Proposal for the 3rd MMHN Conference

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Reaching Out Beyond the Horizon
Hospitaller Malta’s Communication System with the Mediterranean World in the 1600s

This paper is a description of a work in progress. It will outline the main themes addressed by doctoral research currently being undertaken at the Hospitaller Order’s Archives in Malta. The principal objective of the study is to try and assess how a Mediterranean island in the early modern era received news from the world surrounding it and exchanged information with other lands. In order to achieve this aim the study will try to reconstruct Hospitaller Malta’s system of communications and contact mechanisms with the Mediterranean, mainland Europe, and beyond which enabled the Order to maintain durable links with, and receive regular and reliable information from the surrounding Mediterranean world. The analysis and assessment of the efficacy and reliability of these communication channels will be carried out through the study of the system of networks which enabled the Order to absorb news from overseas:

- Diplomatic networks, made up of embassies, special envoys, emissaries, receivers, and procurators.
- Hospitaller networks based on the Priories which the Order owned throughout Europe.
- Ecclesiastical networks formed by the cardinals, based mostly in Rome and southern Italy, who provided patronage for the Order through their lobbying activity in the most influential European courts of the time.
- Commercial networks. Hospitaller Malta’s poverty in natural resources forced it to maintain trade links with several places around the Mediterranean and the influx of merchant ships from all around the region was a highly relevant source of information. These commercial links were also fostered by a network of consuls and agents resident in several Mediterranean lands.
- Naval networks. The Hospitaller squadron was consistently engaged in sorties against enemy outposts and vessels and the captains’ detailed reports once their mission was over constituted one of the most reliable sources of information for the Convent on the military situation of the Mediterranean.
- Financial networks. The collection of responsions from the Priories throughout Catholic Europe and the need to channel funds towards Sicily (mainly for the purchase of grain) and Malta meant that the Order had to keep in periodic yet constant contact with its receivers and procurators of the Common Treasury on the continent

In explaining this communication network the study will also endeavour to assess the efforts made by the Knights to overcome the ‘tyranny of distance’, the difficulties involved in channelling towards Sicily a constant flow of currency for the purchase of wheat, and how the threat of plague, whether real or the result of unfounded hearsay, could seriously disrupt the island’s link structures with the rest of the Mediterranean. By
way of conclusion, considerations will also be made on how this pattern of contacts since 1530, when the Knights settled in Malta, changed the island from within and altered its place and role in the surrounding geo-political setting.
Autobiographical Note

Ivan Grech studied history at the University of Malta. He carried out research at the state archives of Genoa, Rome, and Malta and published in Italy, Malta and Canada on Hospitaller Malta and the Mediterranean world in general, and more specifically on the relations between the Republic of Genoa and Hospitaller Malta. He currently teaches History at the University of Malta, has collaborated in the write-up of library catalogues of documentary material at the Malta National Library, and has participated in a curriculum development project for the creation of a Masters Degree in Mediterranean historical studies.