

Capital, Conflict, and Mediterranean Frontiers: The Mobilization of Funds from the Order of St John's European Estates in Early Modernity

Ivan Grech

American University of Malta

The Order of St John, Geopolitics, and the Growth of Western Capitalism¹

The Order of St John was originally founded as a hospice-keeping institution in eleventh-century Syria. By the following century it metamorphosed into a Christian military unit to adjust to geopolitical evolutions which saw the Holy Land transformed into a frontier territory where Muslims and Christians clashed bracing the mantra of religious ideology. Keeping hospices and fighting Islam increased the financial demands on the Order, and consequently the reliance on its continental estates which the knights hospitallers systematically acquired throughout the first few centuries of their existence.

The accumulation of these European estates through bequests, donations, or direct purchase² was a long-term investment with irreversible implications for the Hospitaller Order of St John. If well managed, extensive land possession in the agrocentric societies of pre-industrial Europe meant wealth in abundance and long-term prosperity which hardly any other economic activity could guarantee. Woods became timber, orchards provided fruit, and vineyards wine, fields yielded grain cargoes and all kinds of other crops, and farms reared livestock which provided meat, milk, cheese, wool, hides, and multiplied into other livestock, all of which could be consumed or used directly, bartered, or monetized. By the dawn of the early modern age, the Order had long upstaged its income-generation potential by diversifying the systematic exploitation of its estates. These estates, termed commanderies, and their various members dispersed throughout European territory could be sold or leased out, in full or in part, on short or long lets. Over the centuries the Order re-organised its continental property, grouping the commanderies into a series of priories, as Hospitaller edifices ended up merged into an ever-expanding continental urban fabric while long-term population levels soared and the urbanization process gained pace. The Order's architectural spaces within and outside urban walls were divided into grounds, rooms, apartments, houses, and workshops which could be sold or rented out.³ More income was derived from occasional gifts, exceptional impositions on these continental estates, fees for the admission of new members to the Order, and portions of inheritance of deceased Knights which by statute were due to

¹ This study – with a few adjustments – is drawn from my doctoral dissertation. Ivan Grech, 'Hospitaller Malta's Communication System with the Mediterranean World in the Early Seventeenth Century', unpublished PhD dissertation, Department of History, University of Malta, 2016.

² For a general overview of how the Order of St John of Jerusalem accumulated these estates in the first centuries of its existence, and how these estates were exploited to improve the economic condition of the Hospital see H.J.A. Sire *The Knights of Malta* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1996), especially chapter eight; Dominic Selwood, *Knights of the Cloister. Templars and Hospitallers in Central-Southern Occitania 1100-1300* (Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 1999); Judith Bronstein, *The Hospitallers and the Holy Land, Financing of the Latin East 1187-1274* (Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2005).

³ For an example of the development of a Hospitaller commandery in an urban setting and its exploitation for the generation of income, see Cesare Cattaneo Mallone di Novi, *Gli Hospitalieri di San Giovanni a Genova. Sette chiese, tre ospedali, due commende, un collegio* (Genoa, Delegazione Granpriorale di Genova, 1994) and Ivan Grech, 'The Hospitaller Commandery of San Giovanni di Prè in Genoa. Aspects of its Historical Development in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', unpublished M.A. dissertation, Department of History, University of Malta, 1996.

the common crusading cause.⁴ It was up to the receivers and procurators stationed in Europe to collect and manage the overall resulting funds from the various *ricette* – Hospitaller financial jurisdictions dispersed throughout the continent which served as depositories of the Order’s revenue. Profits from Hospitaller trading, privateering, and pillaging activities provided further introits for the Common Treasury of the Order.⁵ A large cargo of soap confiscated in the Levant, for example, could fetch a handsome price on the Roman market⁶ and from time to time foreign governments sounded the Order to sell them slaves,⁷ a commodity in perennial demand in a Mediterranean arena where fighting, rowing, and the ensuing casualties ensured that the manpower-supply trade was rarely inactive.⁸

But the generation of income through land, stone, inheritance, donations, trade, and crime was not always sufficient to sustain an institution like the Order of Saint John, whose self-imposed charitable ethos and much more financially taxing anti-Muslim militant creed⁹ implied enduring social, economic, and military engagement on regional and continental levels spanning centuries. As consistent frontliners on the Mediterranean’s ideological barricade and compulsive hoarders of landed property,¹⁰ the Hospitallers took upon themselves commitments which rendered compulsory and inevitable their introduction into a Euro-Mediterranean economy which, as the early modern age unfolded, was becoming increasingly reliant on capital¹¹ and on financial transactions for the relocation of funds. These financial transactions ultimately became a distinctive feature of western early modernity, bringing about changes in the credit markets which collectively earned the historiographical tag of ‘financial revolution’.¹²

Scholarship on the Order of St John hitherto still lacks a thorough, authoritative, and comprehensive study on the financial dealings of the Hospitallers throughout their history. Judith Bronstein’s study analyses the Order of St John’s economic efforts in the West and Latin Syria to help finance Hospitaller crusading missions in the Holy Land in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries.¹³ Bronstein shows how the Order received land and towns as donations, bought and sold property, invested in animal husbandry, cleared forests to gain agricultural land, traded in land and animal

⁴ The *spoglio* was four-fifths of a Knight’s property which passed on to the Order after his death. The mortuary consisted of the fruits of a commandery from the day the commander died till the start of the next financial year. The vacancy consisted in the fruits of the commandery accumulated in the following financial year. For a generic overview of the Order of St John’s sources of income and the definition of related terminology, see Alison Hoppen, *The Fortification of Malta by the Order of St. John. 1530-1798* (Edinburgh, 1979), 140-55.

⁵ T. M. Vann, ‘The Fifteenth-Century Maritime Operations of the Knights of Rhodes’, in *The Military Orders Vol 4. On Land and by Sea*, Judi Upton-Ward (ed.) Ashgate, 2008, 217.

⁶ AOM 1399, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 285v-286, 12 July 1620.

⁷ AOM 1417, Lascaris Castellar to Gio Andrea Doria (Viceroy of Sardinia), f. 80v, 9 April 1638.

⁸ Ivan Grech, ‘Dealing with Manpower Shortages in the Mediterranean. The Hospitaller Order of St John’s Labour Force Problems during the ‘Long Seventeenth Century’’, in C. Vassallo and S. Mercieca (eds.), *The Port of Malta* (Malta, 2018), 75-96.

⁹ Hoppen (1979), 144.

¹⁰ For an account of the Order’s acquisition and occasional loss of European estates from the Middle Ages to modern times, and a pictorial representation of their continental location, see Sire (1996), *passim*.

¹¹ Braudel reassures us that it is not anachronistic to use the terms ‘capital’ and ‘capitalism’ in a pre-industrial context, and William N. Parker asserts that certain ‘economic elements’, of the medieval world are recognizable as ‘capitalist’. Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century. Vol 1: The Wheels of Commerce*. Trans. S. Reynolds (London, Fontana Press, 1985), chapter 3, and William N. Parker, *Europe, America and the Wider World Essays on the Economic History of Western Capitalism. Vol 1: Europe and the World Economy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984), 3 respectively. Not all opinions in contemporary historiography converge on the issue. A different school of thought is less prone to condone the use of such terminology within a pre-industrial context. See, for example, John Chircop, ‘From Permeable Frontiers to Strict Border Divisions: The Geostrategic Construction of the Mediterranean on the Ruins of the Ancient Narrow Seas’, in *Borders and Conflicts in the Mediterranean Basin*, G. D’Angelo and J. Martins Ribeiro (eds.) MK, Turin 2016, 50-68.

¹² For a brief overview of the benefits to international trade as a result of sixteenth-century financial innovations see, for example, John H. Munro, ‘The Low Countries’ Export Trade in Textiles with the Mediterranean Basin, 1200-1600: A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Comparative Advantages in Overland and Maritime Trade Routes’, *International Journal of Maritime History*, vol. xi, no 2 (1999), 27-8.

¹³ Bronstein, *passim*.

produce, and lent money in a drive to expand its economic activity, both in Latin Syria and Europe, especially France, in order to finance its fighting in the Levant and withstand the dual Mamluk and Mongol menace from different latitudes.¹⁴ Glimpses on the economic activities, and consequently on the monetary transactions of the Order for the fourteenth century can be found in the writings of Anthony Luttrell, who acknowledges the documentary *lacunae* in this field, yet manages to provide a picture of a financially enterprising Order which by the beginning of the 1300s was quite well-versed in monetary transaction mechanisms, acting as both lender and borrower to supplement its income.¹⁵

The financial strains of the confrontation with Islam in the eastern Mediterranean were too pronounced to be sufficiently and readily eased by the sole reliance on the European estates, whose capacity to generate and transfer cash was often too sluggish or downright insufficient for the pressing needs of war. To conquer Rhodes in 1310, the Order had to take hefty loans from the Papacy and its Florentine banking families. The Bardi, the Peruzzi, the Acciaiuoli, and the Alberti continued to credit the Order demanding a minimum interest of 6 per cent and the pledging of Hospitaller estates in Europe as repayment guarantees,¹⁶ a basic fund-raising mechanism, similar to that adopted by the merchants of Antwerp in the sixteenth century,¹⁷ which the Order exploited since its years in Latin Syria¹⁸ and continued to exploit right up to its last days in Malta in the eighteenth century, when widespread post-Revolutionary turmoil and the consequent confiscation of several of its estates in Europe castrated its creditworthiness.¹⁹ Further borrowing was contracted from bankers of Pistoia for the defence of Rhodes in the second half of the 1300s²⁰ and although repayment commitments could waister all the income of several priories,²¹ the Order was still sufficiently resourceful to become a creditor itself, lending sums to royalty²² and to its former Florentine creditors, apparently suffering losses when the Acciaiuoli and the Peruzzi went bankrupt towards the mid-fourteenth century.²³ Similar setbacks were physiological hiccups in an otherwise enduring history of monetary investments which saw the Hospitallers venture more insistently into the world of finance as their history unfolded, perhaps less conspicuously and spectacularly than the Templars,²⁴ whose wealth and banking prowess attracted French monarchic greed with fatal consequences, but with more lasting dividends which contributed to the Order's survival and military activism for several centuries. Documentary focus on early-modern Italy alone reveals that the Hospitallers made investments of varying proportions from north to south of the peninsula. Manuscript sources mention Hospitaller investments in the Banco di Lampugnano in 1607²⁵ and refer to a 7 per cent investment in the territories of Milan and Cremona in 1609;²⁶ the Order and members of its property

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Anthony T. Luttrell, 'Actividades economicas de los Hospitalarios de Rodas en el Mediterraneo occidental durante el siglo XIV', in *VI Congreso de Historia de la Corona de Aragón: 8-14 December 1957* (Madrid, 1959), 175-83.

¹⁶ Anthony T. Luttrell, 'Interessi fiorentini nell'economia e nella politica dei Cavalieri ospedalieri di Rodi nel Trecento', *Annali della Scuola Superiore di Pisa* (Pisa, Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, 1959), 317-8.

¹⁷ Braudel (1985), 251.

¹⁸ Bronstein, 48. The Order continued to pledge its property to contract and cover loans even during its island phase in the East. Luttrell, 'Interessi fiorentini' (1959), 318.

¹⁹ Ivan Grech, 'La confisca dei beni dell'Ordine di Malta da parte della Repubblica Ligure', in *Cavalieri di San Giovanni e Territorio. La Liguria tra Provenza e Lombardia nei Secoli XIII-XVII. Atti del Convegno Genova-Imperia-Cervo, 11-14 settembre 1997*, J. Costa Restagno (ed.) Istituto Internazionale di Studi Liguri, Genoa 1999, 207-17.

²⁰ Luttrell, 'Actividades economicas' (1959), 180.

²¹ Luttrell, 'Interessi fiorentini' (1959), 318-9.

²² Luttrell, 'Actividades economicas' (1959), 179.

²³ Luttrell, 'Interessi fiorentini' (1959), 318-20.

²⁴ For an account of the persecution of the Templars by Philip IV of France in the fourteenth century, see Malcolm Barber, *The Trial of the Templars* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996). In the Middle Ages, France and England used the banking services of the Templars 'with great sophistication'. I. De la Torre, 'The London and Paris Temples: A Comparative Analysis of Their Financial Services for the King during the Thirteenth Century', in *The Military Orders Vol 4. On Land and by Sea*, Judi Upton-Ward (ed.) Ashgate, 2008, 121-7.

²⁵ AOM 1386, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 55-56, 11 February 1607.

²⁶ AOM 1388, Wignacourt to Amb. Lomellino (Rome), ff. 143v-145r, 30 April 1609.

in Liguria held a number of *luoghi* in the Genoese bank of San Giorgio²⁷ and at one point in the mid-seventeenth century the Order was willing to cash in on other assets in the form of *luoghi di monte* held in Rome.²⁸

Naples was apparently another favourite market for the Hospitallers to invest their money in. Income from the sale of property was converted in assets which yielded an interest²⁹ and thousands of ducats could be deposited in the *Monte della Pietà* of the city.³⁰ When in 1636 the Viceroy of Naples wanted to punish the knights hospitallers after their galleys confiscated a grain-laden Flemish vessel which had left Barletta to replenish other Spanish outposts, he found nothing better than to freeze the Hospitaller assets held in the various banks of his kingdom.³¹ Although the above are scant references which deserve deeper and more quantitative attention, they are indicative of a Hospitaller Order eager to exploit the possibilities offered by financial investment, more so in Italy, a country which had distinguished itself as a pioneer in the emergence of early modern western capitalism.³²

This capacity of the Order of St John to generate funds, irrespective of the source, was often an answer to short-term administrative and survival priorities but one which, protracted over decades and centuries, placed the institution and the island-bases it governed, such as early modern Malta, on a par with other continental states in terms of availability and accessibility of resources to finance their military infrastructure and activism. According to world historian Paul Kennedy, in early modernity the geopolitical fragmentation of Europe, even with Habsburg power at its zenith, created a spiral of strategic rivalry between the powers of Christendom which encouraged a rudimentary arms race for the resolution of conflicts, particularly from the early 1500s when the ‘military revolution’ started gaining further momentum.³³ Unlike other powers like Ming China or Mogul India, Europe was a divided continent where inter-state antagonism was augmented by confessional strife after the Protestant schism, and where Spanish Habsburg might was enough to intimidate the other states but not to impose absolute hegemony, stimulating a bellicose competition which remoulded state administrations and elicited the multiplication of efforts to generate and exploit resources, financial and otherwise.³⁴ Other historians shift the main focus on the resources available to European states in early modernity. Azar Gat, for example, argues that the ever increasing war expenses incurred by these states throughout early modernity was consequential to the capacity of these same states to draw on their resources and improve their military competitive edge in a fragmented continent.³⁵ Gat’s argument is in part corroborated by Niall Ferguson, who simplifies the argument further and straightforwardly equates the faculty to fight

²⁷ Ivan Grech (1996), 101-6. A *luogo*, from the Latin *locum*, was a quota of the Genoese public debt placed on the market with a nominal value of 100 *lire*. The *luoghi* generated an annual interest but their value varied constantly and were used as a means of payment in financial transactions, with the result that the *lira de luoghi* came to constitute another currency on the Genoese market. Jacques Heers, *Genova nel '400. Civiltà mediterranea, grande capitalismo e capitalismo popolare*. Trans. P. Mastrosa (Milan, Jaca Book, 1991), 85 and 106. For an example of Hospitaller profit made from an investment in the Bank of San Giorgio, see AOM 663, f. 4v, 12 February 1605.

²⁸ AOM 259, f. 38, 20 August 1652.

²⁹ Income from the sale of two houses in Naples was to be placed ‘*in alcun luogo sicuro per cavarne quelli frutti annuali che si sogliono dare*’. AOM 1388, Wignacourt to Caraffa (Naples), f. 189v, 13 June 1609. In 1613, with reference to Naples, Aloff de Wignacourt speaks of the ‘*molte rendite che sono in cotesto Regno*’. AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Abenante (Naples), ff. 161-162, 1 April 1613.

³⁰ In 1618, the Order deposited 15,000 ducats in the *Monte della Pietà* of Naples. AOM 1397, Wignacourt to Ponte (Naples), f. 144v, 21 April 1618.

³¹ Bartholomeo Dal Pozzo, *Historia della S. Religione Militare di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano detta di Malta*, 2 vols. (Verona, 1703 and Venice 1715), i, 841.

³² On the rise of Italy to financial prominence in western society, see Giuseppe Felloni, ‘Dall’Italia all’Europa: il primato della finanza italiana dal Medioevo alla prima età moderna’, in *Storia d’Italia. Annali 23*. La Banca, A. Cova, S. La Francesca, A. Moiola and C. Bermond (eds.) Giulio Einaudi Editore, Turin 2008, 93-149.

³³ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London, Fontana Press 1989), ‘Introduction’.

³⁴ Kennedy, the ‘Introduction’ and the first three chapters.

³⁵ Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilization* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), 449-511.

with money,³⁶ while Geoffrey Parker states how the whole saga of the Dutch revolt was heavily conditioned by Spain's recurrent financial crises.³⁷

One can argue whether Hospitaller Malta, and particularly the Order of St John, can be encased in Gat's paradigm. The Order's military arena during its island-phase was largely restricted to the Mediterranean and its liminal contours,³⁸ with Islam, and the Ottoman Empire in particular, as its main adversary.³⁹ On the continent, the Order's prime bellicose interest was substantially a passive one. The Knights lacked military adversaries in Christendom, yet could do little to impede the exploitation and plunder of their European estates by continental troops except from lodging diplomatic utterances in the hope that other potentates intervened in their stead to implement remedies which the Order, a flyweight in a Europe of domineering nation and territorial states, was impotent to enforce.⁴⁰

However, despite its status as a substantial passive observer and occasional victim of continental military competition, the Order had to fight its own lesser or official wars in the Mediterranean, and whether as an assailant, besieger, supplier of troops and galleys, or besieged defender, it was nonetheless compelled to maximise its military potential in order to survive and inflict as much damage as possible on Islam. Throughout its gradual displacement west after its foundation in Syria, the Order had to review and upgrade its military machine and approach to warfare. It ventured in maritime warfare with the building and upkeep of a galley squadron and, like so many other powers, had to update its military infrastructural designs to adapt to changes imposed by the gunpowder revolution.⁴¹ The Order sought further improvements throughout its stay in Malta and kept an eye open for possible technological improvements which could provide it with a military edge. In 1603, the Hospitaller hierarchy was mulling the acquisition of a supposedly new secret formula for making saltpetre,⁴² and by the mid-seventeenth century it added another galley to its squadron.⁴³

Whatever the causation of the Order's destiny – the military mission demanded resources yet, irrespective of the demand, no mission would have been possible without sufficient availability of resources and the capacity to source them in the first place - Hospitaller efforts to sustain their militancy and provide for the bases and populations they governed would not have been possible without the availability of sufficient capital. Although the Order was not competing in the European arena, it was nonetheless a Catholic force fully enveloped in Mediterranean warfare and its history can be annexed to Gat's argument regarding the conditioning factor of the availability of resources. The monies generated in Europe by the commanderies, raiding, capital investment, and otherwise rendered Hospitaller militancy on Christendom's side feasible for practically 700 years, moulding the Order of St John's history, giving it an imprint and direction which otherwise would not have been possible. While the income from donations and privateering booty was largely fortuitous, although occasionally spectacular, that from European estates and investments was more structural and dependable, albeit subject to multiple contingencies. These resources allowed the Hospitallers to become fortification and galley builders for centuries on end, making it possible for them to survive and recover from crushing

³⁶ 'fighting is possible only if you can raise the money to pay for it'. Niall Ferguson, *The Ascent of Money. A Financial History of the World* (London, Penguin Books, 2009), 70.

³⁷ Geoffrey Parker, *The Dutch Revolt* (London, Penguin Books, 1990), 16.

³⁸ Small contingents of Knights sent to aid anti-Turkish Imperial campaigns on Christendom's eastern front, such as in 1739, were sporadic instances of Hospitaller continental military engagement which cannot be deemed as full-scale military involvement on European territory by the Order. AOM 1498 Despuig to Amb. Baglio de Schade (Rome), ff. 51v-52, 2 March 1739.

³⁹ This argument is also reproduced in Grech, 'Dealing with Manpower Shortages in the Mediterranean' (2018), 83-4.

⁴⁰ Ivan Grech, 'The Dread of Violence and the Lure of Conflict. Contrasting Attitudes to Warfare: the Case of the Hospitaller Order of St John', in *Historicizing Religion. Critical Approaches to Contemporary Concerns*, B. Borstner, S. Gartner, S. Deschler-Erb, C. Dalli, and I-M. D'Aprile (eds.) Pisa University Press, Pisa 2010, 145-57.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 146-50.

⁴² AOM 1382, Wignacourt to Malvicino (Venice), f. 164v, 19 May 1603.

⁴³ Grech, 'Dealing with Manpower Shortages in the Mediterranean' (2018), 83.

defeats, relocate their efforts, lick their wounds, and come back for more.⁴⁴ Just as Ottoman resilience was largely due to the Anatolian hinterland's backup, as manifested by the remarkable post-Lepanto recovery,⁴⁵ the Order of St John's centenary stamina was sustained by its European estates. The analogy, however improbable due to the immeasurable dimensional gap between the two antagonists, can be considered plausible. More so, the income from these estates allowed the Hospitallers to participate in aggressive naval warfare with an efficiency and compulsive indulgence which rendered the Order a model for the smaller Catholic powers of the Mediterranean with proselytising effects. In the sixteenth century, the foundation of the Tuscan Order of St Stephen and its galley fleet was inspired and modelled on that of the Hospitaller Order of St John.⁴⁶

The overall result of the Knights' resources and military involvement was that the Order of St John, and eventually Malta, became perhaps Spain's most faithful ally in the Mediterranean. Hospitaller Malta was one of the few Catholic forces on which the Habsburgs could rely on almost unfailingly when demanded by anti-Muslim duty, with relatively few collateral demands and implications which rarely went beyond the annual concessions of the duty-free export of grain from Spanish Mediterranean outposts. The eleventh-hour *soccorso* of September 1565, one-off monetary donations such as aid for the post-siege construction of a new city-fortress,⁴⁷ and sporadic ambassadorial plights in times of dire food shortages⁴⁸ were instances of exceptional Habsburg attention elicited by early modern Malta in an otherwise centenary history of loyal peripherality. Hospitaller Malta was comparatively of little weight to the Spanish crown and the benefits of the island stronghold for the Habsburg cause did not stop there. Malta was a Spanish fief conceded to the Order of St John as part of the Kingdom of Sicily and did not feel threatened by Habsburg might. It was free from the Spanish threat which conditioned other European and Catholic states. If anything, Habsburg presence in Sicily provided added reassurance for the islanders, at least on a perceptive if not effective level. In turn, Malta's size and peripheral status to the Habsburg world could be of no significant nuisance to Spain. Malta was not locked in the continental logistical quagmire which was partly responsible for the decades of European internecine warfare throughout early modernity, and was neither burdened by internal confessional schisms. It was perhaps the most fundamental of Catholic forces, for its sole military obsession was Islam and was mentally and logistically free to pursue its mission with a single-mindedness which hardly any Catholic force in early modernity could afford. Malta was Spain's loyal sentinel in the middle of the Mediterranean which guarded its own limited confines while keeping an eye open on Habsburg shores in southern Italy,⁴⁹ a dependable cluster of rocks with the added bonus of units of Hospitaller property scattered throughout Europe which consistently funded its subsistence and militancy. To make these funds available to its needs, the Order had to relocate them from Europe to its headquarters or wherever they were needed, and to do so it had to rely on its communication and financial network sprawled all over the continent,⁵⁰ a web of contacts consisting of receivers, procurators, secretaries, and agents in general, plus a host of merchants, financiers, and money-changers.

⁴⁴ This statement is clearly stated in my doctoral dissertation. Grech (2016), chapter 5.

⁴⁵ Molly Greene, 'Resurgent Islam: 1500-1700', in *The Mediterranean in History*, D. Abulafia (ed.) Thames and Hudson, London 2003, 225-6.

⁴⁶ Ann Williams, 'Island Ports and Hospitallers, 1421-1631', in *Islands and Military Orders, c.1291-c.1798*, E. Buttigieg and S. Phillips (eds.) Ashgate, 2013, 73. Luca Lo Basso, *Uomini da remo. Galee e galeotti del Mediterraneo in età moderna* (Milan, Selene Edizioni, 2003), 342-3.

⁴⁷ Brian Blouet, *The Story of Malta* (Malta, Progress Press, 1989), 107.

⁴⁸ Dal Pozzo, i and ii, *passim*.

⁴⁹ On Hospitaller Malta's forwarding of military intelligence to Christendom, see Ivan Grech, 'Getting to Know the Enemy: Hospitaller Malta's Intelligence Network in the Early Seventeenth Century', in *Turkish Historical Review* 9/2, Leiden 2018, 105-50.

⁵⁰ For Hospitaller Malta's communication system and network, see Grech (2016), *passim*.

From Latin Syria to Malta: Continuity and Change in Hospitaller Fund Transfer

Networking and Institutional Coercion: The Surveillance of Hospitaller Personnel

The mobilization of funds was an exercise fraught with difficulties in pre-industrial Europe. Time, distance, the elements, the search for the right financiers or reliable merchants who could clear bills of exchange, the expenses and risks involved in the transportation of cash over land and sea, or the payment of interest charged on relocated sums when cashed in one place to be reimbursed in another were all factors which had to be dealt with when sourcing and transferring money. For the Order of St John there was the added difficulty of spending a good part of its existence on islands. One inherent weakness in Hospitaller administration, in fact, was that the commanderies, the Order's lifeblood, were scattered throughout all latitudes of Christendom. This provided welcome alternatives when income from some property dried out for some reason or another, yet created several difficulties at an administrative level. Controlling and defending Hospitaller estates, while sustaining a regular contact with them for all sorts of activities, not least the sourcing of funds, was an arduous task for the Hospitaller hierarchy. In a way, the Order had similar problems to Habsburg Spain in collecting money from a fragmented mass of possessions, with the added handicap that it was not endowed with Spanish muscle and influence to impose its interests and policy when problems arose. What arguments or means were available for the Hospitallers to stave off the confiscation of all its estates in England or to curb the freezing of its banking assets in the Kingdom of Naples mentioned earlier?

Distance was obviously a massive hurdle, even to impose internal administrative discipline. Whether in Syria, Cyprus, Rhodes, or Malta, the Hospitaller Convent (the Order's headquarters) was an absent landlord vis-à-vis its European estates, with all the ensuing difficulties in personnel supervision that this implied, just as it was practically impossible for the Dutch directors in Amsterdam to keep strict control on the running of their VOC (United East India Company) activities overseas.⁵¹ In the 1300s, payments to Rhodes from the German priories started defaulting⁵² and by the following century the Order was finding it difficult to collect responsions from Hungary⁵³ and practically impossible from Scandinavia.⁵⁴ The Order was plagued by similar problems throughout its existence and was perfectly aware of the difficulty to enforce its Council's decisions on its personnel, and consequently of the importance of the goodwill and professionalism of its agents for the smooth running of its affairs.⁵⁵ The Order could not afford to lower its guard, for the repercussions of poor or fraudulent administration on the continent reverberated right down to the Hospitaller headquarters and came to bear on the Common Treasury.

The efficiency of the surveillance of personnel was often directly proportional to vicinity and reach. While in Malta, it was comparatively easy for the Order's headquarters to keep a closer eye on agents in nearby Sicily, potentially reachable through a day's sailing and a maximum of two days horse travel from Scicli to the island's opposite coastal extremities.⁵⁶ But the more distant from Hospitaller Malta was the agent, the more complicated it was to execute regular and effective vigilance. Months could pass by, for example, without receiving any form of writing from southern Germany.⁵⁷ Europe's heartland could seem a very remote place from a Mediterranean island context. Continental perceptions

⁵¹ David S., Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (London, Abacus, 1998), 141-9.

⁵² Sire (1996), 195.

⁵³ H.J.A. Sire, 'The Priory of Vrana: The Order of St John in Croatia', in *The Military Orders. Vol 4. On Land and by Sea*, J. Upton-Ward (ed.) Ashgate, 2008, 226.

⁵⁴ Sire (1996), 197.

⁵⁵ Alof de Wignacourt could not put it more clearly in a letter to Rome in the early months of his magistracy: '*conoscendo che i buoni ordini operano molto poco se non sono aiutati dalla diligenzia e sollecitudine de i Ministri...*'. AOM 1381, Wignacourt to Amb. Porras (Rome), f. 34, 5 January 1602.

⁵⁶ A horse courier, for example, could cover the Scicli-Messina crossing in a maximum of one and a half days, and the distance between Scicli and Palermo could be covered in a maximum of two days. See, respectively: AOM 1385, Wignacourt to Falco (Scicli), f. 312v, 11 September 1606; AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Falco (Scicli), f. 329, 3 October 1605; and AOM 1389, Wignacourt to Grimaldi (Scicli), f. 204v, 21 July 1610.

⁵⁷ In January 1615, Wignacourt complained that six months had gone by without receiving official letters from southern Germany. AOM 1394, Wignacourt to Rosabac (High Germany), f. 63, 20 January 1615.

from the Convent could be hazy and at times the Hospitaller hierarchy could even encounter problems locating and properly picturing some of its own lands in Europe, at least up to the early seventeenth century. In 1602, the Convent was trying to establish whether the Principality of Tyrol fell within the Hospitaller Priory of Germany or that of Bohemia, and the doubts apparently persisted for years.⁵⁸ In 1615, despite extensive research in the archives of the Italian and German Langues, the Order still could not figure which priories comprised the territory of Tyrol (a region across the Austrian-Italian Alps) and the receiver in Venice had to be commissioned to try and solve the dilemma.⁵⁹ Similar problems render the idea of how complicated it could be for a group of Knights stranded on a rock in the middle of the Mediterranean to access, keep contact with, and consequently exert some form of control over very distant possessions.

One way for the Order to verify its state of financial affairs on the continent was to oblige its receivers and procurators to send reports on the accounts of their respective *ricette* as regularly as possible. This provided the Common Treasury in Malta with knowledge on the funds available for the execution of the various transactions needed by the Order and its archipelago base.⁶⁰ The prevailing impression in early modern Hospitaller historiography has hitherto been that the Order's administration lacked consistency and regularity in its record-keeping regarding financial transactions, fund transfers, and the income and expenditure from its priories.⁶¹ Should we review our convictions on this matter? A close analysis of the magistral outgoing correspondence for the first half of the seventeenth century alone would suggest that the Order solicited accounts from its financial agents on a fairly regular basis, although not always obtaining the desired results. Most of these records seem to have been lost. No similar collection apparently survives in the Maltese archives. However, official Hospitaller correspondence to Europe helps us chart a reviewed picture of the Order's record-keeping efforts in early modernity. Obviously the letters dispatched from the Convent only give indications about the nature, provenance, and occasionally the regularity of the accounts in question, without disclosing detailed contents or hints of possible uniformity of presentation between the various financial reports dispatched from all over Europe. But we have to make do with what we have in the hope that future archival findings will fill gaps and clarify present doubts. We know that the receivers were obliged to send the Convent annual balance sheets reporting the financial situation of their priories. This is also explicitly stated in a letter to the Grand Prior of Germany in 1617.⁶² But some magistral letters hint clearly at regular financial accounts (usually termed *conti* or *bilancio dei conti*) received or solicited by the Convent on a more regular basis. At various instances in the first half of the seventeenth century, we find that income accounts were to be sent from Florence, High Germany, and Milan on a monthly basis.⁶³ A letter dated April 1617 talks of a *bilancetto*, a brief balance account of the income and expenditure of a *ricetta*, sent to the Convent by the receiver of Naples for the previous month of February.⁶⁴ Other letters tell us that balance accounts were also sent, expected, or solicited from

⁵⁸ AOM 1381, Wignacourt to Poppel (Prior of Bohemia), f. 69v, 15 February 1602.

⁵⁹ AOM 1394, Wignacourt to Guinigi (Venice), f. 510r, 13 November 1615.

⁶⁰ At one point in 1656, Lascaris Castellar, in demanding a balance account from the Venetian receivership, states explicitly how important it was for the Convent to receive financial updates from its European priories: '*e quanto per n[ost]ro governo per saper di somma ci potremo far capital perché senza q[uest]a luce vivremo alla cieca*'. AOM 1646, Lascaris Castellar to Spreti (Venice), ff. 282v-283, 10 December 1656.

⁶¹ Alison Hoppen, 'The Finances of the Order of St John of Jerusalem in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *Europe Studies Review*, iii, no. 2 (1973), 103-5; Ivan Grech, 'Flow of Capital in the Mediterranean: Financial Connections between Genoa and Hospitaller Malta in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *International Journal of Maritime History*, xvii, 2, (December 2005), 195.

⁶² '*ordini nostri che comandano à i Recev[ito]ri di mandar in Convento ogni anno il bilancio dell'introito et exito della lor Ricetta*'. AOM 1396, Wignacourt to the Gran Priore d'Alemagna, ff. 253v-254r, 22 July 1617.

⁶³ In 1612, the receiver in Florence was asked to send a monthly '*nota dell'introito*' to the Convent. AOM 1391, Wignacourt to Gaetani (Florence), ff. 443v-444r, 8 October 1612. In 1615 the receiver in High Germany was told to send monthly accounts 'like his predecessors', meaning that the practice had been established for quite some time. AOM 1394, Wignacourt to Rosabac (High Germany), f. 63, 20 January 1615. In 1656, the receiver in Milan was asked to send the Convent monthly records of current exchange rates on the back of balance sheets. AOM 1646, Lascaris Castellar to Sforza Milzi (Milan), f. 189r, 20 May 1656.

⁶⁴ AOM 1396, Wignacourt to Ponte (Naples), f. 106r, 3 April 1617.

Palermo, Messina, Syracuse, Lombardy, Lyons, Venice, the Low Countries, Hungary, and Dacia, albeit with hardly any indication regarding the frequency of the reports.⁶⁵ Very occasionally some letters give extra indications of the type of information contained in the accounts sent to Malta, such as a list of the commanders who paid their dues and those still indebted to the priory and the Convent,⁶⁶ or regarding the appointment of commissioners to review the accounts of a specific Hospitaller jurisdiction.⁶⁷ Others talk of a ‘succinct’ report on income and expenditure sent from Rome for example,⁶⁸ or hint at obvious delays in the submission of annual balance accounts. Notwithstanding the Convent’s dictats, the problem of receiving the reports from distant territories when desired still prevailed. In 1605, the receiver in Bohemia sent the accounts of two successive years of his *ricetta* with the same dispatch.⁶⁹ Delays of many years were also registered from High Germany,⁷⁰ and in 1616 even the receiver of Palermo was reprimanded for taking too long to send his accounts to Malta.⁷¹

For the smooth running of its networks, financial and otherwise, the Order had no option but to trust its judgement when recruiting personnel and to remedy when such judgement proved flawed. Alessandro Marzo Magno declares that credit networks in pre-industrial society were based on ‘one fundamental element: (...) trust’.⁷² Francesca Trivellato also emphasizes the importance of trust for the proper functioning of mail and financial networks in pre-industrial society. Tightly-knit organisations based on kinship, co-religion, and friendship were often the answer to keep together the web of interconnections needed for the transfer of information and currency across territories in a society where any form of effective control from a distance was next to impossible. There was no suprastructure of international surveillance.⁷³ The Order was completely enmeshed in this network of international interconnectedness, for its continental property transcended national, political, and confessional boundaries, implying that the mechanisms for the mobilization of Hospitaller funds formed part of an international financial network which became a distinctive imprint of western capitalism by early modernity. Inevitably, even the Order had to rely on trust and reputation when recruiting its agents and, when the occasion arose, exploited family ties to ensure continuity in the running of a post, on a permanent or temporary level. When in 1608 the Hospitaller agent in Trapani in the northwestern tip of Sicily had to take leave from his post to travel to Campania, he proposed a relative of his as a temporary substitute,⁷⁴ and in 1621 the Prior of Lombardy sent his nephew to the town of Asti to collect the payment of hundreds of sacks of wheat owed to the priory by the local community.⁷⁵ In 1708, the Giavotto brothers succeeded each other as Hospitaller procurators in Scicli.⁷⁶

Obviously the Order could wield the ultimate measures adopted by any organised institution to impose its will, what Trivellato calls ‘institutional coercion’, ranging from the handing out of warnings

⁶⁵ For Palermo see, for example, AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 464, 23 September 1613. For Messina: AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Ventimiglia (Messina), ff. 369v-370r, 7 November 1605. For Syracuse: Ibid., Wignacourt to Settimo (Syracuse), ff. 74v-75r, 16 March 1605. For Lombardy: AOM 1385, Wignacourt to Bertone (Lombardy), ff. 277v-278r, 14 August 1606. For Lyons: Ibid., Wignacourt to Capece (Naples), f. 379r, 21 November 1606. For Venice: AOM 1388, Wignacourt to Loschi (Venice), f. 247, 25 July 1609. For the Low Countries: AOM 1397, Wignacourt to Conrado [Schoffard], f. 112r, 30 March 1618. For Hungary: AOM 1387, Wignacourt to Prior di Ungaria, f. 213, 18 August 1608. For Dacia: AOM 1385, Wignacourt to Hundt (Prior of Dacia), ff. 181v-182r, 9 June 1606.

⁶⁶ AOM 1385, Wignacourt to Muchental (High Germany), f. 215r, 2 July 1606.

⁶⁷ AOM 1384, Wignacourt to the Prior of Germany, ff. 276v-277r, 25 August 1605.

⁶⁸ AOM 1398, Wignacourt to Aldobrandini (Rome), f. 89r, 20 February 1619.

⁶⁹ AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Metich (Bohemia), f. 275, 25 August 1605.

⁷⁰ AOM 1389, Wignacourt to Muchental (High Germany), f. 332r, 7 September 1610.

⁷¹ AOM 1395, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 160v-162r, 2 May 1616.

⁷² Alessandro Marzo Magno, *L'invenzione dei soldi. Quando la finanza parlava italiano* (Milan, Garzanti, 2013), 162.

⁷³ Francesca Trivellato, ‘Merchants’ Letters Across Geographical and Social Boundaries’, in *Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe Vol III. Correspondence and Cultural Exchange in Europe, 1400-1700*, F. Bethencour and F. Egmond (eds.) Cambridge University Press, New York 2007, 80-103.

⁷⁴ AOM 1387, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 327v-328, 25 October 1608.

⁷⁵ AOM 1400, Wignacourt to Gio Micheli Asinari, Gov[ernato]re della Città d’Asti, f. 215r, 20 April 1621.

⁷⁶ AOM 1469, Perellos y Rocaful to Domenico Giavotto (Scicli), f. 89, 9 May 1708.

to the dismissal of agents from their posts, with ensuing possible punishments. In 1614, the Hospitaller receiver of High Germany was severely reprimanded for not having remitted funds to Venice where they were needed to commission shipments to Malta⁷⁷ and in 1620, Baldassarre Guinigi, former receiver of Venice, was imprisoned in the Maltese fortress of St Elmo for leaving his *ricetta* with over 11,000 *scudi* in the red.⁷⁸ On their part, Hospitaller representatives at various ranks, from ambassadors to procurators, had to weave their own local network of contacts within the confines of their post in order to satisfy demands dispatched from Malta. In its communiqués to various Hospitaller agents stationed abroad, the Convent more than once insisted on the need to commission reliable individuals capable of carrying out the task in question, using adjectival phrases with specific terminology such as ‘diligent’, ‘competent’, ‘faithful’, and ‘trustworthy’ to describe the qualities sought to keep the financial accounts of Hospitaller estates in High Germany; to deliver in person delicate correspondence from Messina; to transport by sea a hefty amount of specie from Naples; or to intercept the Hospitaller squadron at Capo Passero, in the southeastern corner of Sicily.⁷⁹ Usually it was left to the official Hospitaller representative in question to find the right contact. Giacomo Buonsegno is described as an aide to the Venetian receivership who ran commissions for the *ricetta* for a number of years leading to 1602,⁸⁰ and in 1614, the Order’s receiver in the Priory of Lombardy was to find a trusted person to carry out a financial transaction in Milan.⁸¹ Occasionally Hospitaller officials stationed in Europe and elsewhere were also sought for profiling purposes. Giovanni Malvicino was appointed Hospitaller receiver in Venice in 1602 after receiving favourable references from Langosco, his predecessor, and some other Hospitallers.⁸² In 1605, the Order asked the Prior of Germany to suggest a successor to Theodoro Dattenbergh, the receiver of Low Germany,⁸³ and in 1610 La Marra, the receiver in Palermo, was to carry out an inquiry on Luciano Maida who was being considered as a candidate for the post of consul of the Maltese in Palermo to replace Nardo Parnis.⁸⁴

Hospitaller officials posted abroad, in fact, had a key role in recommending individuals to the Convent for official posting in the service of Hospitaller Malta. In 1621, the Hospitaller agent in Lombardy dispatched favourable references to Malta about a certain Agostino Quartiero, recommending him for the appointment as principal notary of the Order in the State of Milan. Quartiero eventually got the post and his licence was renewed three years later.⁸⁵ The agents had the obvious advantage of being more knowledgeable regarding what the locality they were posted in could offer, but at times the Order gave its own suggestions. In 1602, for the shipment of wine and biscuit from Trapani, the Order suggested Simon Corso, described as ‘familiar to the Religion’ and apt to carry out the consignment.⁸⁶ But the ultimate decision usually lay with the agents, who first and foremost had to verify the availability of the contact in question. Friends and acquaintances could be enrolled as informants⁸⁷ and influential contacts occasionally proved useful. An informer in Sardinia, potentially a more obscure and remote place than locations further north to Malta, could provide useful information for the provision of goods from that island.⁸⁸ At one point in 1608, the Order was relying on the

⁷⁷ AOM 1393A, Wignacourt to Rosabac (Upper Germany), f. 320, 31 July 1614.

⁷⁸ AOM 1399, Wignacourt to Scalamenti (Venice), ff. 569v-570r, 23 December 1620.

⁷⁹ For similar examples where Hospitaller agents were advised to commission ‘*qualche persona diligente a voi ben vista in detto luogò*’; a ‘*persona pratica e fedele*’; a ‘*huomo fidato*’; or a ‘*persona fidata e diligente*’, see, respectively, AOM 1388, Wignacourt to Ratenou (Upper Germany), ff. 343v-344r, 30 November 1609; AOM 1386, Wignacourt to Torriglia (Messina), f. 311, 14 December 1607; AOM 1368, Wignacourt to Capece (Naples), ff. 150v-151r, 16 June 1607; and AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Falco (Scicli), ff. 155v-156r, 15 May 1605.

⁸⁰ AOM 1381, Wignacourt to Capece (Palermo), ff. 266v-267, 3 October 1602.

⁸¹ AOM 1393A, Wignacourt to Pagliaro (Piedmont), ff. 365v-366r, 29 August 1614.

⁸² AOM 1380, Wignacourt to Langosco (Venice), f. 49v, 17 January 1602.

⁸³ AOM 1384, Wignacourt to the Prior of Germany, ff. 247v-248r, 29 July 1605.

⁸⁴ AOM 1389, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), f. 311v, 28 September 1610.

⁸⁵ A marginal entry confirms the licence renewal. AOM 1400, Aloff de Wignacourt to Quartiero (Milan), f. 654, 30 November 1621.

⁸⁶ AOM 1381, Wignacourt to Capece (Palermo), f. 331r, 27 November 1602.

⁸⁷ At one point, for example, the Hospitaller ambassador in Rome, Ruiz de Prado, was advised to inform himself ‘*per mezzo d’amici et di terze persone*’, apart from the Hospitaller receiver in Rome, regarding a certain unspecified matter. AOM 1397, Wignacourt to Amb. Ruiz de Prado (Rome), f. 274, 7 August 1618.

⁸⁸ AOM 1383, Wignacourt to Capece (Palermo), ff. 221-223v, 16 July 1604.

intercession of the Count of Benevento to export Apulian cereals as alternative provisions for Malta in times of shortages.⁸⁹ According to a letter dated January 1620, the acting Hospitaller receiver in Castile had to contract a loan from some 'friends' to cover a large payment on behalf of the Order made in Palermo,⁹⁰ and in 1703 a certain prince Nixemi put in a word with Sicilian authorities on behalf of the Order to allow the Hospitaller squadron to load more provisions than usual in the ports of Syracuse and Augusta.⁹¹

On a more structural and official level, agents, and receivers in particular, could have their personal secretary who ran errands on their behalf or deputised in their posts,⁹² but it is not always possible from Hospitaller documentation to verify if an agent had a *segretario* or not. However, whether seconded or not, these agents were expected to transfer the Order's funds from the European priories, and to do so they exploited the basic mechanisms of fund transfer available in early modernity: the bill of exchange, the transfer of cash by land and sea, or a combination of both.

The Remittance of Prioral Funds: Bills of Exchange, Merchants, and Financiers

The lure of finance proved irresistible for the Knights of St John, not only for its inherent promise of providing more readily available capital, but also because of the possibilities it afforded to mobilise and relocate it. Just like so many other states, bankers, proprietors, merchants, and traders, one of the main problems that the Order had to face was how to transfer its funds from where it was generated to where it was required. The Knights Hospitallers could not afford to remain alien to a financial world which was evolving in search of more efficient, logistically viable, and quicker credit transfer mechanisms. The Order had the great majority of its landed property and assets, and consequently its money, in Europe. When, and if the commanders managed to collect what was due from the estates they administered, they had the duty to pass a third of this income, the responsions, to the receiver responsible for the Hospitaller financial jurisdiction under which the estates in question fell. At that stage, according to instructions from the Convent, the receiver cashed and used the funds, in part or in full, for whatever transaction was required, or transferred them to the Convent or to other locations dictated from Malta. Towards the end of 1620, the Priory of Lombardy transferred 950 doubloons to a group of bankers in Genoa on behalf of the Order: 444 doubloons were withdrawn by the Hospitaller receiver in the city-port to cover commissions on behalf of the Convent, while the remaining 506 were transferred to Messina.⁹³ In 1656, the Venetian receiver was instructed to withhold enough funds from the Venetian priory, and those transferred from Germany, to cover the purchase of timber from Fiume in the northeast corner of the Adriatic, since the Order lacked enough cash to effect the transaction from Malta.⁹⁴ Funds could be transferred in stages according to the Order's needs. In 1607, 18,000 *scudi* were to be remitted from Venice to Palermo in three tranches amounting to 3,500, 4,500, and 10,000 *scudi* respectively.⁹⁵ The route taken by Hospitaller funds depended also, in fact, on the Knights' activities, commercial and otherwise, and the European markets from where the Order purchased its goods. Money could be needed in Genoa to pay for anchors commissioned for a galleon;⁹⁶ in Venice to

⁸⁹ '*mediante la buona grazia del Conte di Benevento*'. AOM 1387, Wignacourt to Capece (Naples), f. 153v, 31 May 1608.

⁹⁰ AOM 1399, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 38, 15 January 1620.

⁹¹ AOM 1464, Perellos y Rocaful, to Prince Nixemi (Palermo), f. 123, 15, September 1703.

⁹² For some examples of secretaries or deputies to receivers see, AOM 1388, Wignacourt to Quartieri (Milan), f. 359v, 30 November 1609; AOM 1391, Wignacourt to Abenante (Naples), f. 302v, 10 July 1612 and *Ibid.*, Wignacourt to Caloro (Genoa), ff. 251v-252r, 19 June 1612.

⁹³ The bankers were Damiano and Henrio [de Frâche]. AOM 1399, Wignacourt to Semio (Lombardy), f. 578, 23 December 1620.

⁹⁴ AOM 1646, Lascaris Castellar to Spreti (Venice), ff. 276v-277r, 25 September 1656 and *Ibid.*, ff. 281v-282r, 15 November 1656.

⁹⁵ AOM 1386, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 257v-258r, 8 October 1607.

⁹⁶ For example: AOM 1399, Wignacourt to Semio (Lombardy), f. 306, 25 July 1620.

cover the systematic purchase of merchandise and its shipment to Malta;⁹⁷ in Rome to sustain the costs incurred by court proceedings in the *Sacra Rota* (tribunal of the Roman Catholic Church);⁹⁸ in Naples to export wine and other goods to Malta;⁹⁹ in Messina to cover a timber consignment;¹⁰⁰ in Trapani or Syracuse to provide the galleys with biscuit;¹⁰¹ or in Palermo for the usual payment of the *tratte*¹⁰² or to pay the tenderer providing the Convent with meat.¹⁰³

Apart from the direct transfer of money in cash, which will be dealt with in greater detail later on in this study, the other fund-transfer option available for the receivers was that which in Hospitaller documentation is frequently referred to in Italian as the *rimessa*, literally a remittance of funds which usually had to involve at some stage the use of bills of exchange. Fernand Braudel and Richard Bonney seem to disagree about the breadth of the use and influence of the bill of exchange in the Mediterranean world and beyond in the pre-industrial era. According to the French historian, the bill of exchange, or something conceptually very close to it, was already being used in Islam by the tenth or eleventh century of the Christian era.¹⁰⁴ In other instances, however, he does concede that it was only in Christendom that the bill was widely used, that in Syria it was debased of any value,¹⁰⁵ and that its use in Islam was 'so exceptional (...) as to suggest that it was unknown in the East'.¹⁰⁶ Bonney, on the other hand, states that currency transfer tools similar to the bill of exchange were 'restricted to Latin Christendom' and were alien to other parts of the world such as Muscovy, Islam, or Spanish America.¹⁰⁷ Irrespective of where the truth lies, what is certain is that by early modernity the widespread use in Europe of the bill of exchange rendered it a protagonist of the rise of western capitalism. The advantages it offered to whoever used it were undisputed: it provided a loophole for circumventing strict ecclesiastical laws on usury; it allowed the concession of loans veiled as otherwise; it could be cashed by its deadline date or it could be renewed or transferred; it allowed the relocation of funds without the physical transfer of cash, reducing the risks of loss through thefts and physical assault; it could be used as payment for commercial transactions; it allowed the transfer of funds between places with different currencies, and rendered international payments possible when states prohibited the exportation of precious metals; it was a credit instrument which gave the possibility of financial gain through the fluctuations of exchange rates between different places.¹⁰⁸ It was 'a marvellous instrument' according to Marzo Magno, but one which had its discomforts: it demanded 'an organisation capable of covering both the market where it (the bill) was issued and the market where it was to be cashed'.¹⁰⁹ The Hospitallers had such an 'organisation' made out of receivers, procurators, and agents posted throughout Europe in the nerve centres of the Order's prioral and financial network, not dissimilar to the network of continental

⁹⁷ For example: AOM 1393A, Wignacourt to Guinigi (Florence), f. 383, 12 September 1614 and AOM 1400, Wignacourt to Scalamenti (Venice), f. 393, 18 July 1621. For the systematic shipment of goods from Venice to Malta, see Grech (2016), chapter four.

⁹⁸ AOM 1646, Lascaris Castellar to Domenico Carretto (Turin-Priory of Lombardy), f. 175v, 25 September 1656.

⁹⁹ AOM 1388, Wignacourt to Capece (Naples), ff. 65v-67r, 14 February 1609.

¹⁰⁰ For example: AOM 1385, Wignacourt to Ventimiglia (Messina), ff. 391v-392r, 16 December 1606.

¹⁰¹ For Trapani, see for example AOM 1389, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 71v-72, 24 March 1610. For Syracuse, see for example AOM 1385, Wignacourt to Settimo (Syracuse), f. 213r, 30 June 1606.

¹⁰² For example: AOM 1388, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), f. 233, 14 August 1609.

¹⁰³ AOM 1385, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), f. 404v, 1 December 1606.

¹⁰⁴ Fernand Braudel (1985), 390.

¹⁰⁵ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. Trans S. Reynolds, 2 vols (London, 1986), 370.

¹⁰⁶ Braudel (1986), 465.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Bonney, *The European Dynastic States 1494-1660* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1991), 430-1.

¹⁰⁸ Marzo Magno, 161-3. For an explanation of how the bill of exchange worked, see also Bonney, 430-1. Braudel recounts how in the late sixteenth century the broker Simón Ruiz bought and sold bills of exchange on the Medina del Campo-Florence axis purely to make a profit. Braudel (1986), 497.

¹⁰⁹ Marzo Magno, 163.

branches of medieval commercial enterprises such as that of the fourteenth-century merchant of Prato Francesco Datini, by some considered as the very father of the *cambiale* as used in western Europe.¹¹⁰

To put it simply and succinctly, the bill of exchange was a credit instrument containing a promise of payment to another party.¹¹¹ For the Order during the period under study, the bill or letter of exchange provided the possibility to relocate its funds from its continental priories dispersed mainly in Iberia, France, Flanders, High and Low Germany, Bohemia, and Italy. In a nutshell, the transfer mechanism can be explained thus:¹¹² the Order might need a sum of money in Palermo to purchase wheat, for example. If the receiver of Palermo was not in possession of the necessary amount of funds, he would have to relocate the required sum from one of the Hospitaller priories in Europe. To do so he would have to find an individual or a group of individuals, who could be merchants or financiers, or a financial institution (who we can call the ‘creditor’), with enough cash available in Palermo to cover the sum required by the receiver, usually against the payment of a commission. The receiver would then hand the creditor the bill of exchange – usually sent to him from a Hospitaller priory where the Order was solvent – covering the entire sum through funds from the Hospitaller priory in question. The creditor, or whoever he appointed by proxy, would then be able to clear the bill and be reimbursed his due in markets like Castile, Barcelona, or Lyons, for example, centres where the Order had receivers who collected Hospitaller funds from the respective priories in Iberia and France, and consequently places where the Order was solvent. In this way the *rimessa* would have been effected, without any actual physical transfer of money taking place, and the Order would have its sum available in Palermo to purchase its wheat.

For the whole mechanism to work, the Order needed to be financially covered in the receiverships where the bills were cleared, mainly Castile, Barcelona, Lyons, High and Low Germany, Bohemia, and the main receiverships in Italy, that is Lombardy, Venice, Florence, and Naples. What emerges from the Hospitaller documentation consulted is that Palermo and Messina¹¹³ were vital Hospitaller financial centres where substantial sums from the Order’s continental priories were ultimately deposited through remittances, and occasionally cashed.¹¹⁴ Although this study cannot boast of documentary material from any such bills involving Hospitaller fund-transfer transactions from European priories for the period under study, alternative documentary sources will be used to recreate the stages, fluxes, and routes along which these remittances travelled, allowing the Order to transfer funds from its European estates. This fund-transfer mechanism is in fact illustrated, or hinted at, in several letters of the magistral outgoing correspondence and occasionally in other Hospitaller sources such as the *Libri Conciliorum*.¹¹⁵ Some examples might help us understand this financial mechanism better.

In 1606, the Order’s receiver in Palermo, La Marra, was to collect from a certain Theodaldo Thedaldi 700 *scudi* on behalf of a secretary of the Order, Commander Vigliasecca, through the conversion of a bill of exchange signed by Ferramonti Pallavicino of Valladolid.¹¹⁶ Although we are

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 160. Iris Origo immortalised Datini’s life in a book about the merchant’s activities but is certain that Datini was not the inventor of the modern bill of exchange, although he used it frequently. Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato. Daily Life in a Medieval Italian City* (London, Penguin Books, 1992), 147.

¹¹¹ The Zingarelli dictionary defines it as a ‘credit instrument containing a promise made by a person to pay, or appoint someone in his/her stead to pay, another person a sum of money. Zingarelli, Nicola (ed.), *Il nuovo Zingarelli. Vocabolario della lingua italiana* (Bologna, Zanichelli, 1987). According to Iris Origo, ‘the bill of exchange made it possible to transfer purchasing power without the shipment of actual coins’. Origo, 82.

¹¹² Giuseppe Felloni describes the mechanism of the use of the bill of exchange with reference to merchants and their representatives located in two different European markets. Felloni, 107-8. Felloni’s model can be adapted to the type of transactions used by the Order to relocate priorial funds.

¹¹³ In 1615, for example, the receivers of Germany, Bohemia, Lombardy, Florence, Genoa, and Naples were all commissioned to transfer funds to Messina. AOM 1394, Wignacourt to Sollima (Messina), f. 461, 8 October 1615.

¹¹⁴ Grech (2005), 199.

¹¹⁵ For some examples of transactions effected with the use of bills of exchange addressed to places like Castile, France, or other places, see AOM 107, f. 191r, 20 April 1623; Ibid., f. 202v, 10 June 1623; Ibid., f. 205v, 14 June 1623; Ibid., f. 210v, 3 July 1623; Ibid., f. 223r, October 1623.

¹¹⁶ AOM 1385, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 213v-214r, 1 July 1606.

not told if Vignasecca collected the sum for personal use or on behalf of the Order, the transaction constitutes an example of how a sum is made available in one place to be reimbursed in another through the bill of exchange mechanism. Hospitaller documents provide other examples where similar transactions were carried out to transfer the Order's money. In 1612, the Order was planning to cash an unspecified sum in Palermo to subsequently reimburse it in Castile.¹¹⁷ In 1617 the Order's financial agent in Barcelona, Cotoner, sent letters of exchange to Malta to be eventually cashed by the Hospitaller receiver in Palermo,¹¹⁸ and more bills amounting to 2,582 florins were to be cashed in Messina at the rate of 6 *tari* per florin from the merchants Carlo Frenes and Onofrio Carbonel.¹¹⁹ Later on that year, the receiver in Messina was to present a number of letters of exchange sent from Venice to some merchants operating in the Sicilian city-port and to deposit the proceeds in a bank in Messina.¹²⁰ Similar transactions were carried out on the Bohemia-Messina axis in 1619,¹²¹ and thousands of reals a month for a specific period would be reimbursed in Madrid or Valladolid by the Order's receiver in Castile to whoever was indicated on letters of exchange sent from Scicli.¹²² Bills cashed in Palermo at the rate of 12 *tari* per *scudo*, could ultimately be reimbursed in Castile at 10 *reali* per *scudo*, for example.¹²³

Obviously these payments could go through only if the Order was solvent in the priories where the final reimbursements were effected, subject that is to the successful and timely collection of the responses. Early in 1615, the Order was planning a remittance of 16,000 *scudi* on the Castile-Palermo axis. A certain Don Ottavio d'Aragona provided the receivership of Palermo with the cash for the purchase of a wheat consignment. He was handed the bills of exchange addressed to Receiver Brisegno, the Hospitaller receiver in Castile. It was hoped that by the time d'Aragona arrived in Madrid to cash his due, Brisegno would have the sum available to cover the payment. If not, it was agreed to delay the payment till May of that year until the responses were collected by the Castilian receivership.¹²⁴ Similar transactions, therefore, could take months to be concluded, but allowed the Order to have ready cash where it was needed. Credit on bills of exchange, in fact, was cashable in stages and their clearance could be diffused through time, allowing a receiver to effect some urgent payments while buying time to receive reassurance from European priories about the solvency of the *ricetta* where the reimbursement was to take place. In 1620, the Hospitaller receivership in Palermo was instructed to cash only half of the 20,000 *libre* in bills at its disposal, 3,000 *libre* of which were to be deposited in Syracuse to pay for biscuit and saltpetre.¹²⁵ In this way the Order gained time to receive notification from Spain that its Castilian coffers could cover the remaining bills in the hands of the receiver in Palermo.¹²⁶

It was important for the Order's agents on the receiving end of these remittances to cultivate contacts with wealthy members of the community within or in the vicinity of their financial jurisdiction in order to have valid alternatives when cash was needed. At one point in 1614, the Hospitaller receiver in Palermo had the Countess of Modica as an alternative creditor in case a substantial *cambio* of 120,000 *reali* with Don Ottavio d'Aragona did not go through, and in the meantime was negotiating a *cambio* of 4,000 *scudi* with a certain Donna Maria Vries who was known in the Convent as having cash available.¹²⁷ The Order, on its part, had to be kept updated by its receivers deployed throughout the continent on the state of the coffers of the respective *ricette* to be able to decide on the provenance and

¹¹⁷ AOM 1386, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), f. 312r, 14 December 1607.

¹¹⁸ AOM 1396, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 353, 22 October 1617.

¹¹⁹ AOM 1396, Wignacourt to Balsamo (Messina), f. 353v, 22 October 1617.

¹²⁰ 'per riscuotersi costì in Messina da cotesti mercanti alcuni partiti di denari (...) rimetterli subito in cotesta tavola di Messina'. AOM 1396, Wignacourt to Balsamo (Messina), f. 403r, 7 December 1617.

¹²¹ 'rimessivi di Bohemia dal Ric[evito]re Nostiz'. AOM 1398, Wignacourt to Balsamo (Messina), ff. 452v-453r, 30 November 1619.

¹²² AOM 1399, Wignacourt to Lo Porto (Scicli), ff. 552v-553r, 30 November 1620.

¹²³ AOM 1399, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 337, 4 August 1620.

¹²⁴ AOM 1394, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 36v-37, 20 January 1615.

¹²⁵ AOM 1399, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 208v-209, 22 May 1620.

¹²⁶ Ibid., ff. 208v-209, 22 May 1620.

¹²⁷ 'che per quanto ci è stato detto tiene il den[a]ro in ordine'. AOM 1393A, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 489-490r, 26 November 1614.

the amount of remittances it was in a position to effect. In the summer of 1617, the Convent was waiting for information from Spain to see what funds could be transferred to Palermo, also because at the time no bills could be issued on Lyons or other places in France.¹²⁸ These bills were also used in the reverse direction, allowing Hospitallers and members of the Maltese population to deposit sums in the Common Treasury and withdraw them from a foreign bank or one of the Order's receivers in Europe against the presentation of a bill of exchange,¹²⁹ a mechanism used also by the Order to pay for commissions abroad. To pay for the building of a galley in Barcelona in 1604, money could be withdrawn from Palermo or from any place where the money of the foundation set up on purpose for the building of the galley was deposited.¹³⁰

Similar fund-transfer mechanisms, widely adopted in western Europe since medieval times, were quite a frequent practice in Hospitaller administration. At one point in 1621, it is recorded that the Order's agent in Venice was receiving remittances from Germany on 'a daily basis',¹³¹ a frequency which at face value might seem rather suspicious if afforded literal status, yet one which seems to be corroborated by other similar episodes. In 1607, for example, in conjunction with an abundance of debased currency in Sicilian markets, receivers in Italy were expected to affect daily remittances to Palermo.¹³² These transfers allowed the Order of St John to effect payments on a continental level, with Hospitaller money travelling along several routes and in all directions in western Europe's financial network, from the coasts of the Atlantic and the heart of Europe, to the midst of the Mediterranean. Thus a cargo of goods shipped to the Convent by a merchant from Venice could be paid with letters of exchange cashed in Paris;¹³³ proceeds from the sale of rice in Corfu could end up deposited in Naples;¹³⁴ and a deposit of *cruzadi* in Lisbon allowed a payment in Sicilian currency in Messina through the financial mediation of the Order's receiver in Genoa.¹³⁵

Of course, fund transfers could be aborted, delayed, or re-thought according to unfavourable exchange rates, the reluctance of the Order to fork out the commissions demanded on the transfer, or the whims of creditors unconvinced by the reimbursement guarantees provided by the Order. In 1612, a remittance through letters of exchange for 5,450 ducats on the Bohemia-Venice connection was not accepted and the bills were sent back to Bohemia.¹³⁶ The following year, 4,000 florins remitted from Bohemia were not cashed in Venice since the Order's merchant of reference in the Serenissima was temporarily absent and alternative financiers consulted were demanding an 'exorbitant' interest on the exchange.¹³⁷ In 1614, the Order was finding it difficult to cash a bill of 120,000 *reali* in Palermo.¹³⁸ In 1620 it was pointed out to the Hospitaller receiver in Lombardy that some merchants in Messina were refusing to clear bills for 2,500 *scudi* he had remitted to the Sicilian port on behalf of the Order.¹³⁹ From similar episodes it emerges that, apart from its own network of agents, the Order needed the services of a host of financiers, merchants, bankers, or individuals with the required cash available who were involved in the craft of fund transfer and were in a position to supply the Knights with cash where it was required, allowing the Order to effect payments on an international level since its pre-Malta phase along fund-transfer routes which became established through time.

¹²⁸ AOM 1396, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 246-247r, 22 July 1617.

¹²⁹ Blouet, 107. See also some of the examples from AOM 107 in footnote 115 and AOM 1006, *passim*, for the years 1770 to 1798.

¹³⁰ AOM 101, f. 34r, 5 April 1604.

¹³¹ 'giornalmente'. AOM 1400, Wignacourt to Hospitaller Scipione Trento, ff. 588v-589r, 24 October 1621.

¹³² AOM 1386, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 215-216r, 2 September 1607.

¹³³ AOM 1400, Wignacourt to David [Vanusle] (Venice), ff. 357v-358r, 30 June 1621.

¹³⁴ AOM 1389, Wignacourt to Loschi (Venice), f. 104, 24 April 1610.

¹³⁵ 'con poliza da pagarsi à vista à Cesare Passalacqua'. AOM 1429, Lascaris Castellar to Spinola (Genoa), f. 73r, 21 May 1651.

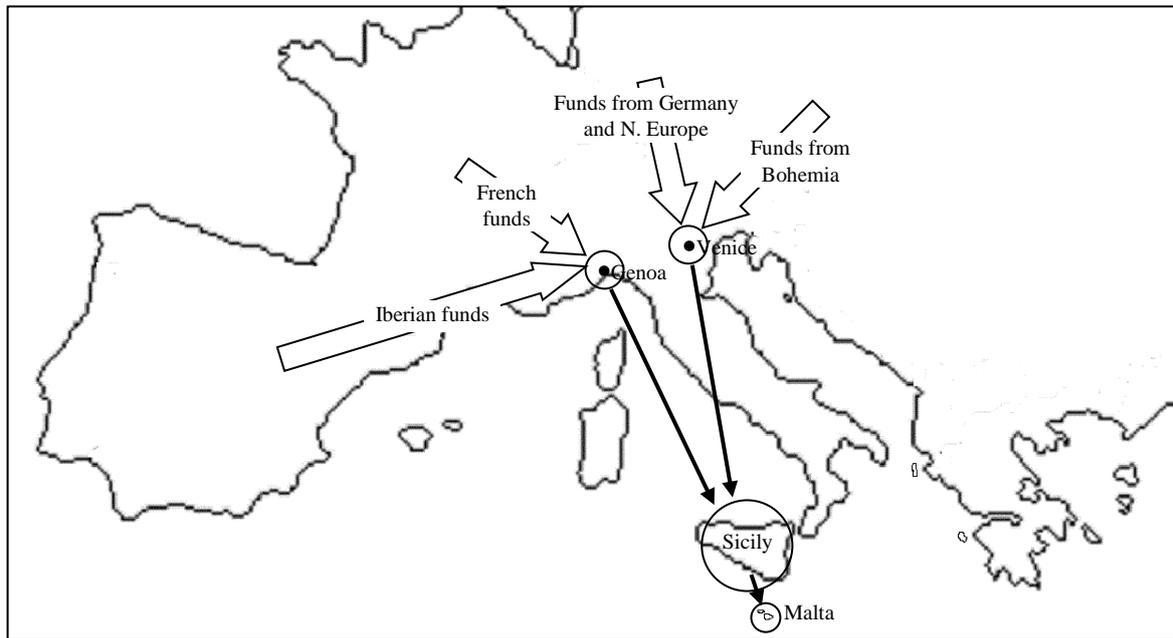
¹³⁶ AOM 1391, Wignacourt to Metich (Bohemia), f. 259, 19 June 1612.

¹³⁷ The merchant who apparently provided the Hospitaller receivership in Venice with cash on a regular basis was a certain Seifrid. AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Metich (Bohemia), f. 116r, 8 March 1613.

¹³⁸ AOM 1393A, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 428v, 10 October 1614.

¹³⁹ AOM 1399, Wignacourt to Semio (Lombardy), ff. 486v-487, 10 October 1620.

Patterns of Hospitaller Fund Transfer



Major Patterns of Hospitaller Fund Transfers

Bronstein and Luttrell do give generic indications of Hospitaller fund transfers from Europe, effected to finance the Order's activities in the Levant in the pre-Malta period, but without elaborating on the mechanisms used except for occasional cash transfers by sea.¹⁴⁰ One has to see if and to what extent the Order's medieval sources consulted by these historians elaborate on the kind of financial transactions adopted in the first place. Commenting on the correspondence consulted to reconstruct contacts between Latin Syria and some of the Order's western priories in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Bronstein denounces the generic nature of a good part of the letters she sourced, which make it difficult for the historian to pin down even the very 'needs' of the Hospitallers.¹⁴¹ The early modernist is apparently more privileged in this regard, for Hospitaller sources of the Malta phase are generous in outlining not only the credit transfer mechanisms adopted by the Order, but also the patterns and routes of these transfers which emerge from the Knights' financial and communication network. According to Luttrell, in the fourteenth century the Order employed the services of several financiers, mostly Tuscan, and Florentine in particular, to transport its funds from Paris, London, and Lisbon to Avignon; and from Catalonia, France, and Venice, to Rhodes. Barcelona and Venice apparently became important fourteenth-century centres for the transport of Hospitaller funds from Iberia and Germany respectively to the Levant, and merchants from Narbonne occasionally transported to the Levant the Order's money collected from Languedoc.¹⁴²

As outlined above, the Order continued to rely on the services of financiers in its Malta phase and some Hospitaller fund transfer patterns persisted, at least in part, up to early modernity. Venice and Barcelona, for example, retained their role in the transfer of the Order's funds from Germany and Iberia

¹⁴⁰ Luttrell, 'Actividades economicas', 179; 180; 182; Luttrell, 'Interessi fiorentini', 321-2; Bronstein, 79; 140.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁴² Luttrell, 'Actividades economicas', 175-182; Luttrell, 'Interessi fiorentini', 321-2.

respectively, with the difference that the terminal point of the transfer was usually Sicily or Malta, not Rhodes.¹⁴³ Hospitaller documentary sources establish the centrality of Italy for the relocation of the Order of St John's funds from Europe in early modernity. By the early decades of the seventeenth century, Italy was benefitting from a rush in precious metals which started flowing through its exchange markets with the decline of Antwerp, taking on the role of prime vector of Spanish silver.¹⁴⁴ The peninsula's geography and protagonism in the financial evolution of the West, especially from the Renaissance onwards,¹⁴⁵ rendered it the ideal vehicle through which the Knights could channel their money from Iberia, France, Flanders, Germany, and Bohemia.¹⁴⁶ Just as in the case of the flux of mail, news-sheets, and *avvisi*, apart from the financial accounts outlined earlier,¹⁴⁷ the Order's displacement west and ultimate settlement on Malta shortened, and therefore hastened and facilitated all sorts of contacts with Italy, and consequently with the rest of Europe. The dispatch of a good part of Hospitaller remittances at some stage had an Italian city as a transitory or final destination. Obviously, since in the case of remittances similar to the ones explained above, the effective transfer involved bills of exchange, the flow of remittances followed established patterns of mail transfer to and from Hospitaller Malta. Cities like Venice and Genoa, therefore, played vital roles for the collection and redistribution of Hospitaller funds. Through the Serenissima, the Order collected and redistributed its funds from High and Low Germany and from Bohemia, apart from the funds of the Priory of Venice.¹⁴⁸ Genoa was used as a collecting station for Hospitaller funds from the Priory of Lombardy and occasionally Iberia, France, Germany, and Flanders.¹⁴⁹ Once the Order's funds were deposited in Genoa and Venice, the Hospitaller receivers in these cities would in turn remit them, in full or in part, to other collecting stations according to the Order's and Malta's needs, with the ultimate destination often being Malta, Palermo, or Messina as explained earlier.

Florence was a favourite intermediate stage in the remittance south of Hospitaller funds along the Italian peninsula. Funds from Bohemia and Germany could find their way to Florence, either directly or through Venice for example.¹⁵⁰ Funds thus collected in Florence could be subsequently redirected in full or in part to Rome, Naples, or Sicily, for example.¹⁵¹ On its part, Palermo was a collecting station

¹⁴³ Grech (2005), *passim*; Ivan Grech, 'Struggling Against Isolation. Communication Lines and the Circulation of News in the Mediterranean: The Case of Seventeenth-Century Malta', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, vol.16, 1/2, Malta 2006, 168.

¹⁴⁴ Braudel (1986), 494-6; 499.

¹⁴⁵ Ferguson, 70.

¹⁴⁶ The priories of Bohemia, Hungary, and Poland were grouped under the Tongue of Germany. The Priory of Hungary was suppressed around 1538. From 1252, Poland was normally included under the title of Bohemian priors. Up to 1610, the only Polish preceptory was that of Posen and an independent Polish priory was only formed in 1775. The Order's estates in the Low Countries usually fell under the jurisdiction of Hospitaller preceptorates in Germany. Sire (1996), 190-7. The Order's property in England and Ireland was confiscated by Henry VII in 1540 (*Ibid.*, 186).

¹⁴⁷ For the relay of such written information from Europe to Hospitaller Malta, see Grech (2016), *passim*.

¹⁴⁸ For the Germany-Venice fund trail, see AOM 1383, Wignacourt to Hundt (Germany), ff. 323v-324, 27 September 1604 and AOM 1387, Wignacourt to Muchental (High Germany), f. 60v, 9 March 1608. For the Bohemia-Venice fund trail, see above and AOM 1385, Wignacourt to Metich (Bohemia), f. 60r, 23 January 1606 and AOM 1390, Wignacourt to Guinigi (Venice), ff. 325v-326r, 23 September 1611.

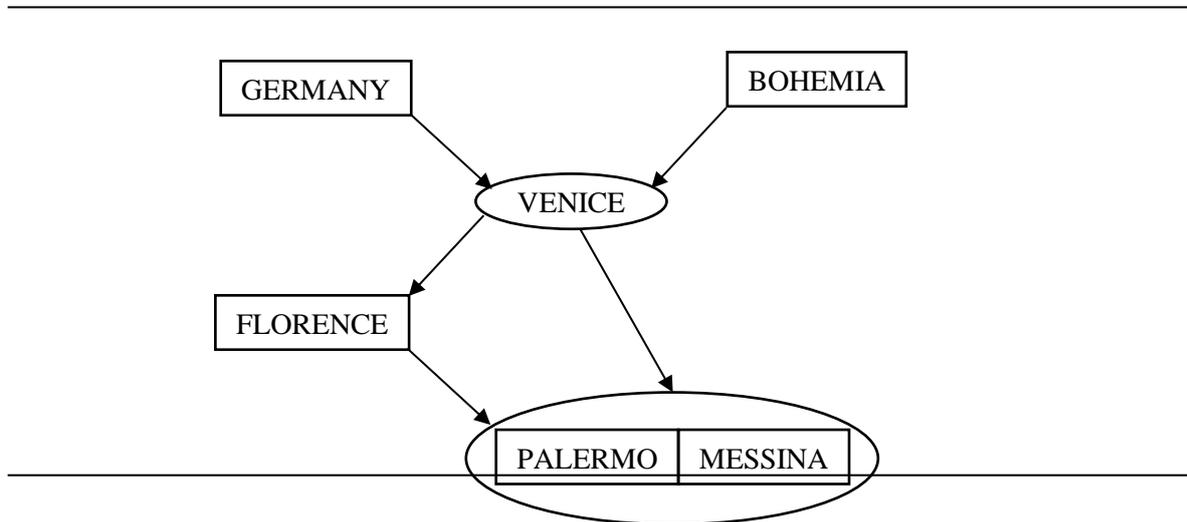
¹⁴⁹ Grech (2005), 197-200. For the Flanders-Genoa financial connection see, for example, AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Alfonso D'Avolos (Flanders), f. 416r, 30 December 1605 and AOM 1390, Wignacourt to Quartiero (Milan), f. 424r, 14 November 1611. According to Sire, since the twelfth century Hospitaller preceptorates in territories considered today as Swiss and Dutch formed part of the Tongue of Germany and therefore their proceeds formed part of the Order's German responsions. Sire (1996), 192. In 1621, for example, Hospitaller funds from Germany '*et altre parti*' were to be channelled to Venice. AOM 1400, Wignacourt to Scipione Trento, f. 166v, 4 April 1621.

¹⁵⁰ For the Bohemia-Venice-Florence-Malta fund trail see, for example, AOM 1390, Wignacourt to Guinigi (Venice), 325v-326r, 23 September 1611. For possible Germany-Florence fund transfers see, for example, AOM 1386, Wignacourt to Muchental (High Germany), ff. 146-148r, 9 June 1607.

¹⁵¹ For example: AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Medici (Florence), f. 411, 30 December 1605; AOM 1390, Wignacourt to Gaetani (Florence), f. 295r, 31 August 1611; AOM 1393, Wignacourt to Sollima (Messina), ff. 157v-158r, 8 April 1614.

for Hospitaller remittances from Iberia and France.¹⁵² The Order's Iberian funds, including those of Valladolid, Aragon, Navarre, and Portugal, were usually deposited in Madrid and those of France, including those of Paris, Toulouse, Aquitaine, and Champagne, in Lyons.¹⁵³

Flow chart: Patterns of Hospitaller Fund Transfer to Sicily via Venice



Funds collected from Spanish commanderies could subsequently be relocated to Barcelona to be transferred elsewhere.¹⁵⁴ As outlined above, the Order's receivers in Castile, usually residing in Madrid or Valladolid,¹⁵⁵ and the Hospitaller contact point in Barcelona¹⁵⁶ had a direct communication line with the receiver in Palermo for the remittance of funds to Sicily.¹⁵⁷ Similarly, French responses intended for remission to Sicily via bills, were deposited in Lyons for subsequent transfer to Palermo, for example, either directly or else through Genoa.¹⁵⁸

Messina was the other major Sicilian depository of Hospitaller funds.¹⁵⁹ As a busy central Mediterranean port, holder of an industrious mint, vibrant trading hub for the production and

¹⁵² Grech (2005), 199.

¹⁵³ This transfer pattern is occasionally stated explicitly in Hospitaller documentation: *le ricette di Madrid e (...) Leone dove cadono rispettivamente tutti gli effetti della Relig[ione] di Francia e Spagna*. AOM 262, ff. 246v-247r, 4 May 1686. See also AOM 262, f. 7v and 16v, 21 May 1672. For the Lyons-Palermo currency remittances see also, for example, AOM 1385, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), f. 202, 30 June 1606.

¹⁵⁴ See Grech (2016), chapter seven. See also AOM 432, ff. 253-254, 27 June 1569.

¹⁵⁵ In 1609, referring to the Order's receiver in Castile, Wignacourt said that he usually resided in Valladolid: *'solendo egli risiedere a Valladolid'*. AOM 1388, Wignacourt to the Governatore of Modica, f. 281v, 28 August 1609.

¹⁵⁶ The Order's financial agent in Barcelona was occasionally referred to with the term *depositario*, that is someone who receives, an office where funds were deposited, similarly to a receiver, but probably without the authority or designation to collect funds directly from the Order's estates. Occasionally, in fact, that of *depositario* and receiver in Hospitaller documentation seem to be distinct designations. AOM 455, f. 239 r.

¹⁵⁷ In 1608, for example, writing to the Governor of the County of Modica in Southern Sicily, Wignacourt informed him that it was the Order's normal practice to transfer its Spanish funds to Palermo. AOM 1386, Wignacourt to the Governatore di Modica, Paolo la Restia, f. 52, 21 February 1608.

¹⁵⁸ Grech (2005), 196. For the Lyons-Palermo financial connection see, for example, AOM 1380, Wignacourt to Staiti (Palermo), f. 188r, 25 July 1601; AOM 1388, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 146-147, 30 April 1609; and AOM 1400, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 328-329, 16 June 1621.

¹⁵⁹ Funds could be deposited in Messina from Genoa or 'elsewhere'. AOM 1387, Wignacourt to Torriglia (Messina), f. 67, 11 March 1608. For the Genoa-Messina fund transfer trail, see also AOM 1385, Wignacourt to Ventimiglia (Messina), f. 66r, 23 January 1606.

redistribution of silk,¹⁶⁰ and Hospitaller Malta's prime mail connection with Italy,¹⁶¹ Messina was an obvious magnet for the Order's funds from Italian and other European priories. It was a terminal credit depository similar to Palermo, from where Hospitaller wheat and other merchandise were subsidized, and a final stop on the Order's currency trail before cash was shipped to Malta. The city port's financial affairs could have regional economic repercussions. Fairs held in Messina could dry up the availability of capital in Sicilian markets, momentarily jeopardizing currency exchanges and the potential relocation of funds on an international level, thus creating financial exchange problems for the Order. In 1606, the exchange of funds on the Palermo-Barcelona axis for the purchase of wheat stalled. The Hospitaller receiver in Palermo was advised to wait for the right moment before operating remittances from Catalonia in order to let the effects of a fair being held in Messina to wear down.¹⁶² Notwithstanding similar conjunctures, the city port remained a vital depository in the Order's early modern financial network. It was in Messina that prioral funds from France, Spain, Italy, and Germany were to be remitted during the Ottoman siege of Malta of 1565 to help sustain Malta's defence.¹⁶³ At one point in 1613, the Order's receiver in Florence was instructed to transfer all responsions from then on to Messina,¹⁶⁴ and Grand Master Lascaris Castellar's administration waxed lyrical when speaking of the city on the straits, describing it as the best place where to deposit Hospitaller funds, a coffer from where credit could be sourced more readily.¹⁶⁵

Through this financial network, Hospitaller funds from Germany, Bohemia, Castile, Barcelona, Lyons, Lombardy, Venice, Genoa, Florence, and Naples found their way to Sicily, Malta or wherever they were required. For this network to operate efficiently and effectively, the Common Treasury had to communicate the financial needs of Hospitaller Malta to the various receivers and procurators posted on the continent. It was up to these representatives to keep the Convent updated on the collection stage of the responsions, and consequently on whether the priories were solvent or not, on the availability of bullion in European markets, and on the commodity prices on a continental level.¹⁶⁶ This allowed the Order to decide from where it could draw funds and where these had to be relocated according to Hospitaller Malta's needs.

Commercial and Financial Information, Liquidity Problems, and Financial Re-Routing

The direction of the flow of the remittances was not always unilateral vis-à-vis the patterns described above. Late in 1614, for example, thousands of ducats and gold *scudi* were to be transferred from Florence and Naples to Venice where hefty funds were needed to buy various supplies and ship them over to the Convent.¹⁶⁷ At times, Hospitaller funds deposited in Sicily were subsequently remitted to Genoa to exploit the more favourable exchange rates operative at the time in question on the Ligurian

¹⁶⁰ For a generic overview of Messina's economic and maritime activity and relevance in early modernity, see Salvatore Bottari, *Post Res Perditas. Messina 1678-1713* (Messina, Adizioni Dr. Antonino Sfameni, 2005) and Salvatore Bottari, 'The Port of Messina, 1591-1783', in *Making Waves in the Mediterranean (Sulle onde del Mediterraneo). Proceedings of the 2nd MMHN Conference. Messina and Taormina, 4-7 May 2006*, M. D'Angelo, G. Harlaftis, and C. Vassallo (eds.) Istituto di Studi Storici Gaetano Salvemini, Messina 2010, 627-50.

¹⁶¹ Grech (2016), chapters two and three.

¹⁶² 'che allora speriamo si cambierà con minor disavantaggio che al presente poiche sarà cessato l'impedimento della fiera di Messina che si suol assorbire tutto il den[a]ro'. AOM 1385, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 252v-253, 8 August 1606.

¹⁶³ Iacomo Bosio, *Dell'Istoria della Sacra Religione et Ill. Militia di S. Gio. Gerosolimitano*, vol. iii, 543. (Venice, 1695).

¹⁶⁴ AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Gaetani (Florence), f. 521r, 20 October 1613.

¹⁶⁵ Hospitaller receivers in Italy were encouraged to remit funds in Messina, described as the '*luogo più comodo per valersene* (ie: dei soldi) *la Religione prontamente*'. AOM 259, f. 38, 20 August 1652.

¹⁶⁶ In 1652, for example, the Procurators of the Order's Common Treasury reported to the grand master and Council on the financial reports sent by the receivers of Genoa, Madrid, and Valladolid regarding the '*stato della moneta*' in Spain. AOM 259, f. 61v.

¹⁶⁷ AOM 1393A, Wignacourt to Gaetani (Florence), f. 383, 12 September 1614; Ibid., Wignacourt to Abenante (Naples), f. 384r, 12 September 1614; Ibid., Wignacourt to Guinigi, f. 490v, 26 November 1614.

market.¹⁶⁸ One of the receivers' tasks, in fact, was to remain informed on the exchange rates offered on the various financial markets and to liaise with the Common Treasury in Malta to be able to choose the best market possible where to exchange Hospitaller funds, subject to feasibility and contemporary contingencies, with the aim of sparing the Order's Treasury excessive payments on interests. The receiver in Florence, for example, could be afforded the responsibility to decide whether to remit funds to Naples or Sicily, depending on which option best suited the Order's financial interests.¹⁶⁹ In 1614 the Order's receiver in Bohemia proposed to remit Bohemian responsions to Amsterdam where they could be cashed and shipped down the Atlantic to Messina in order to avoid the usual remittance through Venice, where interests for these financial transactions were apparently too high at the time.¹⁷⁰ The Common Treasury proposed a trial remittance of 2,000 ducats on this route to judge its feasibility and profitability when compared to the Venetian route. The Bohemian receivership had to report to the Convent once the remittance was effected.¹⁷¹ Apparently the transaction proved worthwhile although the other examples available for this study to corroborate this claim are few and far apart. We know that in 1617, 2,000 *scudi* were transferred on the Bohemia-Amsterdam route and another 1,000 *scudi* were to be relocated on the same route the following May.¹⁷² In the summer of 1619 the receiver in Messina was asked to verify if a remittance of 1,000 *scudi* on the Bohemia-Amsterdam route to Messina had been carried out.¹⁷³

The high interests demanded for similar transactions on the Venetian market apparently constituted a recurrent theme in the Hospitaller financial world, to an extent that they could induce the reconsideration of currency fluxes along time-honoured remittance routes such as that from High Germany to Venice. In 1607, the Order gave instructions for its German funds to be transferred to Genoa or Florence if interests on the Venetian market remained high,¹⁷⁴ and three years later the Order expressed its dismay that fund remittances from Germany were being directed to Venice and not Genoa.¹⁷⁵ Problems due to distance and accessibility could crop up at the responsion-collection stage. In the mid-seventeenth century, the commanders of the Priory of High Germany were complaining that depositing responsions in cash with the receiver of the priory was no longer feasible.¹⁷⁶ His residence (not specified here), claimed the commanders, was too distant and the dangers and expenses of cash transport were too high. The city of Basle,¹⁷⁷ deemed more reachable by the dissident German commanders, was suggested as an alternative collecting station, a centre where the Order could post an intermediary *depositario* with the authority to receive responsions¹⁷⁸ and forward them to the next remittance stage. The Swiss city, which had been used earlier in the Order's history to remit Hospitaller funds to Venice,¹⁷⁹ was also suggested because of the presence of bankers who could transfer

¹⁶⁸ Ivan Grech, 'Il prezzo dell'onore nel Mediterraneo: rapporti e dissidi diplomatici tra Genova e l'Ordine di Malta nel Seicento', in *Cavalieri di San Giovanni in Liguria e nell'Italia settentrionale. Quadri regionali, uomini e documenti. Atti del Convegno Genova, Commenda di San Giovanni di Pré, 30 settembre-2 ottobre 2004*, J. Costa Restagno (ed.) Istituto Internazionale di Studi Liguri, Genova-Albenga 2009, 594-5.

¹⁶⁹ 'second che conoscerete essere nostro vantaggio'. AOM 1387, Wignacourt to Gaetani (Florence), f. 144v, 31 May 1608.

¹⁷⁰ 'per sfuggire il grosso danno che si riceve nel rimettere a Venetia'. AOM 1393A, Wignacourt to Metich (Bohemia), ff. 320v-321r, 31 July 1614.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., ff. 320v-321r, 31 July 1614.

¹⁷² AOM 1396, Wignacourt to Nostiz (Bohemia), f. 367, 27 October 1617.

¹⁷³ AOM 1398, Wignacourt to Balsamo (Messina), f. 317, 29 August 1619.

¹⁷⁴ AOM 1386, Wignacourt to Loschi (Venice), ff. 50v-51r, 6 February 1607.

¹⁷⁵ Grech (2005), 198-9.

¹⁷⁶ AOM 1646, Lascaris Castellar to Gottifredo Drost (Priory of High Germany), f. 308r, 1 May 1656.

¹⁷⁷ Present-day Switzerland fell under the Hospitaller jurisdiction of the German Tongue. Sire (1996), 192 and 194.

¹⁷⁸ 'ove vi sia un depositario il quale abbia autorità di ricevere il denaro'. AOM 1646, Lascaris Castellar to Gottifredo Drost (Priory of High Germany), f. 308r, 1 May 1656.

¹⁷⁹ At one point in 1621, 1,000 *scudi* were transferred from Basle to Venice for the purchase of goods to be shipped to Malta. AOM 1400, Wignacourt to Scalamenti (Venice), f. 393, 18 July 1621.

Hospitaller money in Lyons and spare the Order the interests being demanded in Venice.¹⁸⁰ Months after it was presented, however, the proposal was ditched and the normal practice of depositing responsions with the receiver of High Germany was resumed. It was then up to the receiver to decide whether to remit the funds to Lyons or Venice according to convenience.¹⁸¹

It was essential for the Order to remain informed on the market situation within the orbit of its financial and communication network. Knowledge on commodity prices, currency exchange rates, and the degree of liquidity in markets was vital in order to purchase merchandise and relocate prior funds accordingly in the perennial attempt to strike the best possible deal by intercepting the most favourable exchange rate, exploiting the least expensive purchase, and concluding the most economic transaction. Early modernity witnessed the rise of business, commercial, and financial information in merchants' letters and otherwise.¹⁸² By 1540 one could already find printed commodity price lists in Antwerp.¹⁸³ In Florence, currency exchange rates were quoted on a weekly basis¹⁸⁴ and economic information on a European level was available on periodical publications from the late 1500s.¹⁸⁵ The need of knowledge on currency-related news, such as product availability and description, insurance rates, and information on the negotiability of letters of exchange, generated business correspondence.¹⁸⁶ The Order's receivers and agents on the continent somehow or other intercepted this kind of information, although it's very difficult to say from which source they derived it. This study can boast of one reference, sourced from the Order's manuscripts, to what appears to have been an official exchange-rate list dated 29 April 1621 and mentioned in a letter addressed to the receiver in Naples in May 1621.¹⁸⁷ But hardly any conclusions can be drawn from a single reference, so we cannot say that Hospitaller personnel consulted similar exchange rate lists on a regular basis, although it is very plausible. It is easy to imagine, however, that some of the information was also gained first hand from the knowledge of their jurisdiction or from informants. Whichever the source, Hospitaller agents themselves transmitted this kind of economic information on an institutional level to Malta. Hospitaller documents attest the flow of similar economic and financial news to the Convent dispatched from Hospitaller continental personnel.

These updates allowed the Order to adapt its purchase strategy according to what was offered on markets within its reach. Thus the Order was in a position to know that better quality and cheaper biscuit for its galley crews could be fetched in Trapani rather than Syracuse or Palermo,¹⁸⁸ or the other way round according to contingencies;¹⁸⁹ that caulking material of better price and quality could be found in Syracuse rather than Messina,¹⁹⁰ and what price was being asked for the wholesale of tallow in Sardinia,¹⁹¹ or for rice in Candia.¹⁹² Hospitaller agents managed to obtain detailed price lists for the export of grain, timber, metals, and oarsmen from Naples;¹⁹³ they were briefed that olive oil was being

¹⁸⁰ With reference to the Swiss bankers: '*che ci faranno rispondere il denaro in Leone con minor cambio di quello si sente farlo tener in Venecia ...*'. AOM 1646, Lascaris Castellar to Gottifredo Drost (Priory of High Germany), f. 308r, 1 May 1656.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., f. 308v, 2 October 1656.

¹⁸² Trivellato, 82-3.

¹⁸³ Derek Keene, 'Cities and Cultural Exchange', in *Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe. Vol II: Cities and Cultural Exchange in Europe, 1400-1700*, D. Calbi and S. T. Christensen (eds.) Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, 16.

¹⁸⁴ Braudel (1986), 379.

¹⁸⁵ Trivellato, 85.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 87-8.

¹⁸⁷ With reference to a remittance of 4,000 ducats from Naples to Venice: '*pagabili in moneta di banco perche così deve intendere il cambio il quale per la cartella de 29 d'aprile correva (...) che viene ad essere con il minor danno che si possa ricevere in fare la detta rimessa*'. AOM 1400, Wignacourt to Falco (Naples), ff. 265-266r, 25 May 1621.

¹⁸⁸ AOM 1383, Wignacourt to Capece (Palermo), ff. 374v, 16 November 1604 and AOM 1386, Wignacourt to Ferro (Trapani), ff. 269v-270r, 31 October 1607.

¹⁸⁹ AOM 1389, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), f. 126, 18 May 1610.

¹⁹⁰ AOM 1383, Wignacourt to Settimo (Syracuse), f. 397v, 18 November 1604.

¹⁹¹ AOM 1383, Wignacourt to Capece (Palermo), ff. 221-223v, 16 July 1604.

¹⁹² AOM 1385, Wignacourt to Loschi (Venice), ff. 54-55, 23 January 1606.

¹⁹³ AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Franc[esc]o Maria Sangri, f. 114v, 28 April 1605.

sold cheaply at Monopoli in Apulia,¹⁹⁴ and received tips regarding the price of muskets in Lombardy¹⁹⁵ and of ammunition in England.¹⁹⁶ They spared the Order extra expenses on the purchase of gunpowder – the most sought after commodity in case of an enemy threat – by suggesting that it could be bought at cheaper prices in Naples rather than Palermo;¹⁹⁷ they were in a position to compare the prices of Flemish and Apulian cereals with those of Sicily and Naples,¹⁹⁸ and to evaluate the convenience of shipping sulphur from Southern Sicily rather than importing it from Naples.¹⁹⁹ Comparatively fresh knowledge on international markets permitted the Order to gauge the feasibility of importing excellent-quality saltpetre from Flanders²⁰⁰ and wine from Calabria rather than Syracuse,²⁰¹ taking into consideration delivery costs and time.

Through its information network, Hospitaller Malta's reach in early modern European economy was apparently boundless, enabling Hospitaller administration to consider buying military ammunition from far-off centres like Warsaw,²⁰² and opting to pay for thousands of *cantara*²⁰³ of gunpowder in France rather than Germany according to convenience and viability.²⁰⁴ It was a considerable advantage for the Order since, while having to manoeuvre within the constraints of a pre-industrial communication network, it allowed the Knights to consider economic and financial options on an international arena and to avoid, as much as possible, overdependence on one particular market or other.

Of course these economic and financial updates were nowhere more pertinent than for the export of Sicilian grain, the staple provision of pre-industrial Malta. The Order's agents posted along Sicily's littoral kept the Convent informed on harvest forecasts, effective agricultural yields, and grain prices on the island's markets. Palermo exchanged information with Malta on the general situation and quality of Sicilian harvests, cereal price fluctuations, and supply levels in the wharves of Licata, Sciacca, and Girgenti.²⁰⁵ Frequent updates were also dispatched across the channel from Licata,²⁰⁶ at times on a daily basis,²⁰⁷ and briefings were also exchanged with Syracuse.²⁰⁸ First and foremost the Convent tried to predict agricultural yields in order to plan in advance its grain purchase strategy for the season in question. Harvest forecasts were based on weather contingencies.²⁰⁹ Rainfall levels were a fairly reliable

¹⁹⁴ AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Capece (Naples), f. 376, 7 November 1605.

¹⁹⁵ AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Pagliaro (Lombardy), f. 117, 8 March 1613.

¹⁹⁶ AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Pagliaro (Genoa), f. 397v, 20 December 1604.

¹⁹⁷ AOM 1399, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 169v-170, 30 April 1620.

¹⁹⁸ For Flemish wheat see Dal Pozzo, i, 525. For Apulian wheat and barley see AOM 1382, Wignacourt to Capece (Palermo), ff. 60v-61r, 26 January 1603.

¹⁹⁹ AOM 1393A, Wignacourt to Abenante (Naples), ff. 312v-313r, 31 July 1614.

²⁰⁰ AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Torriglia (Messina), f. 117v, 8 March 1613.

²⁰¹ AOM 1394, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 503v, 13 November 1615 and AOM 1395, Wignacourt to Ponte (Naples), ff. 348v-349r, 17 October 1616. For the possible purchase of saltpetre from Syracuse, see AOM 1394, Wignacourt to Mont'alto (Syracuse), ff. 460v-461r, 8 October 1615.

²⁰² AOM 1394, Wignacourt to Guinigi (Venice), f. 355, 23 July 1615.

²⁰³ A *cantaro* was a weight measure equivalent to between 50 and 80 kgs. Nicola Zingarelli (ed.), *Il nuovo Zingarelli. Vocabolario della lingua italiana* (Bologna, Zanichelli, 1987), 288.

²⁰⁴ AOM 1389, Wignacourt to Hospitaller Meltio, ff. 116v-177r, 24 April 1610.

²⁰⁵ See, for example: AOM 1383, Wignacourt to Capece (Palermo), f. 340, 6 October 1604; AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Capece (Palermo), ff. 210-211r, 25 June 1605; AOM 1388, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), f. 248r, 25 July 1609; AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 195-196, 20 April 1613; AOM 1393A, Wignacourt to Pugiades (Licata), ff. 358v-359r, 26 August 1614.

²⁰⁶ AOM 1383, Wignacourt to Accarigi (Licata), f. 196v, 25 June 1604; AOM 1383, Wignacourt to Romeo (Licata), ff. 273v-274r, 26 August 1604; AOM 1385, Wignacourt to Carlo Corsetto (Licata), f. 181v, 9 June 1606; AOM 1388, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 285v-286r, 31 August 1609; AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Pugiades (Licata), ff. 383v-384r, 3 August 1613 and *Ibid.*, f. 408r, 13 August 1613.

²⁰⁷ AOM 1387, Wignacourt to Corsetto (Licata), f. 128, 19 May 1608.

²⁰⁸ AOM 1383, Wignacourt to Settimo (Syracuse), f. 196, 25 June 1604 and AOM 1387, Wignacourt to Sortino (Syracuse), f. 142r, 31 May 1608.

²⁰⁹ For examples of harvest forecasts reaching Malta from Palermo and elsewhere in Sicily, see AOM 1382, Wignacourt to Accarigi (Licata), f. 244, 9 August 1603; AOM 1385, Wignacourt to Bernardo Capece (Palermo), f. 175v, 7 June 1606; AOM 1387, Wignacourt to Capece (Naples), f. 153v, 31 May 1608; *Ibid.*, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), f. 161, 2 June 1608 and *Ibid.*, ff. 171-72r, 30 June 1608; AOM 1386, Wignacourt to La Marra

barometer to predict crop yield.²¹⁰ Droughts and storms could be equally punishing on crops. Early modern Sicily was apparently a more arid place than its medieval equivalent and demographic swells increased the demand on agricultural yields.²¹¹ South-easterly winds – the dreaded *scirocco* – carried with them sands from North Africa, suffocating entire agricultural expanses²¹² both in Malta and Sicily. Whole harvests from fields of wheat, barley, and vines could go lost.²¹³ When this happened, Hospitaller Malta knew that most probably it would have to pay more for its provisions or otherwise look elsewhere to stock its wharves.²¹⁴ The Order, in consultation with the Common Treasury and the agents in Sicily, evaluated the various grain prices offered on the Sicilian market in conjunction with the effective and potential availability of grain in Malta and across the channel. In principal, and according to market logic, abundant harvests implied lower prices.²¹⁵ If this was not so, the Order took its time to look around for a better bargain,²¹⁶ perhaps discarding the option to buy from the old harvest and wait for the next, when prices could be more attractive.²¹⁷ Grain prices could vary considerably over a short span of time on the same market and between one Sicilian market and another. During the same summer, grain prices in Palermo could go down from 64 *tari* to 50 *tari per salma*, while in Licata grain would be sold at 40 *tari per salma*.²¹⁸ On other occasions prices went down by just a few *tari*²¹⁹ or else they could decrease on a daily basis. In the summer of 1607, Licata informed the Order that grain prices were going down despite the fact that cylos were being emptied at a furious pace.²²⁰ In September of that year, in fact, grain in Syracuse was being sold at 10 *tari per salma*, or less.²²¹ Such low prices usually occurred when markets were flooded with cereals. Fertile seasons in Sicily had to be exploited to the full by Hospitaller Malta.²²²

All this constituted vital information for the Convent. Apart from allowing the Order to gauge the availability and potential sufficiency of Sicilian grain stocks, and consequently whether alternative grain markets had to be tapped,²²³ it could impinge on the timing, quantity, and routes of Hospitaller fund transfers from the continent to subsidize the purchases. If Malta was well stocked with grain, the Order could decide to take the chance and suspend purchases from Sicily in the hope that prices deflated later on in the season.²²⁴ If not, the island's government had to act quickly to coordinate the transfer of sufficient funds to Sicily before grain prices started rising again by the end of summer when Sicilian

(Palermo), ff. 211v-212, 2 September 1607; and AOM 1387, Wignacourt to Corsetto (Licata), f. 128, 19 May 1608.

²¹⁰ See, for example, AOM 1381, Wignacourt to Accarigi (Licata), f. 103, 7 May 1602 and *Ibid.*, Wignacourt to Staiti (Palermo), ff. 122v-123r, [11] May 1602.

²¹¹ Denis Mack Smith, *Storia della Sicilia medievale e moderna*, Trans. L. Biocca Margheri (Rome-Bari, Biblioteca Universale Laterza, 1983), 230.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 230.

²¹³ For Malta, see: AOM 1385, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 174v-175r, 7 June 1606. For Sicily, see: AOM 1390, Wignacourt to Afflitto (Syracuse), f. 254v, 6 August 1611. When the *scirocco* failed to damage Sicilian harvests it was news deemed worthy to communicate to Malta. AOM 1386, Wignacourt to Corsetto (Licata), f. 94, 24 April 1607.

²¹⁴ In 1604 the Order was paying higher prices than usual for its grain due to bad weather. AOM 1383, Wignacourt to the Prior of Bohemia, ff. 410v-411, 20 December 1604.

²¹⁵ As in the summer of 1609, for example, when Sicilian wheat was being sold cheaply due to abundant harvests: '*non si sente altro che una straordinarissima abbondanza di formenti à prezzi dolcissimi*'. AOM 1388, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 285v-286r, 31 August 1609.

²¹⁶ For example: AOM 1387, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 215v-216, 18 August 1607.

²¹⁷ AOM 1395, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 160v-162r, 2 May 1616.

²¹⁸ AOM 1393A, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 286v-287r, 11 July 1614.

²¹⁹ Late in 1613, Hospitaller sources reported a three-*tari per salma* decrease in the price of Sicilian wheat. AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 614v-615, 31 December 1613.

²²⁰ Cereal stocks '*calavano à gran furia in quei caricatori (...) e che però tuttavia andavano abbassando di prezzo*'. AOM 1386, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 204v-205, 11 August 1607.

²²¹ AOM 1386, Wignacourt to Sortino (Syracuse), f. 213v, 2 September 1607.

²²² See for example: AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Capece (Palermo), f. 268, 25 August 1605.

²²³ Alternative provision sources did not always suffice. In the first half of 1603, notwithstanding its efforts, the Order failed to fetch enough alternative wheat from the Levant to see Malta through until the next harvest. AOM 1382, Wignacourt to Afflitto (Palermo), ff. 142v-143r, 12 May 1603.

²²⁴ See for example: AOM 1386, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 163-164, 29 June 1607.

stocks would start dwindling.²²⁵ The overall result was that a portion of Hospitaller funds were consistently channelled to Sicily, mainly to Palermo²²⁶ and Messina, where they were either used directly to subsidize the grain purchases or transferred to places like Licata,²²⁷ from where cereals were bought to be shipped to Malta; or else funds would be directed to Syracuse²²⁸ or Trapani²²⁹ on opposite ends of the island for the baking of biscuit to be loaded on Hospitaller galleys. Consequently, weather moods in the Mediterranean, the stock levels of grain wharves in Malta and Sicily, and overall market fluctuations conditioned the Order's fund-transfer strategy. Forecasts of a deficient Sicilian harvest could force the Order to speed up the collection of mortuaries and vacancies in Germany and remit the funds collected to Venice from where they would be transferred south.²³⁰ Alternatively, abundant harvests throughout Sicily as in 1610,²³¹ coupled with shortages in the circulation of silver currency for which Sicily was notorious,²³² could cause a dramatic decline in grain prices, creating a conjuncture too favourable for the Order not to exploit, by injecting its own currency from all over Europe in the Sicilian markets to buy grain.²³³ Systematic Hospitaller fund-transfer patterns thus came to be established to meet the subsistence needs of early modern Malta, with thousands of *scudi* of the Order's credit being deposited in Palermo from Spain²³⁴ and Lyons,²³⁵ either directly or through Genoa and Naples.²³⁶ Funds could also reach Palermo or Messina from Germany via Venice,²³⁷ or from Lombardy via Genoa.²³⁸ Naples, a grain market in its own terms and a banking centre from where to relocate Hospitaller funds,²³⁹ was a conveniently close market to tap for alternative credit when time was pressing. Between 1599 and 1628, a span of years covering the period under study, the Royal Mint of Naples minted 13 million ducats, coins which were immediately injected into circulation,²⁴⁰ rendering Naples one of the money markets less likely to end up insolvent in the Mediterranean. In September 1605, as soon as the Convent received news that wheat prices in Sicily had gone down, the receiver in Palermo was ordered to purchase wheat for 20,000 ducats remitted from the *ricetta* of Naples.²⁴¹ In early 1618, when delays in Hospitaller remittances from Lombardy, Genoa, and Venice were compromising the baking of biscuit in Messina, the Common Treasury suggested that 3,000 ducats could be withdrawn from Naples to cover the commission.²⁴²

²²⁵ AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Capece (Palermo), ff. 267-268r, 25 August 1605.

²²⁶ At one point in 1604, for example, the Order's agents in Venice, Florence, Genoa, and Naples were to transfer to Palermo all the funds possible for the purchase of wheat. AOM 1383, Wignacourt to Capece (Palermo), ff. 370-372, 16 November 1604.

²²⁷ See, for example: AOM 1393A, Wignacourt to Pugiades (Licata), ff. 358v-359r, 26 August 1614 and AOM 1398, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 93v-94, 20 February 1619.

²²⁸ See, for example, AOM 1391, Wignacourt to Mazzara (Syracuse), f. 270v, 19 June 1612 and AOM 1399, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 208v-209, 22 May 1620.

²²⁹ See, for example, AOM 1389, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 71v-72, 24 March 1610 and AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 222, 27 May 1613.

²³⁰ See, for example, AOM 1387, Wignacourt to Muchental (Germany), f. 136, 19 May 1608.

²³¹ AOM 1389, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 242v-244r, 2 August 1610.

²³² Mack Smith, 217. Such shortages were mainly the result of the over-evaluation of gold in relation to silver. Braudel (1986), 463.

²³³ See, for example, AOM 1389, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 242v-244r, 2 August 1610.

²³⁴ For example: 6,000 *scudi* in the summer of 1606; 6,000 *scudi* and 20,000 *scudi* in the summer of 1609. See, respectively, AOM 1385, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 174v-175r, 7 June 1606; AOM 1388, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), f. 248r, 25 July 1609; AOM 1388, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 285v-286r, 31 August 1609.

²³⁵ For example: 30,000 *lire* in 1606 and 20,000 *scudi* in the summer of 1610. See respectively AOM 1385, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), f. 177, 9 June 1606 and AOM 1389, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 226v-227, 2 August 1610. See also AOM 1400, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 328-329, 16 June 1621.

²³⁶ For example: AOM 1385, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 174v-175r, 7 June 1606.

²³⁷ AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Malvicino (Venice), f. 57, 7 February 1605.

²³⁸ Grech (2005), 198-9.

²³⁹ See also, AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Malvicino (Venice), f. 57, 7 February 1605.

²⁴⁰ Braudel (1986), 498.

²⁴¹ AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Capece (Palermo), f. 293, 1 September 1605.

²⁴² AOM 1397, Wignacourt to Balsamo (Messina), f. 17r, 13 January 1618.

The Convent's cereal barometer which updated early modern Malta on the availability and prices of grain within the confines of the Hospitaller world, and Sicily in particular, had to be accompanied by a wider knowledge of the solvency situation and currency exchange-rates of Euro-Mediterranean markets which somehow intersected the Order of St John's communication and financial network. As explained earlier, the remittance of funds from Hospitaller financial centres to Sicily, Malta, or wherever the Order needed capital, was an operation which depended on a few basic conditions. First, the priories had to be solvent, meaning that enough responsions were to be collected to satisfy Hospitaller Malta's needs. Like any institution which relied on financiers or money-lenders to transfer its funds, or which provided payment facilities at a distance, the Order was jealous of its creditworthiness. As it was to learn at its own tragic expense in the post revolutionary crisis of the 1790s,²⁴³ defaulting on payments could spell ruin, a dreaded implication which Alof de Wignacourt seemed wary to avoid when drilling the simple equation to the receivership of Palermo in the summer of 1612 regarding the use of bills in either direction from Malta:

we cannot send bills (*bolle*) if we are not sure that the transactions to be carried out through them can be paid for sure.²⁴⁴

Secondly, the European markets hosting the priories had to be solvent themselves in order to allow currency conversions required by the Order's transactions. Currency exchange rates could also be determined by the degree of availability of bullion on a particular market. In 1609, the Order was worried that its receiver in Castile would have to pay hefty interests if compelled to fork out all payments in silver at a time when Spain was experiencing severe shortages of the metal.²⁴⁵ The Order was not always happy to effect payments in silver²⁴⁶ and cash transactions in Madrid occasionally could prove difficult to carry out, as denounced in 1618 by Brocchero, the Order's ambassador in the Spanish Court.²⁴⁷ Shortages in currency on a certain *piazza* could shoot interests upwards in money-lending transactions, as happened to Philip II in 1561 when he contracted an *asiento*²⁴⁸ of 100,000 ducats on the Genoa exchange at the outrageous rate of 21.6 per cent.²⁴⁹

Thirdly, and similarly, the markets where the Order had to cash its funds to carry out payments had to have liquid currency available. In other words, the Hospitaller agents had to find financiers, merchants, or anyone with enough cash available to provide the Order with the sums required. This was a basic prerequisite to finalize remittances where the payments of goods were to be effected. Regional contingencies could swallow up capital to a degree that made it difficult for Hospitaller personnel to find solvent financiers, as in the case of the Messina fairs mentioned earlier. Consequently, the Order needed constant market information on multiple levels to be kept updated on what cash it could rely on, the exchange rates offered in Europe, which markets offered the best rates for the remittance of funds, and which markets were more solvent than others. As partly explained earlier, Hospitaller receivers and procurators were tasked to provide this information to the Convent and were allowed a degree of autonomy by the Order's hierarchy when deciding which markets were best to deposit funds in. Apart from this, when demanded by circumstances, Hospitaller agents posted on the continent communicated with each other to coordinate the most feasible fund transfers possible.²⁵⁰ In 1615, Sollima in Messina and Ponte in Naples were advised to collaborate in finding the best way to transfer funds and reduce

²⁴³ Grech (1999), 207-17.

²⁴⁴ '*non si possono spedire bolle se non quando siamo sicuri che i cambi che si devono fare in virtù di esse possono essere pagati sicuramente*'. AOM 1391, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 346-347r, 31 July 1612.

²⁴⁵ '*mentre in Spagna ne corre pochissimo*'. AOM 1388, Wignacourt to the Governatore di Modica, f. 281v, 28 August 1609.

²⁴⁶ AOM 1394, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), 402v-403, 25 August 1615.

²⁴⁷ AOM 1397, Wignacourt to Ponte (Naples), ff. 50v-51r, 21 February 1618.

²⁴⁸ An *asiento* was 'a short-term loan at high interest'. Céline Dauverd, *Imperial Ambition in the Early Modern Mediterranean. Genoese Merchants and the Spanish Crown* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), 68.

²⁴⁹ Braudel (1986), 489.

²⁵⁰ AOM 1385, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 174v-175r, 7 June 1606.

the losses that the currency exchange and transfers on the Naples-Messina fund stream were incurring due to the silk fair being held in Messina.²⁵¹

Receivers were allowed enough administrative leeway to decide whether to deposit sums in Naples, Messina, or Palermo in the summer months according to the most convenient interests rates which, to their knowledge, were on offer.²⁵² This way they had funds available to buy cereals that same winter, or by the following spring in order to buy thousands of *cantara* of biscuit in Syracuse or Trapani, right in time to stock Hospitaller galleys when the sailing season started.²⁵³ Receivers and procurators had also the remit to negotiate currency exchange rates, although the last word was usually dictated from Malta on such matters. In early 1613, following the advice of the Common Treasury, the terms for a remittance to Messina negotiated by the receiver in Naples were overruled by the Convent, deeming the transaction unfavourable.²⁵⁴ Each receiver had a market zone of competence according to the Hospitaller financial jurisdiction he was posted in. The receivership of Palermo, for example, was consulted by the Order for its knowledge of Spanish markets,²⁵⁵ and could be asked to update Malta with the currency exchanges in Sicily,²⁵⁶ Lyons, Provence, Barcelona, and Castile.²⁵⁷

Thus, knowledge about the level of capital available on a *piazza* for bills to be cleared and payments to be effected had to be supplemented by information regarding the availability of Hospitaller responsions collected in the various priories. In June 1606, the German priories provided the Order with the most secure financial guarantees to remit capital in Sicily by October of that year to cover grain exports.²⁵⁸ The situation would change drastically with the onset of the Thirty Years War.²⁵⁹ If, as explained earlier, the Order did not have funds available in Castile, the transactions on the Castile-Sicily axis would stall or be postponed.²⁶⁰ The receiver in Palermo could brief the Convent regarding the *larghezza di cambio*, the availability of currency, in the Spanish and French markets, but the Order would not be able to exploit the favourable contingency unless it had enough money available on those markets, as apparently was the case in early 1607.²⁶¹ This was a most unfortunate situation for the Order. A market flooded with currency was an opportunity not to be missed. The Genoese would take the trouble of dispatching express couriers from Madrid all the way to Antwerp simply to exploit favourable market conditions in Northern Europe.²⁶²

Financial interdependencies on a Euro-Mediterranean level conditioned Hospitaller monetary administration. The Order manipulated its fund-transfer strategy according to its needs, to its current financial condition, and to international market fluctuations. Knowledge of the possibility to effect favourable exchanges on Sicilian markets could induce the Order to commission daily remittances to Sicily from its receivers in Italy to exploit the profitable situation.²⁶³ If only a maximum of 6,000 *libre* in bills could be cleared in Saragossa (Aragon), cash availability in Palermo would be limited.²⁶⁴ Information from Messina that coins were circulating more freely on the opposite end of Sicily could deflect Hospitaller remittances to the Palermo-Lyons axis.²⁶⁵ Similarly, knowledge that coins were

²⁵¹ *'per occasione della fiera della seta'*. AOM 1394, Wignacourt to Sollima (Messina), f. 351, 23 July 1615.

²⁵² For example: AOM 1387, Wignacourt to Gaetani (Florence), f. 144v, 31 May 1608.

²⁵³ See, for example, AOM 1383, Wignacourt to Capece (Palermo), f. 374v, 16 November 1604 and *Ibid.*, Wignacourt to Malvicino (Venice), f. 386, 16 November 1604.

²⁵⁴ AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Abenante (Naples), ff. 134v-135r, 22 March 1613.

²⁵⁵ AOM 1388, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 249v-250r, 5 August 1609.

²⁵⁶ AOM 1391, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 401, 3 September 1612.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 312, 10 November 1612.

²⁵⁸ AOM 1386, Wignacourt to Medici (Florence), ff. 122v-123r, 2 June 1607.

²⁵⁹ See Grech (2016), chapter 6.

²⁶⁰ See also AOM 1388, Wignacourt to the Governatore di Modica, f. 109, 11 March 1609.

²⁶¹ AOM 1386, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 55-56, 11 February 1607.

²⁶² Braudel (1986), 367, footnote 55.

²⁶³ *'cambi si potriano fare vantaggiosi per tutte le piazze rispetto all'abbondanza della moneta che corre costì di mal peso'*. AOM 1386, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 215-216r, 2 September 1607.

²⁶⁴ AOM 1395, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 162, 7 May 1616.

²⁶⁵ AOM 1391, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 578-579, 31 December 1612.

circulating in greater abundance in Naples rather than Palermo²⁶⁶ could encourage the Order to remit responsions in the centre of Campania. The Order's hierarchy, in consultation with the Common Treasury,²⁶⁷ had to study the best options available to remit funds to Palermo or elsewhere if interest rates demanded on the Palermo exchange were exceptionally high, as claimed by the Order in July 1606.²⁶⁸ Market contingencies conditioned Malta's grain-purchasing strategy, forcing the Order to make adjustments in its fund-relocation policy. What appeared viable in spring could be impracticable by autumn. In the early months of 1617, the only way to transfer 40,000 *scudi* to Palermo appeared to be via Castile and Aragon,²⁶⁹ but by the end of September of that year the Order was encountering difficulties in transferring funds from Spain.²⁷⁰ However, funds could also be transferred in cash and the Order of St John chose to adopt this option whenever circumstances allowed it.

The Transport of Hospitaller Bullion

The transfer of money in cash became more problematic as western capitalism started maturing, trade volumes on an intercontinental level started increasing, and the government treasuries of modern monetary economies started becoming more demanding. The payment of the salaries of ever growing mercenary armies, just to mention an activity which could require hefty amounts of specie, solicited a flow of currency which the bills of exchange, those 'privileged goods'²⁷¹ which played such a distinctive role in the financial revolution of pre-industrial western society, were not always able to satisfy. The obvious problem with the transfer of cash was that it was reliant on man, animal, currents, and winds in quantities and forces more or less proportional to the amounts of bullion in ingots or coins relocated. A solitary courier could only carry gold coins in his garments to minimize the weight and make up sums of any significance worth transferring,²⁷² with the inevitable risk of falling prey to rascals and bandits. When much larger amounts of cash, usually at institutional levels, had to be carried over long distances, the transport dynamics became more intricate and the incidence of geopolitics, financial feasibility, and climate increased. After the bourse of Antwerp was set up in 1531, Spanish silver was shipped north to Antwerp and Bruges in the *zabras* (vessels) of Biscay to pay the salaries of Habsburg mercenaries, a transport pattern which allowed Spain to avoid the troubles in French territory, but which started encountering severe difficulties after 1568 when English pirates started targeting this traffic, disrupting the plans of the Duke of Alva and inflicting a heavy blow to Spain's Atlantic route.²⁷³ As an alternative, in the 1570s Philip II risked transporting bullion overland through France to finance Spanish warfare in the Netherlands, but this required heavy escort, recourse to diplomacy to obtain the French monarchy's permission, and the agency of Genoese financiers.²⁷⁴ The Genoese shunned the land route from Cartagena to Barcelona in the second half of the sixteenth century, deeming it dangerous for the transport of their cash.²⁷⁵ The war with the 'Turk', which attracted more Spanish capital to the Mediterranean from the 1570s, and the greater influx of American silver in Seville from the 1580s,

²⁶⁶ AOM 1385, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), f. 177, 9 June 1606.

²⁶⁷ See, for example, AOM 1396, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 124v-125, 22 April 1617.

²⁶⁸ Writing to the receiver in Naples in July 1606, Wignacourt complained about the '*grossi, et insoliti interessi che corrono presentemente nella piazza di Palermo*', and voiced the same complaint with reference to Palermo to the Procuratore in Messina a few weeks later: '*non si possono fare (...) cambi senza un gravissimo et insolito interesse*'. AOM 1385, Wignacourt to Capece (Naples), ff. 216v-217, 2 July 1606 and *Ibid.*, Wignacourt to Procuratore Ventimiglia (Messina), f. 243, 18 July 1606 respectively.

²⁶⁹ AOM 1396, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 124v-125, 22 April 1617.

²⁷⁰ AOM 1396, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 328r, 26 September 1617.

²⁷¹ Braudel (1986), 375.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 484 and 499.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 480-3; Grech (2005), 200.

²⁷⁴ According to Braudel, the routes across France were used by the Spanish only up to 1578. Braudel (1986), 484-7.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 490.

invigorated the Barcelona-Genoa sea route for the transport of specie²⁷⁶ and it was only after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 that the Spanish could transfer their bullion north in Dutch ships.²⁷⁷

The transport of Hospitaller bullion was, geographically speaking, a lopsided maritime affair, since it was mainly restricted to shipments in the western half of the Mediterranean. With the exception of Venice, all the principal ports through which the Order could ship its funds – mainly Barcelona, Marseilles, Genoa, Naples, Messina, and Palermo – were in the western Mediterranean. With a single galley trip in these waters, which occasionally could include stops in other harbours of the Spanish, French, and Italian littorals, the Order could end up collecting and shipping with relative safety to Sicily or Malta the responsions from its Iberian, French, Italian, and occasionally German priories when currency from the latter was deposited in Genoa and not Venice.²⁷⁸ The shipment of Hospitaller money from Amsterdam along the Atlantic described above was apparently highly exceptional and until further evidence is provided we cannot conclude that this traffic became a systematic pattern in Hospitaller bullion transfer as the seventeenth century progressed. Neither do the documents consulted for this study provide any indication that Hospitaller bullion from the European priories was shipped along the Adriatic from Venice, for example, notwithstanding the Republic's pivotal role in the transfer south of the Order's funds, as evidenced above. Deploying Hospitaller galleys solely to ship funds from Venice could be unfeasible, especially when risk factors were considered in the equation. In the Adriatic, the Order apparently could not count on a service similar to the one which occasionally could be provided by Genoese galleys when they carried Hospitaller capital south along the Tyrrhenian on their way to load Sicilian silk.²⁷⁹ Grand Master Nicholas Cotoner sustained that the Genoa-Messina sea route was travelled on a yearly basis by several vessels, providing a convenient maritime connection for whoever wanted to transfer goods or money south along the Tyrrhenian.²⁸⁰

The Ottoman threat could have continental and maritime implications for Hospitaller Malta, conditioning traffic related to the archipelago well beyond the islands' shores. Shipments of commodities from Venice destined to the Convent could be delayed to avoid the risk of encountering Turkish fleets at the mouth of the Adriatic if Hospitaller intelligence suspected the concomitant possibility of enemy sorties west beyond Morea.²⁸¹ The Order was ready to risk shipping these commodities from Venice, often in single unescorted Flemish vessels, presumably because this option was still more feasible than transferring merchandise overland through Italy, but it was apparently not prepared to take similar risks to transfer its bullion. Single merchant ships hired by the Venetian receivership could not provide the degree of security guaranteed by armed galleys and the Order could count on alternative fund transfer options from Venice anyway. The western Mediterranean was not exempt from similar Muslim menaces. The Tyrrhenian coast south of Rome was not renowned for safe shipping and Ottoman sorties could occasionally roam Calabrian waters,²⁸² but the possibility of collecting several responsions in one trip and escorting them with multiple galleys rendered these ventures worthwhile for the Order.

As for the continental transfer of Hospitaller responsions, this study has no solid evidence that the Order's currency was systematically transported overland in its journey towards Sicily, Malta, or elsewhere. It must be said that in the case of the fund remittances explained earlier, Hospitaller

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 487-93.

²⁷⁷ Bonney, 437-8.

²⁷⁸ Grech (2005), 198.

²⁷⁹ At times the Order exploited the service of Genoese and Spanish vessels to transfer prioral bullion and merchandise. Grech (2005), 197-8. See also: AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Pagliaro (Genoa), f. 92, 2 April 1605; *Ibid.*, f. 229, 29 July 1605; AOM 1388, Wignacourt to Caloro (Genoa), ff. 150v-151r, 30 April 1609; AOM 1389, Wignacourt to Caloro (Genoa), f. 118, 24 April 1610; AOM 1390, Wignacourt to Caloro (Genoa), ff. 276-277r, 24 August 1611; AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Caloro (Genoa), f. 338, 4 July 1613; *Ibid.*, f. 413r, 13 August 1613; *Ibid.*, to Torriglia (Messina), f. 410v, 13 August 1613 and AOM 1393A, Wignacourt to Caloro (Genoa), f. 384v, 12 September 1614.

²⁸⁰ AOM 1444, Cotoner to Guglielmo Balbiano, ff. 36v-37r, 29 March 1669.

²⁸¹ See, for example, AOM 1396, Wignacourt to Guinigi (Venice), ff. 292v-293r, 28 August 1617.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, ff. 292v-293r, 28 August 1617.

documents do not always specify whether these were effected in bills of exchange or specie, or a combination of both. When discussing the transfer of Spanish capital through France in the 1570s, Braudel seems to suggest that we cannot conclude that money travelled in specie unless it is specifically stated in documents.²⁸³ In the case of the Hospitaller remittance mechanism for the relocation of funds from the European priories, it is highly unlikely that the Order was in a position to systematically transfer substantial sums overland in cash without some kind of escort, and the carriage costs would probably have been prohibitive. However, the overland transport of specie when responsions were collected to be deposited with the receiver of the respective priories – as in the case of High Germany described earlier – or by merchants at some stage of the remittance from Europe cannot be excluded. At one point the Order's contemporary chronicler Dal Pozzo seems to imply that the Hospital's Castilian responsions deposited in Madrid were carried overland to the Spanish Mediterranean coast, a journey between 150 and 200 miles long, where they had to be loaded on the Order's galleys.²⁸⁴ A rare and explicit reference to the overland transport of Hospitaller cash is made in a letter dated September 1607, when the Order was planning the carriage of a sum from Licata to Palermo for the purchase of wheat on behalf of the *Università*.²⁸⁵ The wording of the correspondence, however, specifies that the transfer in question was to go through only under appropriate escort and the whole operation was to be carried out in great secrecy, presumably to limit the risk of ambush.²⁸⁶ The decision was left to the receiver of Palermo who apparently approved, for by the end of the following month a sum in cash was transferred along the Licata-Palermo land route.²⁸⁷

Notwithstanding the risks and costs involved, cash transfers afforded more than one advantage, all of which justify why an institution like the Order of St John occasionally chose to transport its own money in physical bulk at some stage during the relocation of its funds: they allowed a greater control on the overall transfer, making it possible to avoid territorial troubles, defy market fluctuations, and bypass *piazze* where liquidity was poor and exchange rates unfavourable; and they reduced the number of remittance stages, cutting on transaction costs and consequently diminishing the dependence on money-lenders, merchants, and intermediaries, saving on commission charges. In 1605, the Order was considering alternative options to transfer its Spanish money from Barcelona, probably also in cash, since a previous transfer of 30,000 *scudi* from the Catalan exchange through a remittance mechanism had cost the Order an exorbitant 12 per cent interest.²⁸⁸ A typical bullion-collecting trip by Hospitaller galleys in the western half of the Mediterranean envisaged stops on the Spanish, French, and Italian littorals, to conclude the journey in one Sicilian port or more before crossing over to Malta.²⁸⁹ Galley trips of this scale were usually commissioned with multiple tasks. Logistics, the costs involved, the Order's military schedule, and the seasons made it highly unlikely for the Order to plan galley trips solely to ship bullion,²⁹⁰ unless the distances involved were relatively short and the operation was financially worthwhile, as in 1612, when currency on the Sicilian market was easily available and money presumably cheap.²⁹¹ On other occasions, the galleys would be sent on purpose from Malta to pick cash, normally from Palermo or Messina, especially if the sums involved were substantial.²⁹² The Order's documents talk of Hospitaller galleys returning from Messina with sacks full of *scudi*, at times

²⁸³ Braudel (1986), 486-7.

²⁸⁴ Dal Pozzo, ii, 227-8.

²⁸⁵ The *Università* was the Maltese municipal council whose powers, a few decades after the Order settled in Malta, were gradually and mainly restricted to the administration of grain. Carmel Cassar, *A Concise History of Malta* (Malta, Mireva Publications, 2000), 84-5.

²⁸⁶ AOM 1386, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 249v-250r, 23 September 1607.

²⁸⁷ AOM 1386, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), ff. 271-272, 31 October 1607.

²⁸⁸ 'poi che (...) si uscirebbe dall'insopportabile danno che si patisce più che mai nel cambio delle bolle per Barcelona che nell'ultimo delli 30 mila scudi non è stato meno di 12 per cento'. AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Capece (Palermo), ff. 302v-304r, 23 September 1605.

²⁸⁹ See, for example, AOM 259, ff. 49v-50r, AOM 432, f. 254 and Dal Pozzo, ii, 206; 227-9.

²⁹⁰ Grech (2005), 198.

²⁹¹ News from Sicily had it that the '*commercio della moneta si è allargato*', so the Order sent galleys to load cash from Messina. AOM 1391, Wignacourt to Torriglia (Messina) ff. 246v-247r, 6 June 1612.

²⁹² See, for example, AOM 1390, Wignacourt to Torriglia (Messina), f. 465v, 12 December 1611; AOM 1391, Wignacourt to Torriglia (Messina), ff. 246v-247r, 6 June 1612.

in their thousands,²⁹³ and in 1616 the Convent sent three galleys to Palermo to collect the grand sum of 30,000 *scudi*.²⁹⁴

But the norm was to schedule longer trips with multiple commissions. Hospitaller galleys sailing in the western half of the Mediterranean would also stop in Genoa to take on board goods;²⁹⁵ harbour in the Island of Elba to load a cargo of iron;²⁹⁶ and transport oarsmen from Naples.²⁹⁷ These trips were meticulously charted by the Order, for their stoppages had to be coordinated with the Hospitaller agents stationed in the respective ports where the galleys had to load bullion, merchandise, or otherwise.²⁹⁸ Whichever method was used to relocate responsions through Iberia, France, and Italy, prioral bullion intended to be shipped to Malta from the western half of the Mediterranean had to be made available in cash in ports like Cartagena, Alicante, Barcelona, Marseilles, Genoa, or Naples for example.²⁹⁹ An account of 1569 explains how Iberian funds were to make their way to Malta after being collected from Portugal, Castile and Leon, relocated to Aragon and deposited in Barcelona, from where they were to catch a shipping connection to Genoa, Naples, or Sicily to be presumably picked up by Hospitaller galleys.³⁰⁰ Fast forward a century, and we find three Hospitaller galleys in 1652 sailing north along Sicily's eastern coast and the Tyrrhenian, drop mail addressed to Genoa at the Ligurian Riviera, and stop at Nice before sailing to Marseilles to load goods and bullion made available from the French priories. The departure from Marseilles was to be delayed to see if Maisenseuls, the Hospitaller receiver in Lyons, was in a position to provide the galleys with further cash before they coasted to Genoa to collect more funds made available in the Ligurian port and continue their trip south along the Tyrrhenian for a stopover in Campania to load more silver and gold obtained from the Knights' *spogli*.³⁰¹

Episodes a century apart such as these indicate a certain recurrence in the Order's monetary administration, but sufficient similar documented instances exist in between to corroborate claims of fairly standard procedures regulating the transfer of Hospitaller bullion in the western half of the Mediterranean. A superficial look at the twenty years or so under study would reveal similar bullion-collecting trips in 1605, 1606, 1607, 1610, 1613, 1616, and 1621.³⁰² Occasionally this cash could stall in Sicily according to Hospitaller Malta's needs, as in 1607 when thousands of *scudi* were shipped in great secrecy from Barcelona to Messina.³⁰³ Hospitaller cash could also travel between Sicilian markets to cover costs of purchases commissioned by the Convent, as when specie were shipped to Syracuse to finance the making of biscuit for the Order's crews.³⁰⁴

If the Order's money from cash shipments, remittances through bills of exchange, or the routine collection of responsions from the priories was not held in Sicily, southern Italy, or elsewhere, it was usually shipped to Malta either by the Hospitaller squadron during its trips in the western Mediterranean or by galleys sent on purpose from Malta to collect funds, as explained earlier. At times Hospitaller bullion, or credit in bills of exchange converted to money, was deposited in Naples, Palermo, or

²⁹³ AOM 1389, Wignacourt to Torriglia (Messina), f. 145v, 22 May 1610; *Ibid.*, f. 155, 12 June 1610.

²⁹⁴ AOM 1394, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 78, 7 March 1616.

²⁹⁵ Dal Pozzo, ii, 206.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, ii, 206.

²⁹⁷ AOM 1385, Wignacourt to Capece (Naples), ff. 353v-354r, 30 October 1606.

²⁹⁸ For the illustration of the Order's logistics and coordinating efforts between its maritime and continental personnel, see Grech (2016), chapter 7.

²⁹⁹ Grech (2005), 197-202.

³⁰⁰ AOM 432, ff. 253-254, 27 June 1569.

³⁰¹ Dal Pozzo, ii, 206 and AOM 259, ff. 49v-50r.

³⁰² See, respectively: AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Bertone (Lombardy), ff. 309v-310r, 23 September 1605; AOM 1385, Wignacourt to Capece (Naples), ff. 353v-354r, 30 October 1606; AOM 1386, Wignacourt to the Gen[er]alle delle Galere, ff. 87v-88r, 21 March 1607; Dal Pozzo, i, 554-5; AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Paolo La Restia, Governatore di Modica, f. 291, 7 June 1613; AOM 1395, Wignacourt to Amb. Gattinara (Rome), f. 181v, 17 May 1616; AOM 1400, Wignacourt to Balio Conte di Brie, Generale delle Galere, ff. 568v-569r, 22 October 1621.

³⁰³ AOM 1386, Wignacourt to Gio Batta Abenanti, Cap[ita]no della Capitana, f. 116r, 19 May 1607.

³⁰⁴ AOM 1390, Wignacourt to Afflitto (Syracuse), f. 293, 31 August 1611 and AOM 1391, Wignacourt to Mazzarra (Syracuse), f. 245v, 6 June 1612.

Messina³⁰⁵ to exploit the return home of the Order's galleys roaming the Mediterranean at the time to be subsequently shipped to Malta. This way Hospitaller galleys drifting along the coasts of Sicily, or returning from the western Mediterranean or from missions in the Levant, would load the Order's funds previously deposited in physical bulk in Naples, Palermo, or Messina, or cashed in these ports through exchanges with markets like Barcelona, Lyons, Lombardy, Venice, Genoa, or Florence.³⁰⁶ It was very unlikely that substantial sums in cash were transported in vessels other than galleys unless for relatively short distances, such as channel crossings between Malta and Southern Italy for the transfer of the *Università's* cash, the money of the '*popolo*'. This cash was usually shipped to Licata on the padroni's frigates to pay for wheat from the wharves in Southern Sicily,³⁰⁷ although in October 1607, cash on the Malta-Licata route was carried in four galleys.³⁰⁸ But the use of galleys for the specific shipment of bullion along such short crossings seems to have been an exception.

Whatever logistics were involved however, the relocation of prioral funds tested Hospitaller Malta's communication network to the full, for transfer operations, whether in physical bulk, through financial remittance mechanisms, or a combination of both, had to overcome the entire gamut of tyrannies which bridled pre-industrial man's efforts when trying to sustain systematic connections through time and space. Distance, topography, the winds and the currents, bureaucracy, war, and epidemics, combined with the eternal frailties of human nature, all conspired to hinder, restrain, or slow down communication. The struggle to surmount barriers and maintain contacts knew no truce and Hospitaller Malta, lying precariously on the Habsburg-Ottoman divide, with a radius of continental interests ranging from Portugal to Bohemia, and harassed by Mediterranean perils emanating from North Africa and the Levant, had to grapple consistently with similar contingencies to defy isolation and survive.

Conclusion

Early modern Malta's convenience to Habsburg Spain stemmed also from the Order of St John's continental estates and assets, which systematically provided alternatives, both in terms of market access and communication options, despite the inherent weakness in their scattered nature which rendered them vulnerable to the continent's vicissitudes. These resources, together with other sources of income, afforded Hospitaller Malta a degree of independence when managing military conflicts, allowing it to participate in the overall financial burden incurred by the struggle against Islam in the Mediterranean, together with Spain, the Papacy, Venice, and other potentates.³⁰⁹

Through Hospitaller prioral funds, Malta's bellicose contribution to the active defence in the central Mediterranean was also a financial one and helped to ease Habsburg Spain's general costs of warfare. Apart from allowing a degree of self-sufficiency in military campaigns, Hospitaller estates and funds rendered Malta of early modernity unique when compared to other Catholic Mediterranean islands. No other island in the Mediterranean could boast of such a ramified financial network in Europe, for no other island had a government possessing such a widespread mass of continental property

³⁰⁵ AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Torriglia (Messina), f. 147r, 1 April 1613. For more similar examples, see above and Grech (2016), chapter seven.

³⁰⁶ See, for example, AOM 1384, Wignacourt to Capece (Naples), f. 317, 23 September 1605; AOM 1386, Wignacourt to Capece (Naples), ff. 26-27r, 3 January 1607; AOM 1389, Wignacourt to Torriglia (Messina), ff. 377v-378r, 20 November 1610; AOM 1390, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 191, 28 June 1611; AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Pagliaro (Alessandria), f. 496v, 10 October 1613; AOM 1393A, Wignacourt to Sollima (Messina), ff. 332v-333, 17 August 1614; *Ibid.*, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 379v, 12 September 1614; *Ibid.*, f. 428v, 10 October 1614; AOM 1394, Wignacourt to Sollima (Messina), f. 87r, 16 March 1616; AOM 1396, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 337r, 10 October 1617.

³⁰⁷ Some examples: AOM 1391, Wignacourt to Grimaldi (Scicli), ff. 94v-95r, 26 March 1612; AOM 1392, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), f. 125, 8 March 1613; AOM 1393, Wignacourt to Amb. La Marra (Rome), ff. 84r-85r, 17 February 1614. In 1614, the instalments in cash of a *cambio* of 20,000 reals a month on the Castile-Sicily remittance route contracted with the Countess of Modica were to be shipped from Scicli on the frigate of Padron Vincenzo. AOM 1393A, Wignacourt to Accarigi (Scicli), ff. 404v-405r, 28 September 1614.

³⁰⁸ AOM 1386, Wignacourt to La Marra (Palermo), f. 260, 14 October 1607.

³⁰⁹ Paul Kennedy elaborates on the concept of the military cost-sharing. Kennedy, 63.

whose main aim was to generate capital and relocate substantial parts of it for the exclusive benefit of the island-headquarters.

Decades of reform and stabilisation within Hospitaller Malta's establishment moulded an administrative structure capable of devising and implementing a market strategy and of relocating funds across hundreds of kilometres through elaborate financial mechanisms. Market intelligence regarding all sorts of products and the degree of liquidity of certain European financial centres made it to Malta through Mediterranean ports, which provided access to the Order's priories, consequently increasing Malta's continental reach and enabling the Hospitaller establishment to make informed decisions regarding the quality and convenience of its purchases, and the relocation and exploitation of its funds. In consequence, bullion generated in Hospitaller priories was injected into the island's economy after being relocated via international financial centres through credit mechanisms and cash transfer, and the archipelago was supplied with provisions and commodities purchased from markets within the orbit of Malta's shipping routes.

The financial transactions consequent to this network introduced Malta to what Braudel labels as the 'reasonable' world of paper money and bills of exchange and to a future which was still denied to mammoth islands like Corsica and Sardinia, whose largely barter-based and 'half-enclosed' economies were substantially still alien to a financial revolution which was providing the West with an extra economic dimension.³¹⁰ Early modern Malta became the southernmost economy in Christianity where the use of the bill of exchange – hitherto hardly known to whole chunks of the planet - became the norm at an institutional level. Apart from a military frontier, Malta also became a Mediterranean financial frontier with economic links reaching up to Amsterdam³¹¹ in a phase when Dutch capitalism was replacing Mediterranean capitalism,³¹² hooking the island to a fledgling western capitalist economy. How, at which point, and to what extent the Maltese and their financial activities systematically followed suit in this new financial dimension is a different story, one which cannot be dealt with here.

The arrival of the Knights marked an economic and financial watershed for Malta. Following their settlement in 1530, Hospitaller bullion and bills of exchange started to be used at an institutional level to import all sorts of goods to Malta, integrating the island into a western monetary economy and endowing it with an economic edge not only at a regional level vis-à-vis other Mediterranean islands with far greater indigenous resources, but possibly anticipating similar processes in other European nations. It took the reforming efforts of Gustavus Adolphus and the intervention of foreign entrepreneurship to pull a northern power like Sweden out of its barter phase from the second decade of the 1600s, introducing it to a mercantile economy centred around Amsterdam.³¹³

Through the Order's financial transactions, the island's international dimension experienced an unprecedented growth, starting with the increment of the island's incidence at a regional level, not only on an active and preventive military level, but also on an economic one. Through the Order of St John's affairs, the island could surprisingly influence nearby markets. Just as the arrival in Seville of Spain's Atlantic fleet could inflate commodity prices in Spain,³¹⁴ the arrival of Hospitaller bullion in Sicily could have the same effect on Sicilian cereal prices, albeit on much more modest proportions.³¹⁵ Through Hospitaller networking on a Mediterranean and continental level, Malta was becoming something much more than a Spanish fief and mere satellite of Sicily. It was being transformed into an island with the adornments of a state.

³¹⁰ Braudel (1986), 382-3; 509-10.

³¹¹ For an example of Hospitaller Malta's financial and commercial links to Amsterdam in the seventeenth century, see Grech (2016), chapter 7.

³¹² Braudel (1986), 510.

³¹³ Kennedy, 81-5.

³¹⁴ For the effect on the European price revolution of the transfer to Spain of American silver in early modernity, see Braudel, (1986), 476-542.

³¹⁵ AOM 1393, Wignacourt to Valdina (Palermo), ff. 75-76r, 31 January 1614.

Abbreviations

AOM - Archives of the Order, Malta

f - folio

r - recto

v - verso