

# *Prestor John*

## Excerpt

I am Giovanni Benito Cosimo, a knight of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta. My chronicle begins in early 1187 when I answered Pope Clement III's command for the Christian kings of Europe to form the Third Crusade. The Pope's charge was to recapture the Holy Land from the Muslim Saladin and his Saracens, rescue the Holy Sepulcher, and restore Jerusalem as the holy site of Christendom. I sailed from Naples bound for Malta to meet with other Knights of Saint John.

Before we proceed, perhaps I ought to discuss my background. The nuns at the orphanage told me I was born in May 1169 in the small town of Padova—a few miles west of Venice. My unwed mother abandoned me in a pew in the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The kind nuns of The Order of Saint Francis took me to their orphanage. They raised and educated me to become a physician. At seventeen, however, I left the orphanage to answer the Doge of Venice's, Orto Mastropiero, call for soldiers to fight the Croatian pirates who had been raiding the Venetian cities throughout the Adriatic Sea. For reasons I do not understand, I had a natural affinity for fighting. In several battles, I distinguished myself with heroic actions. After our victory, the Doge, a viceroy in the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta, knighted me in St. Mark's Cathedral. Since then, I have been searching for commissions to earn my living in the name of our Christian God.

In our small fleet bound for Malta were twenty other knights, their squires, bowmen, pikemen, horses, and the paraphernalia needed for war. A few days after departing Malta, we arrived in Rhodes where we joined compliant kings and thousands of knights from the Christian kingdoms.

Under the command of Richard I, whom we called Coeur de Lion because of his distinguished valor, I fought in successful battles in Palestine where we captured the coastal cities of Acre, Arsuf, and Jaffa. In 1190, I was posted to the besieged city of Tyre in Syria. Conrad of Montferrat was in command of the Christian forces defending the city. Several thousand skilled Saracen warriors surrounded us. Their siege weapons hurled solid projectiles that pounded the walls and flaming projectiles that started conflagrations within the city. Their bombardment was without respite.

Realizing that without relief, we could not endure indefinitely, Conrad ordered me to lead a large force to counterattack. Our goal was to break through the Saracens' lines to capture an oasis about three miles to the south. From this oasis, we were to sortie and harass the Saracens from their rear thus easing pressure on the city. In just a matter of minutes after leaving the South Gate, I realized that we were doomed. My troop fell in droves to a fusillade of arrows, and from projectiles launched from the Saracens' mangonels. Discipline disintegrated, and in a chaotic frenzy, my men broke in disorder. To the man, the Saracens cut them down.

A projectile pummeled me on the head. From the gaping wound, blood flooded my eyes, nose, mouth, and down my neck onto my chest. As the world became blacker and blacker, I staggered to the ground unconscious. I lay comatose all day among the dead, dying, and moaning wounded.

Shortly after sunrise, squads of victorious Muslim soldiers scoured the battlefield to recover their dead for prompt burial and to collect Christian spoils: weapons, armor, trophies, and prisoners. I lay semiconscious and barely aware of my wound or my surroundings. My only sensation was the pounding pain in my head. The blazing sun and a sharp pain in my neck stimulated my awareness. A Saracen had a scimitar at my throat and was demanding that I renounce Christianity and embrace Mohammedanism, which he insisted was the only true religion. I had no voice to respond with my resounding rejection. Such silence probably saved my life. His cohorts ripped the large silk red cross off my white outer garment and ground it into the sand. I relapsed into unconsciousness and have no recall of the next events.

Sometime later, I do not know how many days had passed, I regained my full senses. My first sensation was to realize that there was no pain in my head. I discovered that I was lying on a stone floor in a dark place. Someone had washed the blood from my body and bandaged my wound. Slowly, I realized I was in a Saracen prison. My worst fear overwhelmed me.

I was in solitary confinement in a cell with no windows. The only light came through a small window with iron bars in the heavy door. I had no way to distinguish between night and day or to keep track of the passing days. The Saracen guards were my only human contact. Soon, boredom tore at my soul. I do not know how long I was so confined. Prayer was my only solace.

After a time, the warden came to my cell. I rose from the straw scattered on the floor to face him as his rules demanded. "Christian knight," he said, "You have caused me no trouble. If you agree to obey scrupulously all my rules, I will grant you parole. You may mingle with my other prisoners and have access to the few books we have. Understand, any violation of my rules brings severe punishment. Do you accept?"

Stunned at this generous offer, I stumbled, "Yes warden, I accept." I paused for a few seconds as I explored the possibilities in his offer, "In Venice I was a medical student. Perhaps I could be of assistance to the other prisoners and even to your guards."

He raised his right eyebrow and advanced toward me. "Christian knight if this is a ploy you will not live to see it through. If you are sincere, do what you can."

I was helpless. There were no medicines, instruments, or bandages to alleviate the pain and disease of my fellow prisoners. At best, I could only give consolation and empathy. To challenge my mind, I began to learn Arabic. In a few months, I was fluent. I could read, write, speak, and understand this Oriental language. I was surprised that I learned my guards' language so quickly. I had no idea that I had an affinity for languages. I began to study the different dialects of our jailers who came from many sections of the vast Muslim empire. I even mastered Farsi, the language of Persia. My fellow prisoners tasked me to be their interpreter and spokesman.

Be not deceived. There was no hope. The prison warden ruled by the whip. Any violation of his absurd and inflexible rules incurred a flogging. The screams of knights as the lash ripped into their backs permeated our cells and assaulted our ears. On three occasions, I myself felt the lash for minor infractions—to this day the scars remain. Branding and amputations were the punishments for serious violations. Rations were short—the food was putrid and frequently maggot-infested, and the water was stale and malodorous. We were dying slowly of torture, prison rot, malnutrition, disease. Such were the catalysis for hope lost. We prayed to God that we would die soon and quickly. For many of my fellow knight prisoners, God answered their prayers.

I was not so fortunate. My maddening anguish endured, and abysmal despair enveloped me. I resigned my soul to God, but the tortuous days passed without relief—each more oppressing than the previous. In the loudest voice I could muster, I pleaded with God to take me to Him, "For what sins am I to suffer so? I am a righteous man who has scrupulously followed your commandments and the laws of the Church. In your name, I fought the Muslims in Palestine and Syria. My blood is on Holy soil." For divine reasons, He did not answer my prayers. My only consolation was that He had other plans for me to serve him.