist' by Caravaggio, c. 1608. The painting is in the National Gallery, London. (Wikimedia Commons) Another similar painting of his, in the Royal Palace in Madrid, shows the head lying horizontally in the platter.



Figure 9 – Reverse of a 50 Tari coin issued by the Order of St John of Jerusalem in 1965. Diameter 32 mms.. It shows the Turkish soldiers breaking in to the fortress of St Angelo.

years old and hardly capable of erotic dancing. She certainly performed a delightful dance, but it was what a child might do at a party.

Jean de Vallete was very religious and when only 20 he joined the knights when they were in Rhodes being besieged by the Turks. In 1523 after both sides had fought to a standstill the knights surrendered the island and sailed away. In 1541 Jean was captured by Barbary pirates and spent a year as a galley slave. Chained in position and being incessantly flogged it was a miserable existence, but eventually he was able to re-join the knights in Malta and became the Grand Master in 1557. In 1565 the Turks invaded and after a hard-fought battle they captured the fort of St Elmo, which guarded the entrance to the Grand Harbour, but after months of bombarding and attacking the forts on the promontories they were unable to capture them. Hoping to intimidate the knights the Turks decapitated some of the knights they had taken prisoner and put their heads on stakes. They tied the headless bodies to wooden crosses and floated them across to the forts. The knights responded by executing their Turkish prisoners and using their heads as cannonballs. At a critical moment, when the Turks were breaking in (Figure 9), the old man, as Grand Master of the Order, put on his helmet and personally led the knights in defen-

ding the fortress of St Angelo. With this boost in morale they were able to repel the enemy. So it was Jean himself who saved Malta, Western civilization and Christendom.



Figure 10 – Gold Zecchino of Jean de Vallette. (Vcoins.com: Coin Kingdom)

# Postal Bid Sale

We offer regular sales of 5,000+ lots, including

- World Coins - Most Countries A to Z (2,000+ lots) in all metals including Gold.
- Australia - Pre Decimal, Gold, Banknotes, Decimal, Tradesmen's Tokens (800+ lots) Medallions - Share Script (Gold Mining)
- World Banknotes - Ancients - Roman Coins.
- Great Britain - Hammered, Milled & Modern Coins, Large Selection of Tokens & Medallions

A wide range of lots to suit almost any collecting interest and budget - Lots from \$5 to \$5,000.

Please request our **FREE Catalogue.**



PO Box 1616,  
Ballarat Mail Centre  
Victoria 3354 Australia

Phone: (03) 5330 1486

Email: [coins@netconnect.com.au](mailto:coins@netconnect.com.au)

Visit our ONLINE BIDSITE:  
[www.coinmall.com/cointrends](http://www.coinmall.com/cointrends)



Yes, I'd like your latest catalogue

Name: .....

Address: .....

.....

..... P/Code .....



Figure 11 – Detail of the coin in Figure 1b.



Figure 12 – Copper 4 Tari coin of Jean de Vallette. (Vcoins.com: Pavlos S. Pavlou)



Figure 13 – 2 Euro coin of Malta issued in 2008.



Figure 14 – Badge of Queensland.

After the siege the knights built a huge hospital, the Sacra Infermeria, in the town south of St Elmo's Fort. The town was called Valletta after the Grand Master and is now the capital of Malta. The cathedral in Valletta is named after St John. So although St Paul first brought Christianity to the island (Acts 28:1-10)

he was eclipsed, at least in this part of the world, by the Baptist.

A gold coin of Jean de Vallette shows him kneeling before John the Baptist and receiving the banner of the Order. (Figure 10) The inscription is F. IOANNES DE VALLETE. The letters 'MI' to the right of the staff stand for Magister Ioannes. On the reverse Christ stands holding the Gospels with his left hand and blessing with his right. The Latin inscription is DA MICHI VIRTUTEM CONTRA HOSTES TVOS, which means 'Give me strength against Thine enemies'.

The emblem of the Order is an eight-pointed cross known as the Maltese Cross. It appears at the top of all Jean's coins (Figure 11) and as the main feature on some of Jean's silver and copper coins. (Figure 12) Jean was the first Grand Master to issue large copper coins probably because of the enormous amount of money needed for the building of Valletta. They were in the same denominations as his silver coins but Jean promised to redeem them in silver as soon as possible, and this is indicated on the reverse of the coins by the two joined hands and the Latin inscription NON AES SED FIDES (Not copper but trust).

The Maltese Cross also appears on the largest of the Euro coins of Malta issued in 2008. (Figure 13) On this bimetallic coin the letters M A L T A appear in the angles of the cross, whereas on Jean's copper coin the letters F I O D V (Fra Ioannes de Vallette) appear in the quadrants of the cross. On the bimetallic coin, instead of a surrounding inscription, there are 12 stars representing the 12 countries in the

European Union, whereas on Jean's copper coin the surrounding Latin inscription is SVB HOC SIGNO MILITAMVS (We serve as soldiers under this sign). The eight points of the cross represent the virtues that the knights strove to uphold: to live in truth, to have faith, to repent of sins, to be humble, to love justice, to be merciful, to be sincere and whole-hearted, and to endure persecution.

The Maltese Cross is incorporated into the badge of Queensland (Figure 14) and appears at the top of the state's coat of arms (Figure 15). This cross was first used by the Colony of Moreton Bay in its naval ensign in the 1850s but it does not signify any official connection between Queensland and the Order. However, whenever a Maltese Cross is seen it should remind the viewer of Jean de Vallette and the brave knights of St John.



Figure 15 – Reverse of an Australian 50-cent coin showing the Queensland coat of arms. There is a Maltese Cross at the top.



Stamp issued by the Order of Malta showing a coin of Jean de Vallette.

## Returned and Services League of Australia (Tasmania Branch) Inc.

has for sale a surplus number of the 2012 \$2 coloured "Poppy" coin at original issue price plus postage

Contact Robert Dick (State President) Ph: 0448 889 848 Email: [rsltaspres@bigpond.com](mailto:rsltaspres@bigpond.com)