

The Order of St John and corsairing activities in the Mediterranean in the 16th and 17th centuries

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The Order of the Knights of St John was officially founded in Jerusalem in 1113 as a Hospitaller Order for the care of pilgrims in the Holy Land. However, as these places were a source of constant friction between Moslems and Christians, the Order soon acquired a military role and began to share fully in the crusading activities of the twelfth century. But in later centuries the chief instrument of action soon became the Order's fleet of galleys which perpetuated the crusading tradition established in the Holy Land through its annual *caruane* - the famous yearly cruises through the East Mediterranean, or along the coast of North Africa - usually planned to take place from May to September, in search of Muslim shipping. The sea-faring *caruane* replaced the old military campaigns of the crusaders in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, a change forced on the Knights after their expulsion from St John of Acre in 1291.

The Hospitallers appear to have had some shipping of their own as far back as 1165,¹ but their occupation of Rhodes in 1309 necessitated that they develop their naval force as fully as they could. This soon became a potent and aggressive weapon, which came to cause considerable embarrassment to the fast growing Ottoman Empire. So much so, that in 1522 the Sultan

Suleiman the Magnificent decided to expunge this thorn from his side. After a hard-fought six-month siege, he forced the Order to sue for peace, granting honourable and generous terms that enabled the Knights to evacuate Rhodes with all their belongings and with all those who chose to follow them.²

Like all the other Mediterranean fleets, the fighting ship of the Knights was the galley. This was most suitable for the war as waged by corsairs. Its firing capacity must have served solely to distract the enemy vessel and make boarding easier since it was important to make the largest number of men prisoners, and therefore slaves, and take possession of the ship's cargo. The sinking of an enemy ship was not the primary objective of the galley at war.³

A feature of the big galleys used in Mediterranean warfare during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the enormous complement they carried, not infrequently approaching five hundred men, sometimes reaching even the six hundred mark. Apart from a nucleus of about twenty-five knights and serving brothers, each galley of the Order carried a mixed complement of sailors, rowers and *homini d'armamento* (soldiers). The *galera Capitana*, as a rule, carried more men than other galleys including some thirty knights; its compliment of both sailors and *homini d'armamento* varied with time. In 1618 the *Capitana* carried a crew of one hundred and eighty men together with 160 *homini d'armamento*.⁴

Unfortunately, information about the galley rowers is sparser. From the 1579 report of Archbishop Torres⁵ - at a time when the Order was fitting out three rather than four galleys - we learn that there were 277 *buonavoglia*,⁶ 216 *forzati*⁷ and 200 slaves, which works out at 230 rowers per galley, although the larger galleys of the seventeenth century required more rowers at the benches.⁸ The slaves were Muslims from the Maghreb or from the Ottoman Levant,

1. E. Rossi, *Storia della marina dell'Ordine di S. Giovanni di Gerusalemme, Rodi e Malta* (Rome-Milan, 1926), 7.

2. On that occasion Grand Master l'Isle Adam swore that the Order would never again fight against the Sultan Suleiman. Nevertheless during the pre-1565 siege years, the Order's naval intrigues in the Levant and their corsairing activities on Muslim trade and territory constituted a blatant defiance of the oath. They had even undermined the security and strategic advantage, which the Ottomans had gained for their empire by the conquest of Syria (1516), Egypt (1517) and Rhodes (1522). Cf. V. Mallia-Milanes, "The Birgu phase of Hospitaller history". In L. Bugeja, M. Buhagiar & S. Fiorini (eds.), *Birgu - A Maltese Maritime City*, (Malta, 1993), 84; D. Goffman, *Izmir and the Levantine World, 1550-1650* (London, 1990), 67.

3. S. Bono, "Naval exploits and privateering". In V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.), *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798: Studies on early modern Malta and the Order of St John of Jerusalem* (Malta, 1993), 377.

4. N(ational) L(ibrary of) M(alta) Lib(rary manuscripts) 746, f. 29, 12.xi.1618.

5. P. Collura, "Le due missioni di Mons. Ludovico de Torres in Malta (1578-1579)", *Archivio Storico di Malta*, viii, 1 (1936-1937), 33-34; NLM Libr. 162, f.127v for the 1632 complements.

6. The *buonavoglia* were those who offered to serve for a number of years on the Order's rowing benches at a small fee either in the hope of being freed from their debts or instead of escaping to more desperate conditions.

7. The *forzati* were those condemned to serve a sentence rowing on the galleys.

8. For details on the galleys cf. J. Muscar, *The Maltese Galley* (Malta, 1998).

commonly referred to as 'Turks'; captured either during warlike expeditions or during the regular corsairing operations. The primary purpose of capturing such slaves was precisely that of having them chained to the oar benches.⁹

An element of adventure would have been constituted by the *corso* and the *caruane* of the Order's galleys, that enjoyed a redoubtable reputation in spite of occasional reverses. The most memorable of these setbacks is associated with the name of Fra Jean Francois de Saint Clement, who assumed the post of Captain General in the autumn of 1569.¹⁰ The Order had just been called upon to give its due contribution to the naval effort of the Holy League, assembled under the leadership of Gian Andrea Doria, intended to intervene to relieve the Ottoman pressure on Famagusta - the last Venetian fortress-port in Cyprus.

Regular fleet warfare depended on the mobilization of large quantities of both money and men. However there were never enough of them to ply the red oars of the galleys - hence the constant need to capture slaves, procure forced galley rowers and recruit volunteers. This state-of-affairs induced the galley-squadron to assault Turkish and Barbary vessels, including merchant ships, and hostile landings on the coasts of Muslim states, particularly in the Maghreb, were made in the hope of taking slaves. The captured Muslims, who were considered slaves the same way as the Christians seized by the Barbary corsairs, were also employed on various public works. If, at any one time, there was a preponderance of captured slaves in Malta, a number of them could fairly easily be sold to foreign states or even to private individuals.¹¹

In reality corsairing in the Mediterranean dates back to times immemorial and one finds frequent reference to them in antiquity. Indeed Julius Caesar had once fallen prey to the corsairs. Hence in the Mediterranean, the terms 'piracy' and 'pirates' were hardly ever used before the early seventeenth century so that the common expressions indicating the practice were 'privateering' or 'corsairing'. While use of different terms does not fundamentally change the elements of the problem, it shows that corsairing was

considered a form of legitimate war with the issuing of specific licences, commissions and instructions. This explains why Salvatore Bono argues that privateering had "its own laws, rules, living customs and traditions".¹²

Giuseppe Bonaffini considers Mediterranean corsairing as a kind of phenomenon that emerged from the conflict between Christianity and Islam. On the one hand it reflects the conflict of interest among the states on the opposite shores of the Mediterranean. At the same time the clash of civilizations helps us to understand the essence of Mediterranean culture within the limits of a sea that served as a centre for clashes over its hegemony, this coming to an end with the advent of a more fruitful world traffic.¹³ Salvatore Bono has shown that for the Christian states corsairing was not carried out simply for the defence of ships and the coastline but it was also useful for attacks on Muslim merchant ships, and against the towns and villages and their populations on the coasts of Islamic states. Bono further opines that the Knights of Malta and those of St Stephen were not less able or less daring than their North-African colleagues. He concludes that the war of corsairing appears to have been the dominating reality of life in the Mediterranean and while the Barbary corsairs may have played the role of protagonists they were surely not the only ones.¹⁴ Ciro Manca further elaborates that the *corso* should not be considered simply as a clash between Christianity and Islam, or as a contrast between different cultures, but it should also be understood as an instrument for the dispossession and appropriation of revenue on the opposing shores of the Mediterranean in an atmosphere of rivalries between different communities and between different classes within each community. Manca explains that both the different communities and classes within each community share the same interests and adopt the same methods - a condition which explains why communities and social groups clashed. In essence it was a clash that favoured the politics of expropriation and appropriation of each community quickly and without any warning. This induces us to believe that each community knew the others so well that it knew when it could attack, and which were the least defended places that could be

9. Slaves ranged from 10-15 to 25-30 per cent of the total number of galley rowers, cf. Bono, "Naval exploits ...", 386.

10. I. Bosio, *Dell'istoria della Sacra Religione et illustrissima militia di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, iii (Rome, 1603), 616, 856-857, 861.

11. Bono, "Naval exploits ...", 356.

12. S. Bono, *I corsari barbareschi* (Turin, 1964), 12-13, 92.

13. G. Bonaffini, *Sicilia e Tunisia nel secolo XVII* (Palermo, 1985), 17, n.15; R. Guemara, "Genova e la reggenza di Tunisi nel '600: corsa e redenzione". In R. Belvederi (ed.), *Atti del III congresso internazionale di studi storici. Rapporti Genova - mediterraneo - atlantico nell'età moderna*. (Genoa, 1989), 302.

14. Bono, *I corsari ...*, 11-12.

attacked, as well as the best moments in which to attack.¹⁵ This state of affairs led to a multitude of renegades on both sides of the Mediterranean. The Christians, or Muslims, who for some reason or other gave up their religion and reverted to corsairing, knew full well where to land and attack and at the same time how to avoid the resistance of the local population.

During the years 1560-1565, the Barbary corsairs ravaged the western Mediterranean. In those years, it would almost be true to say that the western Mediterranean was closed to shipping, as the chorus of Christian protests suggests, as well as the fact that the Barbary pirates were now attacking even the coasts of Languedoc and Provence.¹⁶ What possible pickings were there off the Mediterranean shores in the mid-sixteenth century? There were a few local inhabitants for slaves, a fishing boat, and the odd frigate laden with merchandize.

The Levant was easily the most rewarding hunting ground for Christian privateers. And to the Levant sailed a stream of well-manned galleys, brigantines, galleons, frigates and swift sailing ships well able to batter their way through the rough seas of the end of winter and the spring months. The reason was always the same: for the privateers the eastern Mediterranean meant rich prizes, to be found in the Aegean, the Dodecanese and Alexandria. The game was certainly plentiful but every year at the approach of spring the Turks sent out their galley patrols, employed far more for the defence of the ships than to guard the coast.¹⁷ In the mid-sixteenth century only the Maltese galleys were active in the Levant together with a few Tuscan galleys and the occasional sailing vessel from Genoa or Sicily.

Amongst the leading corsairs of the period was Jean Parisot de La Valette the future Grand Master. In the years 1554-1555 he was captain-general of the galley squadron, and in June 1555 he seized two vessels at Capo Misurata and another one in the vicinity of Malta, with a total of 250 slaves together with a considerable booty of artillery and victuals.¹⁸ In all probability some of the captured could have been Jews.



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The Knights' corsairing activity was equally carried out in the Levant, particularly in order to intercept the rich traffic proceeding from Alexandria and other ports of the Near East towards Constantinople. Pierre Rocquelaure de Saint Aubain and Marthurino de Lescaut, known as Romegas, were among those who distinguished themselves in such operations. De Saint Aubain was a knight-corsair who in 1566 managed to capture a very precious cargo of spices and some ninety slaves from captured Turkish vessels.¹⁹ Romegas had a series of victories starting in the late 1550s. In 1557, he captured, among others, two heavy Turkish merchant ships in the Levant.²⁰ In 1561, Romegas managed to capture 300 slaves and several rich cargoes at the mouth of the Nile. In 1563 having set out with two galleys,²¹ he was sailing back to Capo Passero with over 500 slaves and heaped on two ships the cargoes of eight ships he had captured. In

15. C. Manca, *Il modello di sviluppo economico delle città marittime barbaresche dopo Lepanto* (Naples, 1982), 182.

16. F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II*, ii, Eng. trans. (Glasgow, 1973), 872.

17. Braudel, 875

18. Bosio, 361-362; Rossi, 43; U. Mori Ubaldini, *La marina del Sovrano Ordine Militare di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme di Rodi e di Malta*. (Rome, 1971), 186; Braudel, 875; cf. also J.B.E. Jurien de la Gravière, *Les chevaliers de Malte et la marine de Philippe II*, i (Paris, 1887), 16-18.

19. Bosio, 768; Rossi, 47-48; Bono, "Naval exploits ...", 357.

20. Rossi, 44; Bono, "Naval exploits ...", 356; C. Testa, *Romegas*. (Malta, 2002), 48.

21. Braudel, 875; cf. Jurien de la Gravière, 63-64.

1564 Romegas brought home three corchapis laden with oars, tow and munitions for Tripoli in Barbary, and a Turkish round ship which had left Tripoli for Constantinople with 113 black slaves. The ship was taken to Syracuse, the corchapis to Naples.²² In 1567 he captured two Turkish brigantines at Favignana, and carried some sixty men to slavery from Zuaga (in the vicinity of Tripoli) at a time when slaves were in great demand for work on the building of the new city of Valletta.²³ But it was in the years following the battle of Lepanto that Romegas, captain-general of the galley-squadron between 1575 and 1577, set his mark on the history of Maltese corsairing. With his four galleys and in close collaboration with three Tuscan galleys, he made several prizes in the Levant in 1577.²⁴

Corsairing was simply another form of aggression, preying on men, ships, towns, villages, flocks; it meant eating the food of others in order to remain strong. The official navies of Mediterranean states harboured corsairs, made a living from corsairing and sometimes owed their origin to it. It often had little to do with country or faith and was above all merely a means of making a living. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, several knights like Romegas and de Themicourt, were among the most notorious, and occasionally even the Grand Masters, such as Aloff de Wignacourt (1601-1622), were licensed regularly to act as private corsairs.²⁵ Yet even private corsairs were licensed to participate in operations against the Muslims. Sometimes they even took Christians into slavery.²⁶ When not enslaved, the Christians of the Levant often found themselves at the mercy of corsairing adventurers from the Latin West. On 29 October 1602 the Catalan Francesco Roberto was summoned at the Holy Office tribunal to give evidence on the Spanish captain of fortune Alonso de Contreras. Roberto reported that during a trip to the Levant,

Captain Contreras expressed his wish to renegade several times. Roberto went on to say that during their voyage Contreras had beaten up some Christian Greeks and stole their money. He even had the habit of landing on the Greek islands, accompanied by armed sailors, and took local women forcefully on board, against their will and that of their husbands, to sleep with them. On one occasion he raped a pregnant woman who later suffered a miscarriage and died due to the harassment. Roberto mentioned several other sailors who could give evidence on the matter and stated that during his six or seven year stay in Malta - during which time Contreras was in the service of the knight Gabriele Rosset and the *Mastro di Casa* of the Grand Master - he had never seen Contreras confess, receive communion, say an oration or otherwise.²⁷ The evidence on Contreras may have been exaggerated but it surely provides some credible information on what men of adventure, like Contreras, expected to find in Malta.

The element of adventure would have been constituted by the *corso* and the *caruane* of the Order's galleys, both of which enjoyed a redoubtable reputation.²⁸ Clearly, although the risks of enslavement or shipwreck were high, many seamen remained attracted by this profitable trade at the turn of the seventeenth century.²⁹ It was above all a unique commercial enterprise that created equally specialized markets including that in human beings which was the speciality of Malta, Messina and Leghorn as well as Tripoli and Algiers.³⁰ In 1605 the *Tribunale degli Armamenti* was set up, comprising five commissioners elected by the Grand Master to regulate all corsairing activity in Malta. Where controversial issues were involved, recourse of first instance was made to the *Tribunale dell'Udienza*, against whose judgements appeals could be made to Rome through the Inquisition Tribunal of Malta.³¹

22. Testa, 69; Braudel, 876.

23. Bosio, 793-795; Rossi, 47-48; Bono, "Naval exploits ...", 357; Testa, 99.

24. B. Dal Pozzo, *Historia della sacra religione militare di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano, detta di Malta*, i (Verona, 1703), 261-262; Rossi, 51; R.C. Anderson, *Naval Wars in the Levant 1559-1852* (Liverpool, 1952), 59 in which he claims that there were three Maltese galleys and four from Tuscany; Bono, "Naval exploits ...", 359. Detailed accounts of the adventures of Romegas during the 1570's are given by Testa, especially chs. 8 & 9 and pp. 169-170.

25. P. Cassar, "The Maltese Corsairs and the Order of St John of Jerusalem", *The Catholic Historical Review*, xlvii, 2 (1960), 151.

26. In January 1664, a witness who declared to have been a slave for about eight years gave evidence on behalf of the Christian galley slave, Michele Ungari (a Hungarian). The witness - who had spent some time as a slave, together with Ungari, both on a Turkish galley and later on the galley *Santa Catarina* that belonged to the Order - testified that Michele Ungari had always lived as a Christian even when he served in Constantinople. Archives of the Inquisition of Malta Criminal Proceedings, vol.157 item 8, f.108, 22.i.1664.

27. AIM Crim., vol.20A case 97, ff. 389-390.

28. D. Cutajar and C. Cassar, "Malta's role in Mediterranean affairs 1530-1699", *Mid-Med Bank Ltd. Malta: Studies of its heritage and history* (Malta, 1986), 111; C. Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity* (Malta, 2000), 110.

29. P. Earle, *Corsairs of Malta and Barbary* (London, 1970), esp. ch. 5.

30. Braudel, 878.

31. Earle, 108-109. On appeals by the Greeks cf. R. Cavaliero, "The decline of the Maltese corso in the XVIIIth century: A study in maritime history", *Melita Historica*, ii, 1 (1956), 233-236.

That corsairs flying the Order's flag were a source of hardship on the Christians of the Levant is confirmed by documentary evidence in the Maltese archives and elsewhere. It was not rare for Christian minorities to suffer at the hands of their Turkish rulers after a raid by Christian corsairs. In 1647 the Franciscan friars of the Holy Land protested that the Christian minorities in the cities of Jaffa, Acre and Sidon were suffering greatly due to the incessant raids of vessels flying the Order's flag.³² As a consequence, that same year, corsairing vessels were ordered to travel at a distance of ten miles from the Holy Land.³³ In 1699 the distance was reduced to fifty miles.³⁴ It was not the first time that corsairing activities landed the Order of St John into trouble.

The Venetian representative Giacomo Capello, who wrote a detailed *Descrizione di Malta* in 1716, informed the Venetian Senate that Maltese corsairs habitually robbed the *poveri* Greek Christians, despoiled and profaned their churches with the blessing of the Grand Master. Capello was of the opinion that one could not remain silent when faced with such a horrible situation. He recalled the case of one corsair captain from Majorca called Magrine who roamed the Mediterranean at the time of Capello's stay in Malta, flying the Order's flag. Magrine was in the habit of attacking Christian shipping and used all methods at his disposal to force the crew on board to say that the cargo they were carrying belonged to non-Christians. He attacked Greek Christian vessels, tied up members of the crew in sacks and threw them overboard. He tied others and had their skulls pressed so hard that their brains got loose. On his return he was tried and condemned to death by hanging. But his sentence was changed several times. First he was ordered to kiss the gallows and then serve a life sentence rowing on the Order's galleys; his punishment was then changed to a sentence of life imprisonment; yet again it was changed to three years' service on the galleys. But, as Capello pointed out, everyone was expecting him to be set free within the year. Rumours circulating in Malta at time suggested that Magrine

was able to obtain so many commutations to his sentence because he had paid 2,000 sequins in bribes.³⁵

In June 1724 Grand Master Vilhena retrieved the licences of eight captains of corsairing vessels who had been authorised to raid Syria and Palestine despite the fact that they had originally been issued with permits to navigate in the area.³⁶ When the Greeks learned of this decision they expected the Grand Master to impose similar regulations on corsairs operating from Malta who attacked their lands. On 25 October the people of the island of Patmos appealed to His Holiness the Pope against the cruelty of corsairs. Inquisitor Gio Francesco Stoppani (1731-1735) wrote to His Holiness in Rome:

*"Nell'Udienza de passati giorni ho espresso vivamente al Signor Granmaestro le violenze di fresco usate dalla crudeltà de Corsali nel Levante contro del monastero e degl'Isolani di Patmos. Non ha egli potuto non rimanere sensibilmente commosso, e mostrò dispiacere, che non fosse il castigo in sue mani, giacche non vi era presentemente alcun Corsale, che fosse soggetto all'autorità sua..."*³⁷

Stoppani had written in response to a letter Pope Clement XII (1730-1740) had received from the Abbot of Patmos who explained:

"Beatissimo Padre L'Abbate e Monaci di S. Giovanni di Patmos ricorre con tutto il Popolo di detta Isola... è sempre stata libera da Turchi, ed ha goduto la Protezione della Santa Sede Apostolica, ed il mantenimento del detto monastero ed Isolani per essere il sito povero, è sempre consistito e consiste nella mercatura, e nel comprar viveri dalle Isole vicine... similmente il detto monasterio ed Isola godono la Protezione della Maestà dell'Imperadore, Re di Sardegna, Gran duca di Toscana e d'armi concessimo di non essere molestati da corsali del Granmaestro di Malta, ...cio nonostante li corsari Cristiani non si sono mantenuti dal dare danno..."

32. Earle, 110.

33. NLM AOM vol.258, 10.xii.1647; cf. Cavaliero, "The decline ...", 227.

34. NLM AOM, vol.264, 28.iv.1699; cf. R. Cavaliero, *The Last of the Crusaders*. (London, 1960), 82.

35. "...Non si puo tacere una cosa orrida a sentirsi circa la protezione a corsari, e corsari li più scellerati; ve ne fu uno a mio tempo di nome Magrine maiorchino reo convinto d'haver con bandiera Maltese fatto il corso sopra cristiani greci, d'haverne cuciti in sacchi, e gettati in mare, havere ad altri legato, e stretto il capo in maniera, che il cranio siasi diviso dalla testa, e tutto ciò perche confessassero, o dassero denari, e con altre crudeltà inaudite; al suo ritorno a Malta fu preso e condannato alla forca, cosa ben rara cola; con le protettioni li fu tramutata la sentenza et obligato bacciare la forca; fu poi rimesso alla galera in via poi a carcere perpetuo, poi a servire per tre anni sopra li vascelli della Religione. Quando io partii si era a questo ma s'attendeva un'altra commutatione di servire un'anno solo, et esser libero; così tornerà al corso, e tanto più avido, quanto che le protettioni gl'hanno assiugata la borsa, calcolandosi habbi speso oltre 2 mila ceccchini." V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.), *Descrizione di Malta, Anno 1716 - A Venetian Account*, (Malta, 1988), 95.

36. J. Abdilla, "Aspects of the relations between Malta and France during the grandmastership of Vilhena, 1722-1736" (B.A. (Hons) unpubl. dissertation, University of Malta, 1972), 66.

37. T(rinity) C(ollege) D(ublin), ms. 1272, f.107, 25.x.1732.

The Abbot went on to relate that vessels armed in Leghorn (Tuscany) and assisted by a tartan flying a Maltese flag had depredated two vessels anchored in the harbour of Patmos, laden with rice and other food provisions meant for the sustenance of the islanders. Two more vessels, one flying the Spanish flag landed on the seashore of Patmos, broke into the stores and sacked the place and took away the herds of cattle that were kept there besides causing devastating damage.³⁸ In times of hardship Greeks often appealed to the Pope who intervened locally through the intervention of the Inquisitor and Apostolic Visitor, his representative in Malta, right up to the eighteenth century.

The Procurator of the Bishop of Tinos made similar representations from his island communities where the islanders were *tutti Cattolici* and even from nearby Miconos. It was argued that the incessant depredations by Christian corsairs could threaten the extirpation of Christianity in that part of the Cyclades.³⁹ These appeals to the Pope, and the constant intervention of the Inquisitor induced the Grand Master to issue a proclamation, rather reluctantly, in which he forbid any vessel from assisting corsairing vessels with foreign crews in their depredations.⁴⁰ This was a time of incessant trouble between the Order and the Orthodox Christians. Eventually on 16 June 1738 Pope Clement XII issued a Bull known as the *Bulla Clementina* in the hope that clashes between corsairs and the Orthodox Christians that lived under Ottoman rule could be regulated.⁴¹ Despite the prohibitions and other injunctions imposed on corsairing, many families in Malta, and elsewhere in south west Europe, continued to look at the practice as a major source of income. However most people realised that the great days of corsairing were over. Thus the changing economic and commercial patterns of the eighteenth century Mediterranean - largely introduced partly thanks to the economic decline of the Ottoman empire and that of the southern European states, and partly thanks to the growth of the commercial activities of north European states like Britain, the Netherlands and even France - did not permit the widespread practice of corsairing of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In the sixteenth century the situation was very different. Thus Muslim corsairing was as prosperous as that of the western waters. In the late sixteenth century the western Mediterranean was infested with Barbary pirates, mostly from Algiers particularly between 1560 and 1570. Some even made their way to the Adriatic and Crete. Between 1580 and 1620 Algiers entered upon a second age of prosperity that was more far-reaching than the first. In May 1588 the Turks reached Castello di Pratica in the vicinity of Albano (near Rome) on three galleys. The locals were terrified at the sound of drums played by the Turks and resisted by having their harquebusiers respond by at least eighty shots at the approaching Turks. Yet the fearsome Turks, who killed and wounded a large number of the men before they took away practically all the women and children of the village, overtook them.⁴² This was a time when corsairing was replacing fleet warfare and the southernmost islands of Christendom were besieged without mercy. The corsairs were everywhere in these grim times. In the Inquisition records held at the Archivio Historico Nacional in Madrid one comes across the deposition of the Franciscan friar Fray Lucas de Allende. In 1585 Fra Lucas had witnessed the sack of the Franciscan convent on the island of Gomera in the Canary Islands by English pirates.⁴³ Corsairs had to be reckoned with in the straits of Gibraltar, they plundered Andalusia, Sardinia and mainland Italy including the Papal States. They ravaged Sicily and its small archipelagos, including Malta of the Knights. Braudel opines that corsairing, "the major industry of Algiers, was the cohesive force of the city, creating a remarkable unanimity whether for the defence of the port or the exploitation of the sea, the hinterland or the masses of slaves."⁴⁴

Algiers must surely have had an abundance of slaves. A Portuguese prisoner tells us that between 1621 and 1627 there were some twenty thousand captives in Algiers, "a good half of whom were people 'of pure Christian stock', Portuguese, Flemish, Scottish, Hungarian, Danish, Irish, Slav, French, Spanish and Italian; the other half were heretics and idolaters - Syrians, Egyptians, even Japanese and Chinese, inhabitants of new Spain, Ethiopians. And

38. TCD, ms.1272, f.109-110.

39. TCD, ms. 1262, ff. 238-v, 240-241, 30.ix.1732.

40. The proclamation was issued on 5.ii.1733. TCD, ms. 1262, f.46. Full detailed account in the ff. that follow.

41. NLM Libr., vol.625, ff. 161-163.

42. A(rchivio di) S(tato di) R(oma), T(ribunale) C(riminale del) G(overnatore di Roma), Proc(essi) sec(oto) XVI, busta 224 case 40, ff. 1084-1094. A list of all those taken away into slavery is also included ff.1086-v, 10.v.1588.

43. R.L. Kagan, *Lucrecia's Dreams. Politics and Prophecy in Sixteenth Century Spain*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1995), 109-110.

44. Braudel, 884.

every nation of course provided its crop of renegades... Meanwhile the corsairs swarmed all over the sea, their city now of a size to dominate the entire Mediterranean.”⁴⁵

An insight into the aggression of the renegade Christians in Muslim lands is provided in the evidence of the 45 year-old Maltese Giovanni Petro Calleya of Vittoriosa. In 1645 Calleya declared that he had been twice enslaved in Tunis. The first time he was sent to row on a galley, which was involved in the incursions against the Christians in Sicily and Calabria. On that occasion the Muslims had made good use of the services of a Christian spy called Paolo Somma. During his second enslavement he had learned that the services of Paolo Somma were again vital for the capture of Nicotra by the Ottoman galley squadron of Tunis. He had learned that Somma was heard to say publicly “...di voler far' tanto male a' i cristiani perche calasse dal cielo un'Angelo che gli dicesse col suo nome di rinegato, basta, basta...”⁴⁶

By the first half of the seventeenth century, corsairing activity in the Mediterranean had reached its highest peak. From the Christian part, primacy in the field definitely belonged to the Order of Malta.⁴⁷ It is perhaps difficult to establish where such activity was more predominant - whether it was in the Levant or in the area between Tunisia and the Aegean. As for the Muslims, Algiers predominated. Unlike its neighbour Tunisia, where corsairs were allowed to equip their own privateering vessels, the corso in Algeria was a monopoly of the state. It was also the activity upon which the prosperity of the *Ujaq* (the foreign, Ottoman group, that ruled Algiers) as well as its religious prestige depended to a great extent. This explains why the legendary heroes of Ottoman Algeria were captains of corsairing vessels such as Khayr al-Din, and later in the 1580s, Murad.⁴⁸ These were men who distinguished themselves through audacious attacks on Christian shipping and carried back to Algiers important prizes of Christian booty, especially food and slaves.

By the mid-seventeenth century the much vaunted exploits of the *corso* had numerous critics, even in the Papal court, where voices often raised the question

about the wisdom of such provocation. But if anyone in Malta felt the justice of such criticism, he must have found it advisable to keep his doubts private. Still, due to the course taken by events, the Order thought it wiser to retract its annual *caruane* from the Aegean Sea where the risks had become higher after the fall of Candia to the Ottomans in 1669. Henceforth, the main hunting-ground lay much nearer home, often in home waters and directed mostly against the Barbary corsairs infesting the central and western Mediterranean. The new character of the corso was to become even more pronounced in the course of the eighteenth century forcing the Barbary corsairs to direct their main corsairing efforts to the Atlantic.

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45. Ibid., 885.

46. "...he (Paolo Somma) wanted to do so much harm to the Christians that an angel would come down from heaven, call him by his renegade name, and urge him to stop..." AIM Crim., vol.59A case 736, ff. 67v-68, 10.xi.1645.

47. Nevertheless free Christian and Jewish subjects, with a valid licence continued to travel on their own business throughout the Mediterranean at a time when corsairing activities were at their best. In 1645 Giovanni Maria dell'Alberi of Vittoriosa explained that he had travelled to Tunis in March of that year and returned in August. He also referred to a free Jew of Tunis who was in Malta at that time. Naturally the Jews, like other minorities within the Ottoman Empire such as the Armenians and the Greeks, served as middlemen in formal exchange of trade between Christians and Muslims. AIM Crim., vol.59A case 736, f.67, 19.xi.1645.

48. J. M. Abun-Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period*. (Cambridge, 1987), 159.