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# GOLD AND SILVER COINAGE IN MALTA 1530-1798:

## The Order's stand against falsification of money

Michael A. Sant

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As soon as the Order of St. John set foot on Maltese soil it had to contend not solely with problems of a financial nature which every constituted Government has faced before or since, but with peculiar problems of a monetary nature which, happily, are alien to most nations today. Hardly had the first hurdle, that of being granted the sovereign privilege of minting coins as had been the case in Rhodes,<sup>1</sup> been successfully overcome, than the Order was faced with other monetary problems. There was the very thorny question resulting from the over-circulation of fiduciary copper coins<sup>2</sup> which the Order, at least for some decades, attempted in vain to redeem,<sup>3</sup> and which brought much economic and social harm in its wake. There were complex problems resulting from the debasing of the standard coinage in the 18th Century and there were almost endemic problems due to the surfeit or scarcity of fractional<sup>4</sup> and other currencies in the Island. Nor were these and other problems simply just of local concern; it sometimes happened that echoes of these problems reverberated beyond Maltese shores and, at least temporarily, strained relations between the Order and other powers, usually Sicily, the Vatican and, on some occasions, Venice. One problem which the Order of St. John attempted to solve was the frequent circulation of

1. See M.A. Sant, *Coinage Problems Facing the Order of St. John in Malta* (unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Malta, 1967), Chap. II, pp. 29-50.
2. According to Neil Carothers, *Fractional Money — A History of the Small Coins and Fractional Paper of the United States* (London, 1930, p. 5) the not uncommon use of the term "token money" to distinguish fiduciary coins from standard money is unsatisfactory and even misleading since it conveys the idea that the coins are not money but mere substitutes for money. Carothers (p. 3) defines fiduciary coins as "coins whose money value is greater than their metal value."
3. M.A. Sant, "Minting and Attempted Recalling of Fiduciary Copper Coinage in Malta", *Melita Historica* VI, 1 (1972), pp. 60-80.
4. Fractional currency may be defined as small change or small coins generally used to effect exchanges of goods and services in retail trade and minor economic transactions.

false coinage in the Maltese Islands. This included foreign as well as local currencies; gold and silver pieces as well as copper.

Circulation of counterfeit coinage in Malta, or abroad for that matter, was no prerogative of the post-1530 period. More than fifteen centuries before the knights had set foot in Malta we meet with a possible case of falsification of money<sup>5</sup> and in 1517, thirteen years before the arrival of the Knights, the Island was flooded with a large quantity of false copper pieces which, on the request of the Università, was converted into artillery-pieces.<sup>6</sup> Many were the cases of falsification of money in the post-1530 period which are richly documented in the Maltese archives. Here I will deal exclusively with the noble metal.

As soon as the Order began exercising the sovereign privilege of minting money in Malta it must have immediately legislated in an effort to protect its coinage from would-be falsifiers.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately no actual document of this nature has been traced by the present writer. The first constitution of which we are aware, wherein clauses against money forgers are inserted, is that of Gregory Carafa (1680-90).<sup>8</sup> The constitutions of Antonio-Manoel de Vilhena (1722-36)<sup>9</sup> and that of Emanuel-Marie de Rohan (1775-97)<sup>10</sup> have also been preserved. But numerous *Bandi* and *Prammatiche* attest to the care taken by other Grandmasters to keep false or suspect money out of circulation.<sup>11</sup>

Since the first days of the Order in Malta, foreign currencies, especially Sicilian, circulated freely together with the local coins. In 1533, for example, probably before the Order began exercising its right of mintage, Sicilian money, classified under old and new, was serving as

5. For a discussion of this question, consult Sant (1967), pp. 216-217.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

7. So had previous rulers done. The Romans, though prone to debase their currency, took measures to protect it in their empire. The Norman William I (1154-66) and the Aragonese King, Martin (1402-1409) had clauses against falsifiers of money inserted in their constitutions. See P.P. DeBono *Sommario della storia della Legislazione in Malta*, (Malta 1897), pp. 148-150.

8. NLM, Libr. 1216, *Leggi e Costituzioni pragmaticali ordinati dal Ser. Ecc. Gregorio Caraffa... pubblicati sotto li 11 Settembre, 1681. Titolo Vigesimo Quarto "Delle Monete, Alchimia, et altre proibitioni spettanti all'arte delli Orefici"*, pp. 103-104.

9. *Leggi e Costituzioni Prammaticali Rinuovati, riformati, ed ampliati dal Serenissimo, ed Eminentissimo Signor Fra D. Antonio Manoel de Vilhena ecc.* (Malta, MDCCXXIV), p. 131, XXIV, XXV and XXVI.

10. *Del Dritto Municipale di Malta. Nuova Compilazione con Diverse Altre Costituzioni.* (Malta MDCCLXXIV), *Libro Settimo, Capo Settimo*, p. 300 ff., "Regolamenti Riguardo agli Orefici, Argentieri, monete, ed Alchimia", Para. XXVII, XXVIII and XXIX. See also DeBono, p. 236. "Falsification of money was punished according to the gravity of the crime, but the maximum penalty was temporary imprisonment". This, as we shall see, is not entirely correct.

11. This hardly applies to the Order's gold and silver currency which in the 18th Century became badly debased in weight and standard. See Sant (1967), pp. 263-280.

the medium of commercial transactions in these Islands.<sup>12</sup> Sicilian coinage, as might be expected, never disappeared completely from Maltese shores. But in time other foreign currencies augmented the local and Sicilian stock. By 1609, but probably even earlier,<sup>13</sup> one finds in local circulation German, Hungarian and Dutch Thalers ("Tallari") whose provenance was normally Turkish vessels falling prey to Maltese or Knightly corsairs.<sup>14</sup> Before being allowed free circulation such coins were usually assayed and hand-stamped with the emblem of the reigning Grandmaster as a guarantee of their genuineness. On 20 August 1609, G.M. Aloph de Wignacourt (1601-22) informed the Venerable Council of the Order that a large number of German and Hungarian thalers in local circulation were counterfeit pieces and, what was even worse, some of the fraudulent coins had been cheekily hand-stamped with the fleur-de-llys, emblem of the reigning Grandmaster.<sup>15</sup> It was agreed that the Grandmaster issue a *Bando* decreeing that all suspected coins would be taken to the *Castellania* for a general assay, after which all counterfeit pieces would be destroyed. A Commission was nominated to see to the discharge of the Council's decrees and was urged to do its utmost to bring the guilty person or persons to book.<sup>16</sup> Members of the Order had within a period of three days, in virtue of their vow of obedience and against penalty of confiscation, to report to the Commission the quantity of thalers in their possession.<sup>17</sup> We are unfortunately unaware

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12. A. Mifsud, "L'Approvigionamento e l'Università di Malta nelle Passate Dominazioni", *Archivum Melitense* III, 5 (1918), pp. 207 ff.
  13. Though it was customary to countermark thalers and possibly other foreign coins with the emblem of the ruling Grandmaster, no earlier countermarks than Wignacourt's have been discovered. See V.F. Denaro, "Dutch Coins and Maltese Countermarks", *Numismatic Chronicle*, Seventh Series, Vol. III, 1963.
  14. The negligence of the Turkish Government in the 16th and 17th centuries in matters concerning currency was notorious. As commerce required a stable monetary standard, the European merchants trading with the Levant had recourse to the expedient of introducing European currency into Levantine commerce. Coins were imported mainly from Venice, Spain, Austria, Germany, Poland and Holland. See F.W. Hasluck, "The Levantine Coinage", *Numismatic Chronicle* (1929), 49. Quoted after Denaro, *op. cit.*
  15. Though Wignacourt mentions only German and Hungarian Thalers, none of these coins have so far been traced countermarked with the arms of the Grandmaster. The only such pieces so far discovered have been Dutch Thalers, which by the middle of the 17th century had ousted from the Levant the currency of other countries as money of account. See Denaro, *op. cit.*
  16. NLM, AOM 103, ff. 86v-87. The Commission was made up of the Prior of Navarre, Fra Bernardo d'Espeletta and the Bailiff of Santa Euphemia, Fra Centorio Cagnolo. They had "...chiamati li esperti, e periti, che pareva a loro più a proposito, eseguischino quanto di sopra, e procurino di sapere, trovare e provare li colpevoli delli gigli impune nelli tallari falsi, e faccino risarcire il damo e spese delli colpevoli, e trovando, che siano degni di maggior castigo ne facino relatione a Sua Sig. Illus. che provedera di giustitia..."
  17. *Ibid.*

whether the offenders were in fact traced for the archives are strangely silent. One suspects that the culprits were themselves members of the Order for it was much easier for them than for anyone else to gain access to the Grandmaster's countermark. Indeed one often finds members of the Religion prosecuted for tampering with coinage. In February 1539, for example, Giacomo Blades was indicted with the falsification of money and duly deprived of his habit.<sup>18</sup> On 22 June 1584 the knights C. Pompeo Mormillo and Muzio de Ligorri were also deprived of their habits for circulating false currencies.<sup>19</sup> The same sentence was passed on 29th July 1604 on the Knight C. Elida Solima who in February of the same year had been charged with having coined false money in Sicily<sup>20</sup> and on 2 September 1605 on Cesare Gravina who was found guilty of falsifying money and committing theft in Catania, Sicily. A Servant-at-Arms, Alexander Price, was also imputed on 20 May 1609 with clipping gold Zecchini pieces. He was likewise deprived of his habit and handed over to the secular arm for further punishment.<sup>22</sup> More members of the Order were in later years involved in the falsification of monetary pieces.<sup>23</sup>

Clipping the circumference of gold pieces was not a custom alien to the unscrupulous. On becoming Grandmaster, Antoine de Paule (1623-36) found that most of the gold pieces circulating in the Maltese Islands were filed and thus below the standard weight. He duly proclaimed in a *Bando* dated 10 July 1623 that no person was to accept in payment Maltese Zecchini, Spanish Doubloons or other gold pieces without previously weighing the coins. Owners of filed coins had, within a period of two weeks, to take them to the Mint<sup>24</sup> and exchange them for

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18. NLM, *Libr.*, 390, "Nota dei Delitti principali registrati nei Libri dei Consigli dell'Ordine Gerosolimitano".
  19. *Ibid.* See also W. Porter, *A History of the Knights of Malta or the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem*, Vol. II, (London 1858).
  20. NLM, *Libr.* 390 and 712; NLM, AOM 101, f. 118r. F.G.F. Furse, *If Medagliere Gerosolimitano, ossia Raccolta delle Medaglie e Monete Coniate dai Gran Maestri dell'Ordine Gerosolimitano in Rodi ed in Malta* (Malta 1864), p. 28; E.H. Furse, *Memoires Numismatiques de l'Ordre Souverain de Saint Jean de Jerusalem Illustrees, avec les Medailles et Monnaies Frappees par les Grands Maitres de l'Ordre*, Deux Ed., (Rome 1889), p. 188.
  21. NLM, *Libr.* 390 and 712.
  22. *Ibid.*; Porter, p. 262. In NLM, AOM 228 (a) *Caruso P.I*, Tom II, 1600-1702, f. 160 we also read under 10 September 1604: "Carcerazione d'alcuni secolari per monetarij, et deputatione di commissarij e perche si diceva che uno di essi voleva far tradimento in questa città." See also NLM, AOM 101, f. 79r.
  23. In *Ibid.* 265, f. 52v, for example, under 19 August 1701, we read, "Si da facolta al Luogotenente del Ven. Prior di Messina, Comm. e Fra D. Andrea de Giovanni, di compilar processo, a proferir sentenza diff. a contro il sac. D. Giuseppe Panto imputato per ritagliator di moneta d'argento."
  24. The site of the first Mint of the Order in Malta is unknown, but at some time after 1604 it was installed at the head of Strada San Sebastiano, today Nos. 2

their equivalent weight in good currency. Severe penalties were contemplated for offenders: a fine of 20 ounces or a sentence of two years as convicts on the Order's galleys. Knight Commanders would lose a year's seniority while Knights could be jailed for a period of six months.<sup>25</sup>

But there was no stopping the fraudulent and the speculative. Many silver coins were found to have been filed as well. A *Bando* enacted on 7 August 1631 by G.M. De Paule ordered that all gold and silver coins of one scudo and over were to be weighed by both parties in a transaction under penalty of confiscation.<sup>26</sup>

On 18 April 1636, Dr. Montana, the fiscal lawyer of the Castellanania informed the Venerable Council that fourteen counterfeit pieces-of-eight *Reali* had been confiscated from one of the slaves of the Order. The Council instructed Dr. Montana and the Commissioners of the Mint to proceed against those found circulating false coins "even though they might be our brethren". Everything possible had to be done to indemnify the general public and safeguard regular commercial transactions against the spread of such counterfeit coins.<sup>27</sup> We are left in the dark on whether these investigations were successful or not.

Twenty-eight years later the pieces-of-eight *Reali* were again in the news, many being found to be below the standard weight. So, by a decree in Council on 15 January 1664 and a *Bando* published three days later, it was ordained that nobody should dare spend, exchange, give in payment or keep in one's possession pieces-of-eight, half-pieces or smaller coins of this kind which were below the standard weight. All such coins were to be taken to the Mint within a fortnight to be exchanged for other currency at the rate of 15 tari-4 grani per ounce of silver. The owners could, if they so preferred, take back the clipped pieces. Anyone intending to send abroad underweight coins had to hand them over to the Receiver of the Università; members of the Order were to hand them over to the *Conservatore*. Owners had the right to claim their money back immediately before they were to embark it for transportation. The *Bando* enacted, on the other hand, that nobody could refuse to accept in payment the new "colonnati" pieces-of-eight as these were of standard weight. They were to pass current for the same value as the

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and 3, Old Mint Street, on part of the site of the first Auberge built by the French Knights in Valletta. Of this first auberge we can still see the supports for the standards of the Langue and the Religion. These premises were leased by the French Langue to the Treasury for 65 scudi per annum and here the Mint of Zecca of the Order was set up until it was transferred to the *Conservatoria*, today the National Library, about the year 1788. See V. Denaro, "The Mint of Malta" in *Numismatic Chronicle*, Sixth Series, Vol. XV, 1955.

25. NLM, AOM 255, f. 189v.

26. *Ibid.* 110, f. 106v; Furse (1864), p. 35; Furse (1889), p. 199; H. Calleja-Schembri, *Coins and Medals of the Knights of Malta* (London 1908). Reprinted 1966, p. 83.

27. NLM, AOM III, f. 192v; Furse (1864), p. 35; Furse (1889), p. 199.

old pieces. The penalty for all contraventions against these orders was confiscation of the money and a fine of 10 ounces.<sup>28</sup>

The introduction of Venetian Zecchini into the Island presented the Order with other knotty problems. There were individuals who refused to accept these pieces for their current value of 41 tari. A *Bando* issued on 27 August 1681 by G.M. Carafa (1680-90) confirmed the old price and threatened offenders with prosecution.<sup>29</sup> In 1690 it was found that false Venetian Zecchini were circulating in the Island alongside regular pieces. On 8 July the Grandmaster and his Council urged the officers of the Castellania and the Commissioners of the Mint to investigate the matter carefully. A special Commission was nominated to report to the Council on its findings.<sup>30</sup> On 12 August the commission reported to G.M. Adrian Wignacourt (1690-97)<sup>31</sup> and the Council that the counterfeit Zecchini had not been issued by the Venetian mint at all, but had been minted elsewhere using a fake die. The Commissioners were informed that the supposed Venetian Zecchini had first made their appearance in the Levant, sent there in huge quantities by some merchants. One of the Consuls for Goldsmiths and Silversmiths in the East, discovering that the Zecchini were false, ordered their immediate return. The merchants had then tried to induce a Levantine trader to circulate the money himself, which he refused to do. Other merchants, however, unscrupulously undertook to do so themselves. Soon the counterfeit Zecchini were freely circulating in the East and, in due course, a consignment had found its way to Malta.<sup>32</sup>

It was further learned that the Giurati of the Università had been the first to learn of the existence of the fake Zecchini in the Island. Having sent to Messina 4000 Zecchini entrusted to them by the inhabitants to be exchanged for Sicilian silver money, the Giurati were surprised to receive back 124 pieces suspected to be false. Some of these specimens were handed to the Master of The Mint, Carlo Troisi, to be assayed and on close examination it was found that some of the pieces, at least, were not above board.<sup>33</sup> The Commission, therefore,

28. NLM, AOM 260, f. 177v; NLM *Libr.* 439, pp. 449-451; 738, p. 308.

29. NLM, *Libr.* 149, p. 64.

30. NLM, AOM 263, f. 73v. Cf. *ibid.* 1115, ff. 49v-50.

31. Carafa had died on 21 July.

32. NLM, AOM 263, f. 73v.

33. "...Si fece la prova d'un Zecchino col nome di Marc' Antonio di quelli, li quali sono sospetti intorno alla Bontà e caratto dell'oro e fuso una sol volta col solimato, manco grani cinque.

Nel medesimo tempo si fece prova d'un altro vecchio, e di più perfetti, il quale teneva il medesimo peso, e manco quasi un grano, mettendoli la medesimo dose del sopradetto.

Si prese però quello, che fu trovato dove Boananni, il quale era sì basso, e senza colore che perde i venti tre caratti mettendolo quattro volte a purificare, manco cocci sei, che sono di moneta corrente da cinque tari in circa.

advised Council to enact harsh measures for all those individuals keeping in their possession, spending or receiving such defective coins. Owners of suspected pieces had either to take them to the Mint, or at least reveal their existence to the Grandmaster. Council duly decided that in order to forestall the importation of more fake Zecchini pieces into the Island, it was necessary to stop the circulation of the false ones in existence at the moment. All Venetian Zecchini pieces, therefore, were to be taken to the Mint to enable the Order to control the quantity and quality of such coins.<sup>34</sup> Council entrusted the Grandmaster with the infliction of penalties for offenders, but on the morrow, suspecting perhaps that members of the Order might be involved in the scandal, Wignacourt informed Council that he was unwilling to shoulder sole responsibility for inflicting punishment. After further debate it was decided that members of the Order, if convicted, were to suffer the loss of two years' seniority and have their money confiscated.<sup>35</sup>

A week later (21 August 1690) a *Bando* condemned the circulation of low-carat Zecchini. Those in possession of such coins had, within a fortnight, to reveal their existence to the Master of the Mint. It was also established that if any of the two parties in a transaction disagreed on the rate of exchange of the Zecchini, they were both to consult either the Master of the Mint, or the Consul for Goldsmiths and Silver-smiths or the public store-keeper of wheat, Carlo Randon, all three experienced and practical men who would decide on the genuineness or otherwise of the Zecchini in question. Contravention of the said enactments meant confiscation of the money and a condemnation to ten years as convicts on the Order's galleys.<sup>36</sup>

The story did not end there. On 20 September Carlo Troisi, Master of the Mint, submitted a report to Council, calculating the expenses involved in melting and minting a hundred Zecchini into Maltese currency. He estimated a cost of 16 scudi — 9 tari,<sup>37</sup> ie. a loss of about 2 tari for

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Nelli primi dui e tanta poco la differenza che appena si conosce.

Nl secondo, che tiene in se il medesimo peso, ma nella Bontà e l'infioriore ai primi, onde stimo che questo sia dell'oro di Barberia senza rafinato, mentre tiene il medesimo colore di quell'oro, non vi essendo dentro specie venuna di lega, perche se ci fosse stata lega dovrebbe mancare più di 36 cocci per il tocco, che fa nel paragone, non havendo mencato, come ho detto più di cocci sei." *Id.*, *ibid.*

34. *Id.*, *ibid.*

35. *Ibid.* f. 74r.

36. *NLM Libr.* 149, p. 64.

37. *Nota del Calo che fanno li Zecchini francesi nel rafinarli:*

Per ridurli alla perfezione di carati venti quattro, calano  
uno e mezzo per cento, che sono in moneta corrente cinque  
scudi e tre tari .....

Sc. 5-3-0

*Carlo nel travagliarli:*

Mancheranno una per cento in circa .....

Sc. 3-6-0

every Zecchino. But as some of the 2,200 Zecchini found in circulation would surely be of inferior weight or fineness, the expenses were bound to be somewhat higher.

Council decided that all the 2,200 Zecchini pieces were to be reminted into Maltese Zecchini with the stamp of Adrien Wignacourt. Being of finer metal than the old Zecchini pieces, they were to pass current at 43 tari each.<sup>38</sup> Those who could not afford to wait until the new Maltese Zecchini pieces would be coined, could, if they so desired, get the equivalent value in other currency for their counterfeit pieces.<sup>39</sup>

It took the Mint almost a year to complete the assignment. On 8 August 1691 the general public was informed through a *Bando* that the Order had minted enough Zecchini of standard fineness to cater for the needs of the Island and which would be exchanged at the rate of 43 copper tari per Zecchino. Anyone refusing to accept them or pretending a higher value than that stipulated would incur a fine of five scudi.<sup>40</sup> And that is the last we hear of this protracted Zecchini episode.

Not long after this, in 1694, the Order discovered that some of the Spanish Doubloons in the Island were below the standard weight. These were withdrawn from circulation and kept in the Palace Tower. Soon after the number was augmented by light Doubloons sent to Malta by the Receiver of the Order in Marseilles, Commendator Bousset. Experimenting with ten such pieces, the Master of the Mint found out that the Order would make a profit by melting the said Doubloons and reminting them into Maltese Zecchini.<sup>41</sup> The Venerable Council gave the necessary instructions to this effect.<sup>42</sup> More Spanish Doubloons and other old Catalan coins kept in the Tower were reminted into Maltese

Spesa per ridurli nella perfezione tra solimato, acqua forte, ferramenti et altre .....	1-6-0
Per aggiustarli secondo il peso della Zeccha, quali devono uscire con il peso a tutto rigore ci andera un altro per cento	3-6-0
Per manifattura di cento Zecchini .....	3-0-0
	Scudi 16-9-0

(NLM, AOM 263, f. 75v.; cf. *ibid.* 1115, f. 76r).

38. It was therefore Adrien de Wignacourt and not his successor Perellos who, contrary to what is believed by many a writer on the coins of the Order, first struck his Zecchini of finer metal.

39. NLM, AOM 263, f. 75v. cf. *ibid.* 1115, f. 76r.

40. NLM, *Libr.* 149, p. 65.

41. See NLM, AOM 264, f. 38 v. for the detailed calculations made by the Master of the Mint.

42. *Ibid.* It is probable that the light Spanish Doubloons were minted into four-Zecchini pieces, the first time ever these coins were minted in Malta. In fact, Wignacourt's four-Zecchini pieces bear the date 1695, i.e. the year after the Council's decree.

Calleja-Schembri (p. 8), says that the gold coinage of Adrien Wignacourt marks a decided improvement on the numismatic art of the days of his predecessors. It differs from the earlier issues of ducats or Zecchini; in as much as these coins are thicker and the rim assumes a greater importance.



Zecchini following Council's decision on 26 February 1705 during the grandmastership of Ramon Perellos Y Rocafull (1697-1720)<sup>43</sup>.

Commerce flourished in Malta during the tenure of office of this Grandmaster. One result was a crop of foreign coins — Genoan Filippi, Venetian, Milanese and Florentine Ducats, Turin Doubloons, Louis d'Or and other pieces. Some of the Filippi and Ducati, however, were found to be below the standard weight. Accordingly, on 6 February 1715, Council decided *inter alia* that the said coins were to be assayed and classified according to two categories of weight. Those from three to twenty *cocci* lighter than the standard weight would cost their owners extra payment of one and a half grains for every missing *coccio*. But underweight coins by more than twenty *cocci* would be barred from circulation. A *Bando* to this effect was issued on the same day and was confirmed by another dated 19 February. Offenders were to incur a fine of 10 ounces.<sup>44</sup>

The accession of Manoel de Vilhena (1722-36) to the supreme dignity of Grandmaster of the Order in Malta may be said to mark a new era in the history of Maltese coinage. In gold, pieces of twelve, ten, four, two and one-Zecchino value were struck. The perfect execution of the gold coinage of the period has never been surpassed in Malta for decorative beauty and magnificence.<sup>45</sup> In the first five years alone, De Vilhena struck 200,000 ducats or Zecchini. A complete alteration in the silver coinage is also to be imputed to De Vilhena. The silver standard was raised and coins of various new denominations were issued. Very artistic and exquisitely-finished pieces of two scudi, and tari pieces, ranging in value from one to five, were struck and placed in circulation and they gradually replaced the old type.<sup>46</sup>

It had been originally intended to mint the silver eight-tari piece as well, but strangely enough in minting this coin the same die which had been employed in minting the gold four-Zecchini pieces was used. This could have been a genuine mistake, but, more probably, it was the result of a fraudulent act by one or more craftsmen at the Mint. Soon enough various individuals were circulating the silver pieces for Zecchini. The Grandmaster was therefore obliged to issue a proclamation dated 22 May 1728 ordering the immediate withdrawal from circulation of the silver eight-tari pieces and their conversion into other coins, under penalty of confiscation plus a fine of 10 ounces.<sup>47</sup>

43. NLM, AOM 265, f. 132r.

44. *Ibid.* 266, f. 138r; NLM, Libr. 641, pp. 293-294; *ibid.* p. 297.

45. Calleja-Schembri, p. 129.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

47. NLM. Libr. 429, p. 147; *ibid.* 142, p. 236. The silver eight-tari pieces which were returned to the Mint were re-minted into other silver coins. That is the reason why these Vilhena pieces are indeed very scarce. Consult Furse (1889) p. 256.

No gold coins of Grandmaster Raymond Despuig (1736-41) are known to have been minted,<sup>48</sup> but foreign pieces were in free circulation. In 1740 some of these were found to be below the standard weight. A Bando of 6 June, therefore, ordered that: (a) gold pieces which were no lighter than five *cocchi* were to pass current at a loss of one *tari* per missing *coccio*, whereas they could be refused if the debasement was more pronounced; (b) pledged pieces were to be taken back irrespective of their weight, otherwise they could be refused even if the deficiency was just one *coccio*; (c) every collector of the Order or the Università could refuse to accept underweight pieces; (d) the weights used for assaying gold coins had to conform in every respect with those preserved in the *Conservatoria* of the Order; (e) in case of any disagreement upon the weight of gold pieces, the parties concerned were to abide by the decision of the Consul for Goldsmiths and Silversmiths; (f) notaries were prohibited from keeping in their offices other gold weights except those stated under (d). A fine of 10 ounces was stipulated for contravening any of the clauses of the *Bando*.<sup>49</sup>

Notwithstanding this *Bando*, however, confusion still reigned as a result of the different gold weights employed in commercial transactions. The Grandmaster therefore decided to take firmer measures. On 10 September he ordered all those in possession of such weights, whether for private or public use, to take them to the Mint within a period of three days, there to be checked and controlled in confrontation with the standard weights kept in the Conservatory. To keep control of the situation the Master of the Mint was requested to keep a note of individuals taking their weights for examination. A fine of four ounces was inflicted for contravention.<sup>50</sup>

The Portuguese Grandmaster Emanuel Pinto (1741-1773) minted numerous coins during his long tenure of office, but these show not only a marked decadence in artistic taste but a pronounced deterioration in both weight and fineness. The story of the debasement of the standard coinage in the eighteenth century cannot be recounted here,<sup>51</sup> but foreign coins, too, were not always above board, and some were occasionally found to be underweight or patently false. In 1748 the Sicilian *Piastre*, a new coin which had been introduced to make up somewhat for the scarcity of coin at the time, was found to be very irregular in weight. On 26 September the Grandmaster decreed that such coins, if standard in weight, were to pass current at 26 *tari* each.<sup>52</sup> Between 1756 and 1764

48. Calleja-Schembri, p. 145.

49. NLM *Libr.* 429, p. 102. See also Archives of the Inquisitor of Malta (AIM), "Memorie di Mons Ludovico Gualtieri" II (1739-43), f. 609.

50. NLM *Libr.* 429, p. 106.

51. See Sant (1967), Chap. VIII, "Debasement of the Standard Coinage", pp. 263-295.

52. NLM *Libr.* 429 (1744-56), p. 74.

various quantities and qualities of light and counterfeit foreign coins were withdrawn and together with some of the Order's gold pieces, were coined into Maltese money; largely in new *Louis d'Or* and its half-value (20 and 10 silver scudi respectively).<sup>53</sup> On 9 December 1765 a *Bando* fixed the rate of exchange of foreign coins and in the same proclamation it was enacted that those pieces which were not of the correct weight were to lose 14 grains, Maltese money, for every missing *coccio*.<sup>54</sup>

During the reigns of Francesco Ximenes de Texada (1773-75), Emanuel-Marie de Rohan (1775-97) and Ferdinand Von Hompesch (1797-98) we find no record of any false or underweight gold or silver money in circulation. On 11 June 1798 the Order capitulated to the French, but in just over two years, Great Britain became the new mistress of the Island.

The problem of false money in circulation, however, continued to exist. Counterfeit coins of varied provenance and denomination were circulating in 1802. Most common, however, were copper tari and silver six-tari pieces of the Order.<sup>55</sup> On 23 October, Alexander Ball, Chief of the Maltese, issued a *Pragmatica* warning the inhabitants to be on their guard against counterfeit money.<sup>56</sup> Hardly two years later, however, more false pieces were again in circulation, this time Sicilian two-scudi silver pieces and gold ounces. Ball was obliged to intervene once again on 4 April 1804 but notwithstanding his Proclamation, illicit traffic in false coins continued unabated. In 1805 counterfeit silver scudi of De Rohan made their appearance. On 12 June Ball again warned the inhabitants to be on the alert and report immediately any suspect money appearing on the market.<sup>57</sup>

In 1812 false Spanish Pillar Dollars and other coins were being circulated. A *Bando* of 11 September warned people not to accept any counterfeit money, to hand such pieces to the official authorities and to report offenders.<sup>58</sup> No record of those brought to book, if any, has come down to us. The coins of the Order remained legal currency well after that date, but with the advent of British rule, however, local gold and silver coins became increasingly scarce. It is no wonder, therefore, that no further cases of falsification of the Order's coinage have come down to us.

Enough has been written in this paper to show that the average Maltese inhabitant during the rule of the Order of St. John was fre-

53. NLM, AOM 6409 b, CONTI.

54. NLM *Libr.* 429 (1765-72), p. 19.

55. The coins of the Order remained in circulation in the Maltese Islands after the departure of the Knights. Copper remained legal currency until 1827, while gold and silver pieces were valid means of payment till 1886.

56. NLM *Libr.* 431, p. 156.

57. *Ibid.* p. 70.

58. *Ibid.* p. 110.

quently exposed to the fraudulent and the unscrupulous, who were intent on making illicit gains by the circulation of false currency. But it has also been demonstrated that the administration of the Order, ever solicitous for the welfare of the people at large as well as for its own good name, never shirked its duty to keep false currency at bay. The Order was even more heavily-taxed by the problem of false copper money in circulation, but the story of this other aspect of falsification, in many ways more illuminating and rewarding, will have to wait for another day.