The neo-thalassocracy of the Order of St John: Identifying with the past.

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The Classical wisdom that an island is easier to defend by sea than from land was not wasted on the Order of St John. When the Order was faced with a do-or-die transition after the Latin Kingdom of the Holy Land finally collapsed in 1291 and all the military orders were expelled, the Order changed from an army to a navy. It acquired the archipelago of Rhodes around 1310 and later Malta in 1530. To be able to resist the expansionist ambitions of the Ottoman Empire, the Order became a neo-thalassocracy in the fashion of ancient Crete. Armed with their triremes, positioned at strategical points around their island-homes, and their ability to harness the power of pirates, marauders and slave-traders, they tried to contain the Ottomans in the Eastern Mediterranean basis through pin-prick tactics, as the Ottomans were to big an enemy to confront head-on.

Mariners have their own take on religion, brought about by the unpredictable conditions at sea, and the knights of the Order followed this trend, notwithstanding their strict following of the Roman Catholic religion. In view of the Order’s well-developed culture of identity, memory and memoria, St John’s Co-Cathedral, Valletta Malta, the home church of the Order, possesses a wonderful floor of polychrome intarsia sepulchral monuments and slabs. Their iconography and inscribed texts contain many references to Classical mythology, warfare and seafaring. The Classical past became part of the benchmarking of the knights’ drive for recognition of their individual and collective heroism and martyrdom. This article will let the sepulchral monuments and slabs of St John’s, the corpus of memory and memoria, speak for themselves and present a tableau de la troupe of Classical mythological figures in text and images.