The Port of Malta and the Eastern Mediterranean in the late eighteenth century

Situated in the very middle of the White Sea, sitting astride both the north-south and west-east divides, Malta’s geographical position presents a contradiction. It is in the centre yet isolated, away from major trade routes. For Malta, an island always poor in resources and never able to provide enough food for its population, the sea was an inescapable medium over which the much needed supplies and trade had to be carried.

During a rule of more than two hundred years (1530-1798) the maritime Hospitaller Order of St John pushed Malta towards an ever increasingly profitable marine activity. Later still, during the opening years of the nineteenth century and under British rule, the port of Malta became a veritable hub of maritime traffic. Vessels from different nations, flying different flags, and with a wide variety of cargoes were setting off from a multitude of eastern Mediterranean ports and headed towards Malta as their final stop or as a step in a longer journey to destinations further afield.

In this communication, which is a work in progress, I will give a general overview of the shipping reaching the port of Malta from the different eastern Mediterranean ports, examine the trade routes that were being used, the type of trips undertaken and the cargoes carried. This will provide a context and insight into Malta’s ever increasing shift from isolation to centrality.
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Frank Theuma obtained his B.A.(Hons) in History from the University of Malta in 1994. In 1998 he was awarded an MA in eighteenth-century history from the same university. Till 2007 he taught European and Maltese History at a state school. Presently he is reading for a PhD in history where he is researching eastern Mediterranean shipping headed to Malta in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He is interested in both the economic and social-anthropological aspects of maritime history, especially in the maritime mentality that shaped and affected societies with a close interaction with the sea. He participated in several maritime history conferences and participated in research projects related to eighteenth and early nineteenth century Mediterranean shipping.