

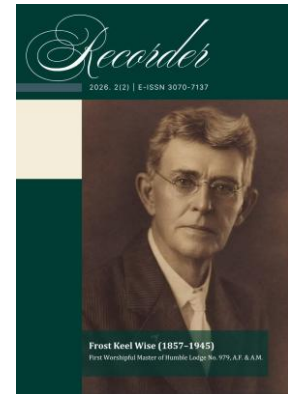
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Uniform of the American Knights of Malta: The Case of Norman Commandery No. 135, Lehighton, Pennsylvania (Early 20th Century)

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Abstract

This article examines the uniform of the American Knights of Malta in the early twentieth century, using Norman Commandery No. 135 (Lehighton, Pennsylvania) as a case study. The research is based on the analysis of museum artifacts from the collections of The Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar (Houston, USA), as well as a visual examination of photographic materials that make it possible to reconstruct the appearance of the commandery.

The study demonstrates that the Knights of Malta uniform constituted a coherent and highly standardized system, including headgear, coats, shoulder straps, insignia, belt plates, and ceremonial swords. Particular attention is given to the distinctions between senior (officer) and junior ranks, which were primarily expressed through the symbolism of crosses (patriarchal and passion crosses), as well as through differences in weapon design and certain elements of dress.

It is shown that, despite the overall unity of style, the uniform combined elements of hierarchical differentiation with a tendency toward standardization, reflecting the internal organization of the commandery. The analysis also highlights the important role of symbolism (crosses, monograms, colors) as a means of expressing affiliation with the order and its structural units.

The study concludes that the Knights of Malta uniform represents an important source for the study of Masonic material culture, offering deeper insight into the corporate identity and visual representation of fraternal organizations in the early twentieth century.

Keywords: Knights of Malta, Norman Commandery No. 135, Lehighton, Pennsylvania, USA, early twentieth century

1. Introduction

The study of Masonic uniforms constitutes an important direction in the investigation of the material culture of fraternal organizations, making it possible to identify features of their internal structure, symbolism, and corporate identity. In this context, the uniform of the Knights of Malta—one of the less numerous yet significant branches of American Freemasonry—presents particular interest, especially given that its regalia have survived in far smaller quantities than those of the Knights Templar.

Unlike the well-studied Templar traditions, the material culture of the Knights of Malta remains insufficiently explored, particularly at the level of individual commanderies. This makes museum collections especially valuable, as they allow for the reconstruction of the appearance, system of distinctions, and symbolic content of the uniform.

The aim of this study is to analyze the uniform of the Knights of Malta in the early twentieth century using the example of Norman Commandery No. 135 (Lehighton, Pennsylvania). Based on visual and material sources, the article examines the principal elements of dress, their functional and symbolic meanings, and the distinctions between the senior and junior ranks within the commandery.

2. Materials and Methods

The materials for this study consist of historical artifacts from The Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar (Houston, USA). A total of eight artifacts from four collections were examined (Collection 1: Swords; Collection 4: Photo Materials; Collection 3: Badges and Ribbons; Collection 2: Uniforms).

These artifacts date to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is important to note that Knights of Malta uniforms are relatively rare, which can be explained by the smaller number of members of this order in the United States during that period compared to the Knights Templar, and consequently by the smaller number of surviving uniform items.

The methodological framework of this study is based on the principles of historicism, systematic analysis, and an interdisciplinary approach applied to the study of Masonic material culture. The research combines methods from history, source studies, museum studies, and visual analysis, allowing the uniform to be considered not only as a material object but also as a carrier of symbolic and institutional meaning.

A key role is played by the source-critical approach, within which museum artifacts (uniforms, badges, swords, photographs) are treated as independent historical sources. Their provenance, dating, state of preservation, and context of use are taken into account. Particular attention is given to attribution and the correlation of artifacts with Norman Commandery No. 135.

3. Results

One of the most informative artifacts is a postcard depicting the members of Norman Commandery No. 135, located in Lehigh, Pennsylvania (MHAKT. Collection 4. Photo Materials. Exhibit No. o80). Its significance lies in the fact that it provides insight not only into the uniforms of both junior and senior ranks, but also into the commandery's flag. The image shows 29 members, 16 of whom belong to the senior rank and 13 to the junior rank.



Fig. 1. Postcard of the Knights of Malta. Norman Commandery No. 135, Lehigh, Pa. (MHAKT. Collection 4. Photo Materials. Exhibit No. o80)

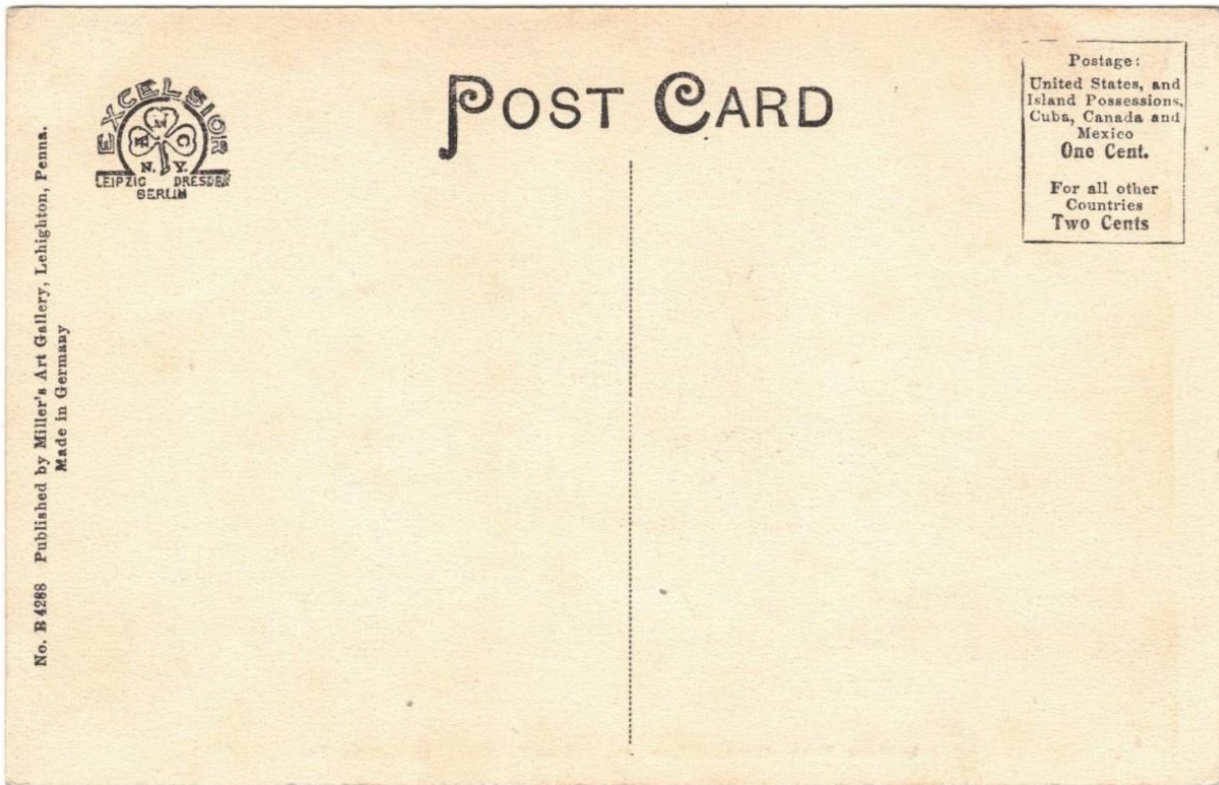


Fig. 2. Postcard of the Knights of Malta. Norman Commandery No. 135, Lehighton, Pa. Reverse side (MHAKT. Collection 4. Photo Materials. Exhibit No. 080)

Let us examine Fig. 1 in greater detail.

An important attribute of a commandery, both among the Knights Templar and the Knights of Malta, was its flag, which since the Middle Ages has been known as the *Beauseant*. Norman Commandery No. 135 possessed its own flag, which is shown in Fig. 3.



Fig. 3. Flag of Norman Commandery No. 135

The flag had a triangular shape, the central field of which was most likely black, while the border was made of a white ribbon. In the central field, the inscription *KNIGHTS MALTA* was embroidered along with the number 135.

The headgear (*Fatigue Caps*) of this commandery was of two types: for the senior (officer) staff (Fig. 4) and for the lower ranks (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. Fatigue Cap of the senior (officer) staff of the commandery



Fig. 5. Fatigue Cap of the lower ranks of the commandery

As seen in Fig. 4, the senior or officer staff wore headgear bearing the patriarchal cross, whereas the lower ranks (Fig. 5) displayed Maltese crosses. The museum collection also contains a cap of the lower ranks of the Knights of Malta, which provides a clearer understanding of the Maltese cross and the color of the headgear (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Cap of the lower ranks of the Knights of Malta ([MHAKT. Collection 2. Uniforms. Exhibit No. 058](#))

In Fig. 6, we can see that the Maltese cross on the headgear was embroidered with gold thread and featured gold braid, while the top of the cap was black.

The fatigue dress was black in color, with the commandery number indicated on both sides of the collar. All members wore black gloves. Shoulder straps were identical for all ranks and featured a patriarchal cross; thus, no distinction between senior and lower ranks was expressed through shoulder insignia. One such artifact is preserved in the museum collection (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. 1900s shoulder strap of the Knights of Malta (MHAKT. Collection 2. Uniforms. Exhibit No. 077)

Figure 7 shows a single shoulder strap of the Knights of Malta; a patriarchal cross is depicted on a crimson background. On the reverse side, the strap was attached to the uniform by means of a pin with a clasp.

On the sleeves of the uniform, members of the senior (officer) ranks bore a patriarchal cross, while those of the lower ranks displayed a passion cross. Among eight representatives of the senior ranks, we can observe the Past Commander badge (Fig. 8), indicating that the individual had previously held the highest office within the commandery.



Fig. 8. Past Commander badge

The museum collection contains one such badge of the Knights of Malta, which we present here (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Badge of the Past Commander of White Cross Commandery No. 159, KM (MHAKT. Collection 3. Badges and Ribbons. Exhibit No. 002)

The badge shown in Fig. 9 belonged to the Past Commander of White Cross Commandery No. 159, Le Roy Adams. Such badges were made of base metals or silver and were often adorned with gemstones, including rubies.

Let us also consider the belt and buckle of the Knights of Malta. All members of the commandery wore identical buckles, meaning there was no distinction between senior and junior ranks in this element. The buckle can already be seen in Fig. 8. The museum collection contains one such example (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Belt plate of Knights of Malta members ([MHAKT. Collection 2. Uniforms. Exhibit No. 149](#))

As can be seen in Fig. 10, the belt plate had a dark gold color with a red patriarchal cross. Finally, let us turn to the swords of the Knights of Malta. In Fig. 1, it is evident that the hilts of the swords of the senior members of the commandery bear a patriarchal cross, while those of the junior members display a passion cross. The museum collection contains three such Knights of Malta swords (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. At the top — a sword of a senior (officer) member of the Knights of Malta; below — two swords of lower-ranking members.

One sword belongs to the senior rank of the commandery (the sword without a scabbard) ([MHAKT. Collection 1. Swords. Exhibit No. 064/KM003](#)), while the other two belong to the lower rank (middle — [MHAKT. Collection 1. Swords. Exhibit No. 023/KM002](#); bottom — [MHAKT. Collection 1. Swords. Exhibit No. 006/KM004](#)). The hilts and guards of the swords had distinctive features (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12. Hilts of Knights of Malta swords

All sword grips were black in color; however, the guard and pommel of officers' swords were made of gold, while those of lower-ranking members were made of silver. The guard, identical on all swords, bore an emblem (Fig. 12).

The upper part of the scabbard featured Maltese crosses (Fig. 13).

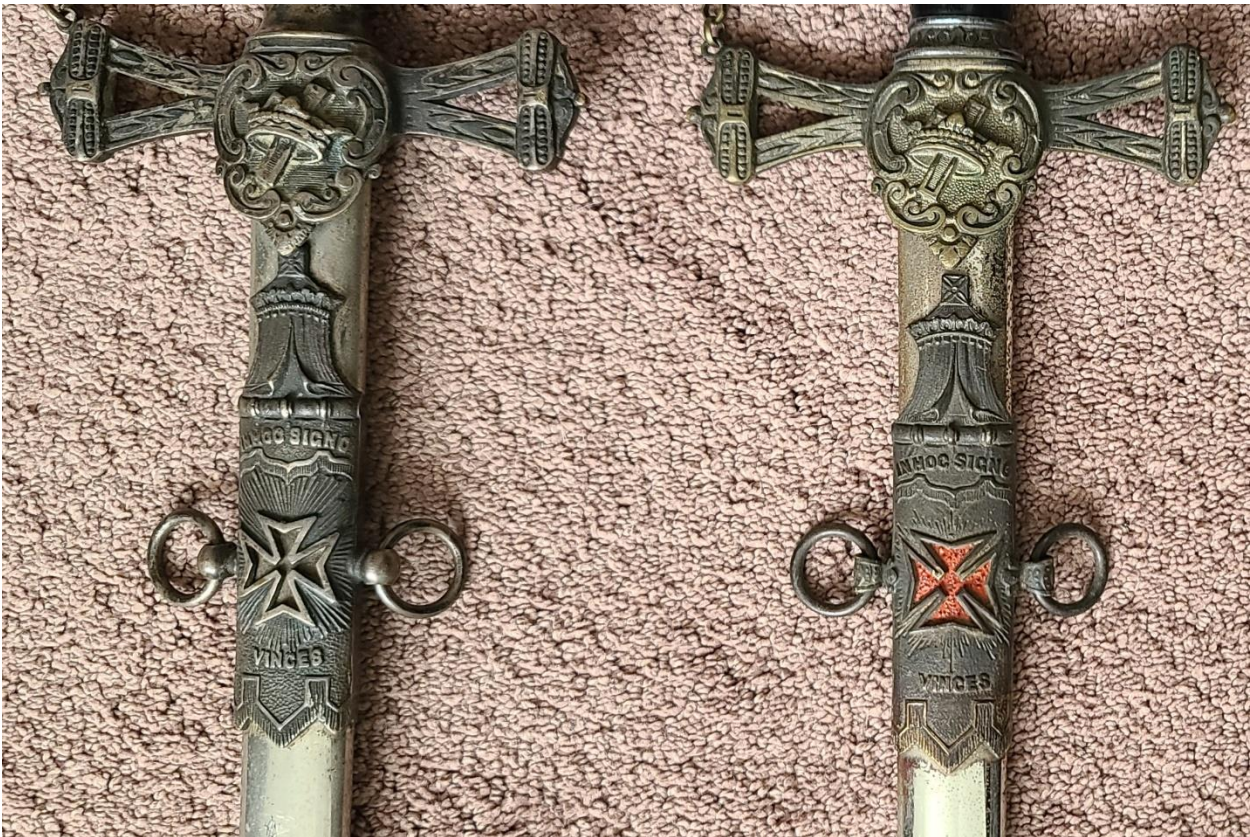


Fig. 13. Maltese crosses on the scabbards

In the middle section of the scabbard there was a monogram with the letters "KM," which stood for *Knights of Malta* (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14. Monogram “KM” – *Knights of Malta*

Finally, the lower part of the scabbard was also decorated with Maltese crosses (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15. Lower sections of Knights of Malta scabbards

Thus, concluding the analysis of Fig. 1 — *Norman Commandery No. 135* of the Knights of Malta in the early twentieth century — we can observe that the uniform of the commandery was executed in a strict and unified style.

4. Conclusion

The conducted study has made it possible to reconstruct the principal features of the uniform of the American Knights of Malta in the early twentieth century using the example of *Norman Commandery No. 135* (Lehigh, Pennsylvania). Based on the analysis of museum artifacts and photographic materials, it has been established that the uniform constituted a coherent, structured, and symbolically rich system reflecting both the internal organization of the commandery and its affiliation with the broader Masonic community.

One of the key characteristics of this system is the combination of uniformity and hierarchical differentiation. While maintaining an overall unity of style—black color scheme, standardized equipment, and consistent insignia—distinctions between senior and junior ranks were expressed in specific details, such as types of crosses, the design of headgear, sword hilts, and particular insignia. This demonstrates an effort to balance visual unity within the fraternity with the need to denote rank and function.

Particular importance was attached to symbolism, represented by patriarchal and Maltese crosses, monograms, and color schemes. These elements performed not only a decorative role but also a communicative function, ensuring identification of members and emphasizing their affiliation with a specific commandery.

Thus, the uniform of the Knights of Malta represents an important element of Masonic material culture, reflecting processes of institutional development, standardization, and the formation of corporate identity. Its study significantly expands our understanding of the visual and symbolic representation of fraternal organizations in the United States in the early twentieth century.

References

[MHAKT](#) – The Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar at Cherkas Global University