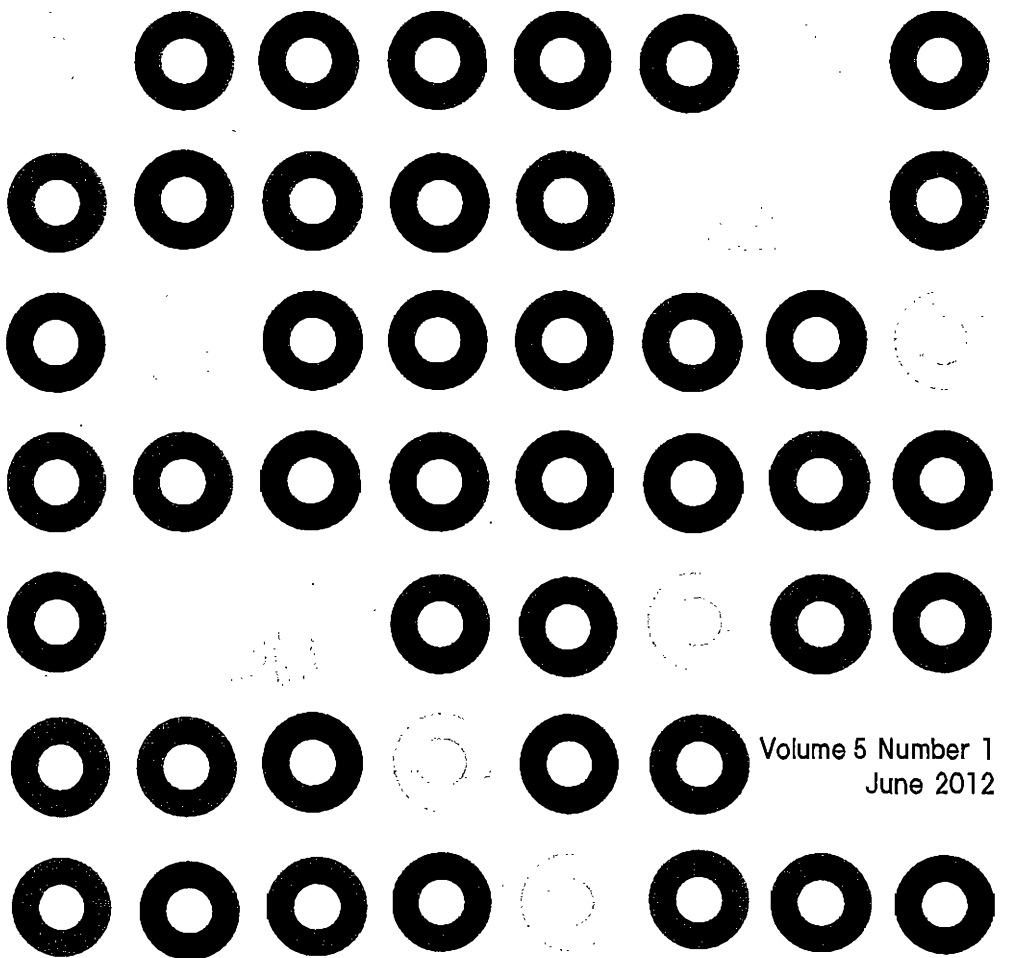


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The Battle Standard (Flag) with the Image of the Immaculate Conception

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Abstract

When maritime communications lacked the sophisticated technologies of today, seafarers had to conceive signals so that they could communicate with each other at sea. Flags were one aspect of the code language in use during early modern times all over the Mediterranean Sea. Flags were not only used to denote the nationality or religion of the owner of the vessel but also as signals, in particular when ships sailed in convoy or squadron formation. A successful encounter at sea depended on good coordination. For this reason, a particular flag was devised to be used in time of battle. It was known as the battle standard, and was raised to signal the beginning of combat. This article focuses on this particular flag and explores its use by both Christians and Muslims. Particular reference is made to the battle flags used by the Knights of Malta. The General of the Knights' galley squadron adopted a personal battle standard and, more often than not, chose to have the iconography of the Immaculate Conception depicted on this flag in what might be interpreted as an invocation for protection and victory.

Keywords : Battle Standard, Immaculate Conception, Corsairing, Knights of Malta, Signals Flags

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In one of the harbour cities of the Island of Malta there is a collegiate church which is dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. The city is called Bormla but is also referred to as Cospicua. The church pre-dates the Turkish siege of 1565 but it experienced the same fate as some of the other churches in the area (Croveri, 2005: 97-105): it was totally destroyed and had to be rebuilt. Ten years after the siege, the edifice was recorded as still being in a precarious condition (Documentary 2001: 164). The church became an independent Catholic parish in 1584¹ and slowly the community invested its time and money to build a magnificent church. A construction programme initiated in the seventeenth century continued uninterrupted throughout the eighteenth, during which periods the church edifice underwent different modifications and adaptation to suit the dominant artistic styles of baroque architecture. (Mahoney 1996: 171, 188, 207) Along with these architectural changes, Bormla's parish church was embellished with many works of art, many of which survive to this day (Galea Scannura 1983).

The parish church has an antependium (or an antique panel which was used in Catholic liturgy to cover the frontal of an altar) bearing the image of the Immaculate Conception which, it is said, was originally a small banner used in processions. On closely observing the frontal one notices immediately that it must have been very special because of its size. It is much smaller than those banners normally associated with religious processions nowadays in Malta. No doubt both in size and shape this banner was inspired by others that had been in use during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

¹ Notarial Archives Valletta, Malta, Acts of Notary Andrea Albano, Repertorio. 12/5, (1587-88), ff. 326-327.



Figure 1. Contemporary procession banners used during religious processions at Bormla,

An inventory of this church's ecclesiastical possessions, compiled in 1602, attests to the existence of a red damask banner with a green garnish and the image of the Immaculate Conception embroidered in the centre. The records specify that this banner was donated to the church by Madonna Bernarda Azzupardo, wife of Mario, *il comito*.² The wording of this entry indicates the close rapport that existed among the people of the locality, the maritime activity of the Knights Hospitaller of St John and the Church. The '*comito*' was the boatswain on a Hospitaller galley with responsibility for the sails and rigging, the general running of the galley and summoning men to duty with a whistle.

² Archivum Archiepiscopali Melitense, Floriana, Malta. *Visita Pastoralis*, Vol. 7, f. 411v. Old number is f.266v. Item : un stendardo della croce con la immagine della Madonna di damasco rosso infodrato di terzanello verde presentato da Madonna Bernarda Azzupardo moglie di Mario, il comito.

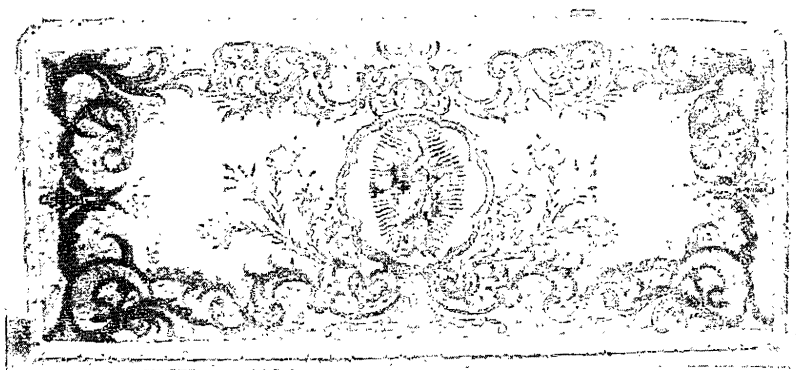


Figure 2. The old banner at Bormla Parish Church, which was changed into an antependium or an antique panel which was used in Catholic liturgy to cover the frontal of an altar.

In her book, *Catholic Pirates and Greek Merchants*, Molly Greene states that the Knights of St John had created in Malta “the most formidable état-corsair” (Greene 2010: 53). Leaving aside the problem of the validity and reliability of such a superlative, as there is no indication of how the author arrived at such a conclusion, she was echoing a past historical narrative: Peter Earle lambasted the island of Malta as the capital of Christian piracy (Earle 1970: 97-122). Unfortunately, the terms pirate and corsair are often used without any effort to differentiate between their meaning.

The meaning of the term corsair as proposed by Alberto Tenenti, needs to be upheld. The word corsair carried a very specific meaning. It referred to anybody, whether Christian or Muslim, who obtained a license or permission from a State to work as a corsair. Pirates did not need permission. Theirs was a spontaneous act. Thus, a corsair needed first to be the owner of a boat (a pirate could be at the head of a mutiny) and could only attack so-called enemy ships. Christian corsairs could only attack Muslim ships. If they breached such a condition, then they became pirates. The same criteria held for Muslims. Once one side or the other infringed this law, the status of the corsair automatically became that of a pirate. Thus, in 1605, a tribunal was set up in Malta, called the *Tribunale degli Armamenti*, to assess and judge corsairs who overstepped this basic principle of the Mediterranean Consolato del Mare law by attacking,

in our case, friendly Christian ships. The fact that Greene found three cases in Malta where corsairs were being accused of having infringed this law, thus becoming pirates, shows that, all in all, corsairs across the Mediterranean worked within the framework of the praxis of the Consolato del Mare.

It is also a misnomer, in the case of Malta, to call these corsairs Maltese. Although there were a handful of Maltese, it should be noted that many of these ship owners were foreigners, primarily French, Italian, Spanish, Corsicans, Ragusans (from Dubrovnic) and Greeks. They flocked to the island, obtained the necessary permit and engaged the inhabitants in their corsairing activity. On obtaining a licence, the corsairs were allowed to display the Order of St John's standard or flag. As Tenenti observes, they became "corsairs parading crosses" (Tenenti 1967; 39). At this period, the maritime flag of the Order figured prominently a cross with four arms of equal length, made up of two equal straight lines bisecting each other at right angles. This type of flag was called the Greek Cross or the *crux immissa quadrata* (Healey 1977: 290), which was a white cross on a red field.

Yet, corsairing in Malta was not only a private venture. The Knights too had their own squadron of galleys devoted to corsairing exploits in the Mediterranean. However, it should be noted that the islanders were not allowed to join the fighting ranks within the Order. In the Middle Ages, as Alexander Sutherland reminds us, 'the quality of chevelier or knight... was confined to persons of noble birth', (Sutherland, 1831: 51), which by the time the Knights arrived in Malta meant that this rank was reserved solely for the offspring of European aristocracy, while the Maltese aristocracy was completely barred from joining the higher ranks known as Knights of Justice (De Boisgelin 1804: 203-205). In the case of the maritime squadron they could only join the ranks of non-commissioned officers. The post of *comito*, described earlier on, was the highest position that a Maltese could reach on the Knights of St John's galleys.

Irrespective of this maritime activity, Malta under the Knights did not only depend on the revenue derived from corsairing. The Order of St John had independent financial revenue deriving from its property in Europe. Even

from the time when the Knights were on Rhodes, Anthony Luttrell notes that their survival already depended heavily on the efficient functioning of their Western financial organisations, which sent the money to this island (Luttrell 1990: 7).

The situation remained unchanged throughout their stay in Malta. It was only after the Order lost its main source of revenue from what were called the *responsions*, after its vast properties in France were confiscated, that its existence in Malta became endangered. In fact, it succumbed to the French forces in 1798. In this context, Molly Greene's assertion that Valletta was one of the Mediterranean cities which "lived off stolen goods" (Greene 2010: 80) only makes sense if this is understood as meaning that some revenue derived from corsairing was reinvested in the embellishment of Maltese churches, towns and villages. One of the sixteenth century corsairs, Alonso de Contreras, who for some time operated from Malta, refers to a lavish donation of stolen silk to one of the Maltese local churches, that of Our Lady of Grace in Żabbar (Contreras 1924: 75). If one accepts Contreras' account, most of the revenue derived from these corsairs was spent on women (or better still courtesans) and the physical embellishment of towns.

The inhabitants of the Three Cities (Bormla, Birgu and L-Isla) as well as those of Valletta were used to seeing many different flags, banners and ensigns on the vessels lying in the Grand Harbour, which belonged to other Christian nations as well as to the Knights of Malta. Today, the tradition continues because these ensigns, in particular the Hospitallers' flag of the white cross on a red field, are still flown from roof tops during religious feasts, which are organized annually in our villages and towns.

However, there were other ensigns and flags that were never flown when ships were in harbour. One such ensign hoisted at a particular moment in time was the Battle Standard. It was special in size, rounded at the fly (as the edge of the flag furthest from the pole is known in vexillology) and used both by Christian vessels and Muslim ones.

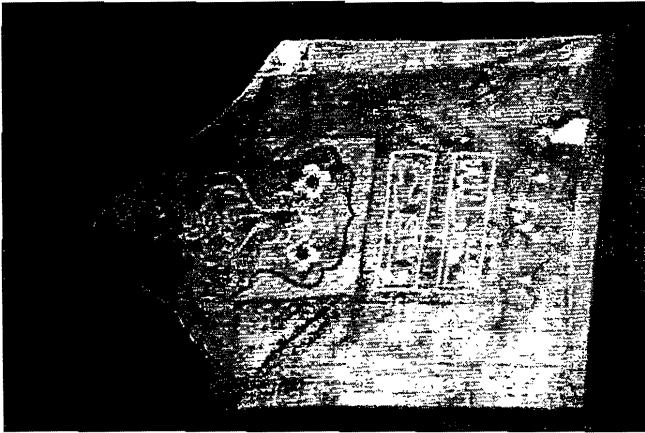


Figure 3. An Ottoman Battle flag

The Christian battle flags were usually red and often carried a sacred image with coats-of-arms or other heraldic symbols. Sometimes other colors were used. The sacred iconography and the coats-of-arms were either embroidered or painted on the banner's fabric. At times even the fimbriation (edging) was embroidered. The choice of red for these banners was not arbitrary. According to vexillologists, red signifies peril or combat; black signifies death and white peace or surrender (Inglefield 1979: 22). The battle standard used to fly from the most important vessel of the fleet or sea squadron. One must here distinguish between a standard, an ensign and a flag that flew on board a ship. An ensign is used in maritime terminology in connection with the principal identifying flag, which in the case of the Order was the white cross on a red ground (Wilson 1986: 10). On the other hand, the battle flag was known as "Lo Stendardo" in the Hospitallers' terminology. Furthermore, a flag was flown anywhere on a ship and was square while the battle standard or ensign was longer and larger and a width and a half in length (Aubin 1702: 601) (Gorgoglione 1705; 119, 188). Its fabric was of quality such as linen, damask or silk. All generals of the galleys, whether Christian or Muslim, chose their own design for their standard.³

³ During this period, the heads of a galley squadron were known as Generals of the Galleys.

In the case of the Knights of St John the standard followed the European Catholic tradition of the time. It always appeared to the starboard side, that is, right of the stern cabin and replaced the Order's ensign; the white cross on a red field that was hoisted when at sea. Therefore when the Knights' squadron sailed out or entered into harbour the standard used was that of the Order. Period paintings depict it proudly flying high on the '*Capitana*' which was the flagship of the General of the fleet of the Order and on all other ships authorized by the Grand Master to operate in the corso (Muscat 2003: color figure 32). A case in point is an eighteenth-century painting from Bormla parish church, featuring the *Madonna del Buon Viaggio*, wherein two galleys of the Order are included in the background. The *capitana* is shown hoisting the white cross on a red field when entering the Grand Harbour. This red and white standard would be hastily lowered when the ship came face-to-face with the enemy and was replaced by the Battle Standard, a signal to the other galleys of the Order's squadron to take up action stations.⁴

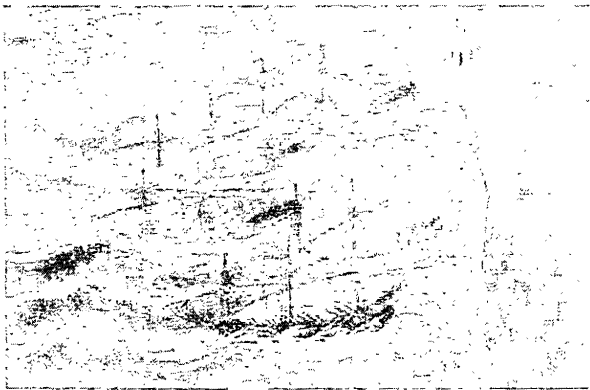


Figure 4. The Order of St John Galley Squadron from an ex-voto. This painting shows the *capitana* painted in black.

⁴ *Ordini e Segni così per la navigazione che pe il combattimento da osservarsi dalla squadra delle Galere della Sacra Religione Gierosolimitana, sotto il Comando degl' Illustrissimi et Venerandi signori capitani Generali delle medesime Galere; signal no. 65* This manuscript is to be found at the Ta' Giezu Library in Valletta and in this study this manuscript will be referred to as Ta' Giezu Code.



The Knights of Malta were, and still are, a religious and military Order (Regula 1556: 2r) and like similar organisations had and still have their own rules and statutes. When the Knights came to Malta in 1530, they undertook to defend the Maltese seashores from Muslim corsairs and Ottoman attacks and protect the inhabitants from being taken prisoner and made slaves as used to happen in earlier times. (Hoppin 1979: 23). Greene states that “in the Mediterranean, the great age of piracy began...immediately following the Ottoman defeat at Lepanto” (Greene 2010: 79). In reality, piracy and corsairing began to dominate the Mediterranean world after the collapse of commerce as a result of the Black Death. David Abulafia notes that in the Mediterranean “nothing could be the same again after the devastations and horrors of the Black Death”. (Abulafia 2011: 369) He goes on to note that the crusading spirit continued but as noted by John H. Pryor, it commuted itself into a *guerre de course*. (Pryor 1992: 193-196) Thus, it is not a mere coincidence that Heers traces the origins of corsairing in the Mediterranean to the late fifteenth century (Heers 2001:31-32). Slowly, a new reality came into being and the island of Malta was no longer immune to the corsairing raids of the fifteenth century. In terms of magnitude, only the significant raids entered the annals of Maltese history. The fact that all the coastline villages contracted and eventually disappeared during the fifteenth century shows that the island became vulnerable to Saracen and Ottoman attacks (Wettinger 1973: 191).

The official chroniclers of the Order, such as Abbé de Vertot, lambasted the entrance of the Arabs into Mediterranean in the seventh century. Vertot accuses the Arabs, whom he calls Saracens and Musulmen (sic.) of having “threatened the whole world with their chains” (Vertot 1728: vol. 1: 6) and having construed a clear programme to destroy Christians resulting from their (Muslims’) “too great aversion... to receive them into their houses” (Vertot 1728: vol. : 7). Following in the footsteps of another great chronicler of the Order’s history, Giacomo Bosio, de Vertot insists that the Knights had no alternative but to defend themselves and become warriors, something that had not been part of their original belief (Bosio 1695: vol. 1: 6-11).

While still on the island of Rhodes the Knights had built a strong navy to defend themselves in the hope of stopping the enemy from reaching their home shores (De Caro 1853: 43 and Preface IV). This they carried on doing

even after their arrival in Malta in 1530. In Malta, the Order continued with its mission which is succinctly described by Abbe de Vertot as:

“Instituted upon the motives of charity, and prompted by a zeal for the defence of the Holy Land, to take up arms against the infidels; an Order, which amidst the noise and clashing of swords, and with a continual war upon its hands, was capable of enjoying the peaceable virtues of religion with the most distinguished courage in the field” (Vertot 1728: vol. 1: 1).

In other words, the Knights viewed themselves as a policing force. Today, this past mission is interpreted more as an act of piracy than a confessional mission against the Turks (Greene 2010: 92).⁵ Whichever interpretation one gives, it was not at all an easy task and the galleys and the feluccas were among the ships used to perform this form of policing role against the Muslims.

After 1625 the ship heading the galley squadron, known as the *Capitana*, was always painted black (Del Pozzo 1703: vol. 1: 744) and equipped with the different flags required when sailing in the Mediterranean. During sea battles between the galleys of the Order and those of Muslims, the Knights put their trust in the Lord.⁶ However, they also had a particular devotion to Our Lady under the name of the Immaculate Conception and during their heyday the Knights’ devotion to the Immaculate Conception spread throughout the Christian Mediterranean region.

It was rare for an attack to be a surprise attack. Whenever a ship appeared on the horizon, the look-out perched at the top of the mast would call out to his mates on deck (Muscat 2010: 244). If a ship with square sails appeared, she was certain to be a merchant ship. However, when a vessel was equipped with lateen sails she attracted special attention because she was light and swift and could quickly make her escape. More often than not she would be a Muslim ship, in which case the General would give the signal to capture the

⁵ Greene defined Livorno, Valletta, Algiers and Tripoli as cities of pirates.

⁶ Franciscan Minors Convent, Valletta, Malta, (Ta’ Ġiezu) Signal Code, Signal number 65.

vessel⁷. Often the enemy attempted to mislead by hoisting a false flag, so the Knights had perforce to intercept and verify the ship's true identity. Who knows how many times the Galleys of the Order gave chase only to find that the vessel was truly Christian!⁸

Whenever it was established that a vessel was indeed a Muslim one, the General of the galleys gave orders to attack and the Battle Standard was raised. At this signal all arms were brought on deck⁹ together with wooden shields to be secured to the sides of the *rambate* or fore-fighting platform and on the sides of the galleys' wooden stanchions.¹⁰ The captives were handcuffed and chained at the ankle.¹¹ The sails were lowered and the masts doubly secured to ensure that should they be hit by cannon balls they would not land on deck. When everything was in place, all that remained was to wait for the enemy to come within firing range with its own Battle Standard raised as a challenge to the Knights; a clear message there was to be no surrender. The Knights' crew would then wait for the ensign bearing the image of St Barbara to be hoisted on the fore-sail as a signal for them to attack.¹²

According to the Code Book of Maritime Signals of the Order of St John (kept at Malta's National Library) it is stated that whenever the Battle Standard was raised the crew prayed to the Lord for help and then fighting

⁷ M(alta) M(aritime) M(useum), *Segni che fa la Capitana in tutti li occasioni su la Squadra delle Galere della Sacra Religione Gerosolimitana, tando di giorno, che la notte, tanto alla vela che alla fonda; signal no. 65.* Henceforth we will refer to this manuscript as the *Capitana*.

⁸ N(ational) L(ibrary) M(alta), A(rchives) O(f) M(alta) 1771, f.126.

⁹ NLM, Libr(ary Manuscripts Collection). 726, f. 100 *Bandiera di Santa Barbara sul calcese di trinchetto*.

¹⁰ Private Collection. *Segni I Quali soservano su La Squadra Delle Galere Della Sacra Religione Gerosolimitana*; signal no. 65 shows the Cross but not the Immaculate Conception. Since this signal carries the coats-of-arms of Grand Master Pinto in the text we refer to it as Pinto's code.

¹¹ *Ordini e Segni cosi per la navigazione che per il combattimento da ossservarsi dalla Squadra Delle Galere della Sacra Religione Gerosolimitana sott'il comando dell' Illustrissimi et eccellissimi Signori Capitani Generali delle medesime Galere*; Royal Library, Turin number 74, henceforth in this text we refer to this manuscript as Turin. Torino, Biblioteca Reale, Mil. 366/3. Ta' Giesu Fransican Minors Signal Code, *Ordini e Segni di Combattimento* no. 63.

¹² NLM Libr. 726, f 100 *Bandiera di Santa Barbara sul calcese di trinchetto*.

began.¹³

Whilst the Greeks in the Eastern Mediterranean had no systematic flag routine (Greene 2010: 178), the Order's squadron had its own signal code, made up of a master copy, which in turn was used by each General of the galleys to compile his own signal code book (Muscat 2010: 238). Due to its idiosyncratic value, the Battle Standard was never included in the master copy. Saverien speaks about the existence of two types of operational signal books, the general one, which included the general signals which are normally related to navigation, and the particular one, which included the specific orders from the General to all his captains (Saverien 1769: 417). The Battle Standard must have fallen within the latter group.

Taking a look at old manuscripts belonging to the Knights –a gold mine of information about the history of Malta– one finds that there were many different signals used aboard the galleys of the Order. Their significance is to be found in the Code Books usually drawn up by those Knights who were sailors by profession. Signals were also transmitted using the different color codes. Some ensigns made recourse to the use of images to denote a particular maneuver at sea. In these manuscripts one notes that one of the images used in these maritime codes was that of the Immaculate Conception.

The maritime codes referring to the image of the Immaculate Conception and other religious or profane images are executed in watercolors and date back to the eighteenth century. However, this does not signify that prior to this date religious images and coats-of-arms were not used on ensigns. There are references in manuscripts (though without illustrations) regarding the use of these ensigns (Muscat 2010: 242). Some examples referred to later on in this paper as well as the reference to Bernarda Azzupardo earlier on, confirm that early Battle Standards included the image of the Immaculate Conception. This goes to show that devotion to the Immaculate Conception was an old and profound tradition among sailors in the Mediterranean. On the other hand, one must conclude that since that the Knights lost very few sea battles they must

¹³ NLM Libr. 110, f. 2.



indeed have had divine protection! From existing information, the Knights only lost four battles at sea during the 268 years they were in Malta, while they won or seized as booty over 150 sea-craft (Muscat 2006: 3-14) (Mori Ubaldini 1970: en passant). Such statistics refer only to the galley squadron of the Knights, and do not take into account the corsairs. The losses here were considerably higher (Mercieca 2011: 21-49). This led the Knights to strengthen their devotion towards the Immaculate Conception. It was not the first time that Generals of the squadrons chose her as their protector when they travelled and, in order to demonstrate to one and all their devotion, they began carrying her image on the most important ensigns, in particular the Battle Standard. However, the Immaculate Conception was not the only sacred image used. This was a very subjective matter insofar as many of the images painted thereon were the personal choice of each individual Admiral or General of the squadron. Thus one finds other sacred images or simply profane drawings on some ensigns. For example, another image used was the Cross.

There exists, in a private collection, a Code Book of Signals of the Galleys of the Order of St John. It is referred to as the Code Book of Pinto since the first sheet bears the coats-of-arms of Grand Master Frà Manuel Pinto de Fonseca (1681-1773), who ruled Malta from 1741 to 1773.¹⁴ On the folio marked *Segni di combatt[iment]o* (Battle Signals), we find the Battle Standard reference no. 65. It is an ensign in red damask, fimbriated in yellow, or possibly embroidered in gold. The Cross is on the pole side and is encircled by a Crown of Thorns on a backdrop of rays. At the bottom of the Cross, wedges are to be seen on each side, as though positioning it in place. This particular flag carries the image of the so called Latin Cross, which is formed by the lengthened stem. Thus the lower part is longer than the other two horizontal arms and upper part of the Cross. It seems that the Captain only wished to convey the conventional meaning of this Cross; the symbol of the passion and triumph of Christ over death (Healey 1977: 291). At the edge of the flag appears the coats-of-arms of both the Order of St John and Pinto under a crown flanked by two flags that are difficult to identify. One must bear in mind that these flags were all hand embroidered and must have been magnificent to see.

¹⁴ Private Collection, Segni i quali soservano su la Squadra delle Galere della Scara Religione Geroslimitina, henceforth referred to as 'Pinto Code'.

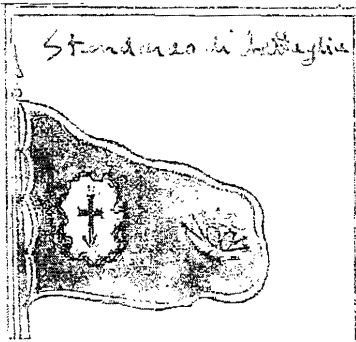


Figure 5. A copy made by Joseph Muscat of the *Stendardo di battaglia* with the image of a cross.

“The Christian church”, remarks Tim Healey, “...was not content to accept any cross as being equivalent to any other. As did the heralds, the churchmen devised many variants on the simple cross, each bearing its own meaning to the initiate” (Healey 1977: 289). Parading such a type of Cross happened at a period when devotion towards the Holy Cross had exploded in Malta. This came about after a wooden crucifix was salvaged by Maltese seafarers from the Church of St Peter at Candia (present day Heraklion). This precious and miraculous icon was rushed out of the island of Crete in 1669 to save it from sure destruction, as this Venetian outpost was about to fall to the Turks (Debono 2005: 20, 24). This Cross, along with other objects, was transported to Malta, where it was donated to the parish Church of Bormla. More than one bishop recorded, throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, the great religious fervor that this Cross inspired in Malta to the extent that people from all over the island flocked to the church of Bormla to pray for miraculous interventions through the intercession of this sacred image.¹⁵

Some Generals preferred ensigns without any religious image. At the National Library at Valletta one finds a manuscript of signals depicting a battle standard quite different to those already mentioned above.¹⁶ This standard is numbered 68 and consists of five fesses in red and four in yellow [see image below] otherwise there is nothing particular about it. Perhaps it was made for

¹⁵ AAM, *Visitatio Pastoralis Alpheran 1736-1740*, Vol. 33, f.1090v.

¹⁶ NLM Libr.110 number 68.



the Order and not specifically for some General of the Galleys. This same standard can be seen in a signal code manual preserved at the Royal Library in Turin. It carries the same reference number and hence is proof that this is a copy of the Code Book to be found in Malta's National Library.

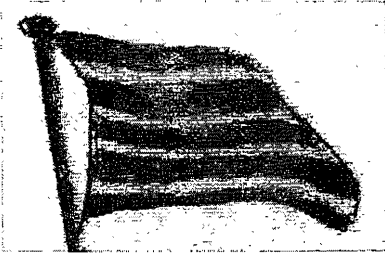


Figure 6. A hand coloured copy made by Joseph Muscat of the *Stendardo di battaglia* with red and yellow striped colors.

One must remember that the ensign conveyed a message of honor, magnitude and prestige for any General who hoisted this standard on his flagship. This was a tradition not exclusive to the Generals of the Order but also to others, be they Christian or Muslim. Therefore the richness of these ensigns was intended to strengthen prestige and image and explains why some Generals or Admirals chose to add their personal coats-of-arms (Aubin 1702: 599).

While the Cross *per se* was a symbol of Christianity, the image of the Immaculate Conception had all the symbols necessary for a Battle Standard adopted in the wars against Muslims. Iconographically, the Immaculate Conception is depicted as a woman standing in prayer with sun-rays behind her, one foot on the moon and the other stamping the head of a serpent. This image, particularly because of the presence of a snake and the moon, began to be interpreted as a good omen auguring the victory of Christians over Muslims, who were likened to the devil. In Christian iconography the serpent represents the devil because in the Book of Genesis it is stated that the snake is similar to the devil. The woman in Genesis that shall bruise the snake's head (Genesis 3;15) was identified as Our Lady and therefore the Immaculate

Conception was, and still is, depicted as crushing the head of the serpent.¹⁷

The crescent too was also considered as a symbol of the Virgin Mary (Healey 1977: 292). What is less well known is that even the sun is closely associated with the iconography of the Immaculate Conception. Both symbols go back to the Book of the Apocalypse of St John. The Apostle refers to “a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, (Revelations, Chapter 12, 1) and this vision was always understood by the Catholic Church to be a direct reference to Mary, who because of her splendor is compared to the sun that gives us the light of day and the moon which is the source of light at night. Certainly, St John uses the sun’s rays as a metaphor for strength because in his time sunbeams represented military power. Therefore these symbols in the iconography of the Immaculate Conception have nothing to do with the Turkish Empire. That only introduced the sun and moon as the symbols of the Sublime Porte 1300 years after the Apocalypse had been written!

It is only as a result of an historical incident that the moon became a Turkish symbol and eventually an Islamic one. Originally, the sun and the crescent were symbols used by the armies of the Levant in the Classical World. The Romans carried on using them on their shields. After the Empire’s conversion to Christianity these symbols were adopted by the Christians of Constantinople. After the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 the symbol of the half moon was adopted as the Turkish symbol (D’Amato 2010: 219-248).¹⁸

In the Code Book of the Knight Spinola – now exhibited at the Malta Maritime Museum – one can see the Battle Standard with the image of the Immaculate Conception. In the index or list of flags of the Code Book, under

¹⁷ In recent times this biblical reference has been re-interpreted and the person now identified as stamping the head of the serpent is male. Originally ‘she’ was used meaning Our Lady. After correction, ‘he’ is now used to refer to Christ stamping on the snake’s head.

¹⁸ See in particular Fig. 6 on page 234 of this article by D’Amato for the iconographic presentation of the crescent and the sun on the Byzantine battle flags.



ref. no. 65, one finds the Battle Standard. It is beautifully produced, since the copyist of the Code Book was a specialized artist. Suffice it to say that the front page depicts an allegory of the victory of the Christian Religion over Islam.¹⁹

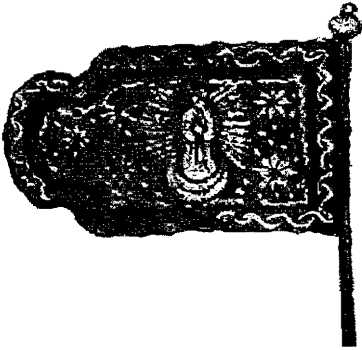


Figure 7. *Lo Stendardo di battaglia* in Spinola's Code Book

In Spinola's Code Book the standard is in red damask with, at the centre, the Immaculate Conception surrounded by sun's rays. Her feet rest on a half-moon and her hands are joined against her chest. She has a crown on her head. In accordance with tradition, the robe the Immaculate Conception is wearing is white with blue. The ensign is slightly rounded, and on its fimbriation there is a hint of a design in gold. There are also five stars depicted on the field colored in Venetian red. In this design, which is in watercolors, there are other details such as the mast with the truck (or the ball on the top of a flagpole) decorated in gold.²⁰

In the library of the Ta' Ġiezu Friars at Valletta one can view another Code Book of Signals used by the galleys of the Order.²¹ Again one finds here a flag numbered 65, which is referred to as a Battle Standard. Even here the artwork

¹⁹ *MMM Ordini Dell'Eccellentissimo Baglio Fra Gio.Batta.Spinola Capitan General Per Regola della Squadra*

di Malta circa la Navigazione e Combattimento, herein referred to as the Spinola Code.

²⁰ Spinola Code image number 65.

²¹ Ta' Ġiezu Maritime Code. See note 5.

is beautiful and must have been executed by a professional artist. Suffice it to observe the expertise that went into portraying the banners aloft. Once again the ensign is of red damask. Its fimbriation is in yellow decorated with a delicate garland. The image of the Immaculate Conception on the left canton is wearing a yellowish robe, standing on the crescent and wearing a crown. Even this standard is rounded. However, on this standard there is another image besides that of the Immaculate Conception. It is that of the flagship of the Order depicted on the fly, with the standard fluttering on the left side of the cabin on the stern. This is an image which reflects an extraordinary knowledge and flair for detail since one of the sails is not in its place insofar as the flagship is embroidered in battle formation. Flapping from the finial of the main mast appears a small flag which one cannot decipher but no doubt must have been some pre-agreed signal between the General of the Galleys of the Order and the captains on the other ships forming the squadron. The image of the Conception on this standard was indeed a beautiful piece of embroidery.²²

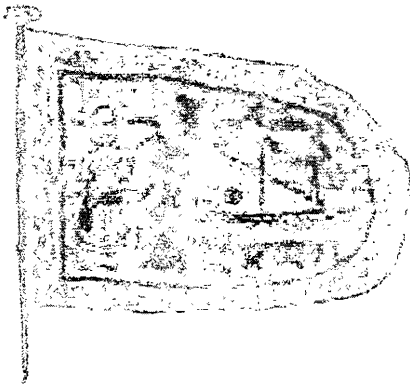


Figure 8. A hand colored copy by Joseph Muscat of the *Stendardo di battaglia* in the Ta' Ġiezu Maritime Code.

In manuscript 423 at the National Library of Malta we find only two folios that refer to the Galleys of the Order²³ but these seem to have been misplaced. In folio no. 9, one finds signal no. 65 showing the battle standard which in all

²² Ta' Ġiezu Maritime Code, image no. 65.

²³ NLM, Libr. 423.



probability goes back to the time of Grand Master Pinto. Once again there is the image of the Immaculate Conception. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the Immaculate Conception was not at the centre but positioned on the hoist, by the side of pole, and once again she is free standing, encircled by rays. Her hands are joined across her chest, her feet resting on the half moon, wearing a white robe and a blue cape but in this case without a crown on her head. On the ground of the fly of this standard, there are two coats-of-arms each surmounted by a crown; that on the left depicts the coats-of-arms of the Religion, a white cross on a red field, and that on the right that of Grand Master Pinto. The standard's fimbriation is in yellow with a simple design. This standard is the result of beautiful embroidery and like any other standard reflects the thoughts of the General of the Galleys who commissioned it and devotion to the Immaculate Conception.



Figure 9. A hand copy done by Joseph Muscat of the *Stendardo di battaglia* in the Maritime Manual Code in manuscript 423 at the National Library of Malta.

In this same library there is Manuscript 627 with information regarding other ensigns but none carry the image of the Immaculate Conception. This manuscript comprises a collection of watercolors – probably by a certain Zimelli – an artist about whom very little is known. These watercolors depict

the flagship of Grand Master Pinto.²⁴ Attached to the filial of the pole is a particular flag showing the Immaculate Conception robed in white with a blue mantel, wearing a crown on her head, her feet resting on the half moon and the palms of her hands on her chest. The flag has a fimbriation all round in yellow which could have been made from damask. Of interest is the fly of the flag, which is rounded. whereas normally it is square. This flag reminds us of the standard seen in the Code Book in the Library of the Ta' Ġiezu Friars at Valletta. One has to point out that the positioning of this flag is indeed odd because normally on the finial only a flag of the Order used to be raised and this only during periods of celebrations. Therefore, what is depicted in the designs reproduced on the magisterial galley of Grand Masters Raffaele Cottoner (1660-1663) and his brother Nicholas, who succeeded him as Grand Master (1663-1680), could have been a Battle Standard which was positioned incorrectly by the artist.

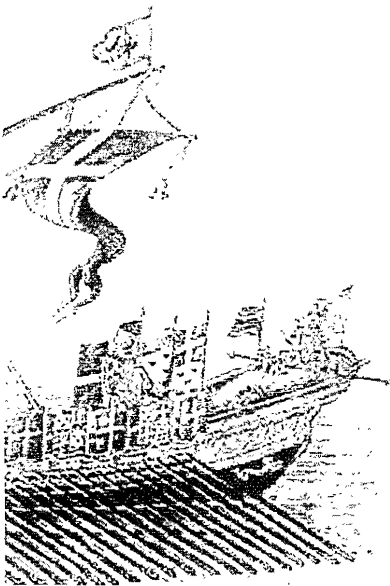


Figure 10. Zimelli's watercolor.

²⁴ NLM Libr. 627, entitled *Fascicolo a colori*.



The French author Barras de la Penne describes the battle standard in his book on the French Galleys and he reproduces the standard bearing the image of the Immaculate Conception (Finnis 1998: vol.1: 28). Once again, it appears that the standard was made from red damask and it has a golden fimbriation. The Immaculate Conception is surrounded by clouds and rays, with the palm of her hands on her chest, and her feet on the crescent, and she is robed in white with a blue cape. The Madonna's hair is long and is blown backwards by the wind. It appears that Barras de la Penne was not versed in sacred iconography because he refers to this standard as one representing the Assumption (Finnis 1995: vol. 2: 878).



Figure 11. The Battle Ensign reproduced by Barras de la Penna and hand copied by Joseph Muscat.

This study shows us that the Immaculate Conception was used not only by the Knights on their ensigns but also by other countries in the Mediterranean, such as France, who shared the same beliefs; praying to the Immaculate Conception for protection while at sea.

In the Basilica of Santa Margherita at Cortona in Italy, there is the standard of Bailiff Fra Filippo Marucelli showing the beautiful baroque image of the Immaculate Conception. Marucelli saw service in Malta. He became Captain of the Galley 'San Luigi' in 1728 (Ubalдино 1970: 583) and in 1748 he was appointed General of the Order's fleet (Ubalдино 1970: 559). Marucelli left his standard to the Basilica of Santa Margherita in Cortona in 1752 (Aiotti 1995). This standard is made of red damask and its fimbriation is rich in a design in yellow. On the side of the mast Our Lady is truly artistically depicted wearing a white robe with a blue cape blowing in the wind and a veil surrounded by a halo. Her feet cover the head of the serpent while resting on the half moon. On the fly there is Marucelli's beautiful coats-of-arms surmounted by an open crown, with the flags of the Religion and others at the sides. To eliminate any possible doubt that the ensign was indeed on a galley, there is an anchor with four boughs behind the family coats-of-arms. This is a beautiful standard with its fine embroidery and the image of the Conception shows that the artist was a very good one.

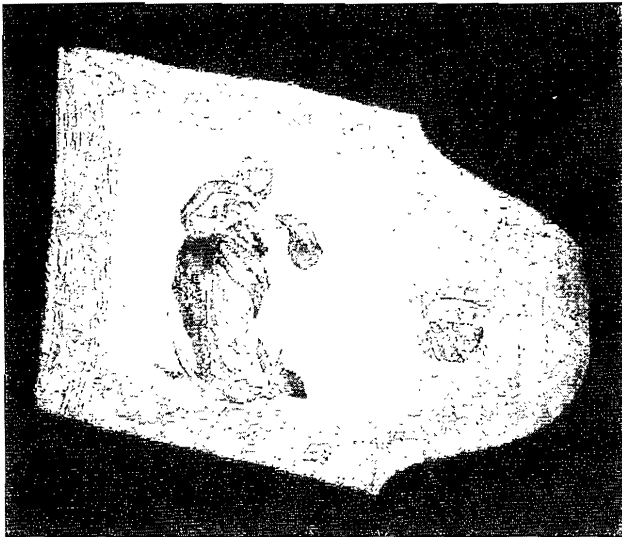


Figure 12. *Lo Stendardo di battaglia* which the knight Marucelli left to the Basilica of Santa Margherita in Cortona in 1752.

There is, however, another iconography of a galley standard depicting the image of the Immaculate Conception which was painted recently in the shape of a banner. This is a case of heritagisation, that is, the re-creation of lost folklore based on past documentation. This particular banner was recreated from the description contained in a manuscript to be found in the archives of the Żabbar Parish Church, which refers to the ensign that the General of the Galleys of the Order of St John, the Capitular Bailiff Fra Antonio Martino Colbert had when he took up his post in 1681 (Dal Pozzo 1715: vol. 2: 486) (Ubaldani 1970: 440). Usually, a General held the post for at least two years. Colbert was the son of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the famous French Minister of Louis XIV, who for a time had acted as private secretary to Cardinal Mazarin (Ubaldini 1970: 440) (Engel 1968: 242, 243, 244). Fra Antonio had the good fortune to acquire significant booty from the Muslims.²⁵ This explains why his standard was recreated for the Museum of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Grace in Żabbar. However, one must clarify that this reproduction is not a faithful replica of Colbert's original but an amateurish one ordered some years ago by the then parish priest, Giuseppe Zarb (1912-1985). The document of the Parish of Żabbar mentions that Colbert's ensign had the images of the Immaculate Conception, St John the Baptist and three coats-of-arms.²⁶

²⁵ NLM, Libr. 16, 467.

²⁶ Parish Archives at Żabbar, *Memorie delle cose appartenenti all S. Parr Chiesa ed alle chiese filiali di Casal Żabbar dall'anno 1679 sino'anno 1780ff.* 1-18 This reference mentions General Colbert's ensign bearing the image of the Immaculate Conception with St John the Baptist and three coats- of- arms. Since in the Parish documents there is a reference to this particular ensign, Fr. Zarb decided to order one according to his own interpretation. Even the dedication on the fly is a fabrication of Fr. Zarb. The painting on the ensign was executed by Raphael Bonnici Cali. It was Zarb's decision, in agreement with Bonnici Cali, to paint this standard blue. This colour does not match any of the old ensigns, which were always red; the colour for danger or war. It is possible that Zarb chose blue because it goes with the iconography of the Immaculate Conception as it became known especially after Our Lady appeared to Bernardette in 1854, when she revealed who she really was; the Immaculate Conception. Bonnici Cali represents the Immaculate Conception in profile from the left side with her hands open, welcoming or defending St John kneeling before her, her feet on the half moon and she has a halo. Our Lady and St John are standing on a cloud. The coats-of-arms depicted are those of Grand Master Gregorio Caraffa (1680-1690), the Religion and an upright serpent (NLM 627, f.34). Beneath the coats-of-arms there is an inscription in Maltese. Any inscription on an ensign of a flagship was completely out of place. Furthermore, no

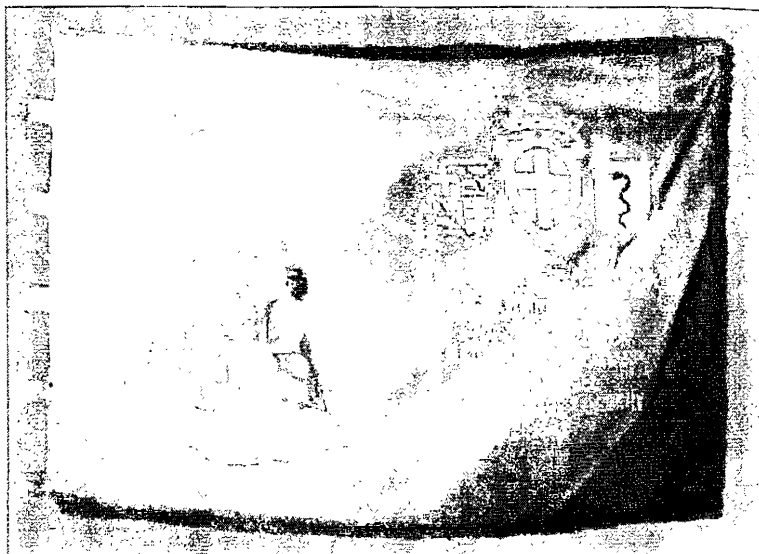


Figure 13. The battle ensign which was created by Zarb in his heritagization attempt to recreate a lost historical artefact.

The authors of this article believe that the old frontal at Bormla, with the image of the Immaculate Conception, needs to be examined in the context of battle standards. It has to be clarified, at this point, that the Bormla frontal was never an ensign on a galley. What can be ascertained is that the fabric of the frontal is very old indeed. From its style it looks as though it was circular and its fly did not break into two pointed ends as banners are made today. This style is reminiscent of the standards we came across in the manuscripts at the Convent of Ta' Ġiezu in Valletta as well as at the National Library of Malta.

standard, whether of the Order or of other nations, ever depicted the Immaculate Conception in profile. Even the colour of her robe is problematic. The robe of Our Lady is completely white and appears ethereal. In the case of the iconography of the Immaculate Conception, we are used to shades of white and blue. St John the Baptist is depicted as a youth on one knee holding, in his right hand, a staff surmounted by a Cross, and in his left hand what appears to be a model of a galley of the Knights. There is no other picture depicting St John the Baptist carrying a model of a galley in his hand.



Several factors in this banner remind one of the battle standard. The Our Lady on this old banner in Bormla follows the iconography of '*lo Stendardo di battaglia*'. The palm of her hands are joined and rest on her chest, her feet rest on the serpent and the crescent. Even the rays surrounding her are a motif that one comes across in battle standards. There is also the similarity in the shape, while the leaves embroidered around her further confirm this similarity. The embroidery is original.

There are features that one does not find on the standards of the galleys carrying the image of the Immaculate Conception. In this banner Our Lady appears encircled by golden rays. However this encirclement is peculiar. The half moon is depicted facing downwards while on ensigns it always faces upwards. In fact, certain details of the banner at Bormla remind one of the painting of Guadalupe, which, although known as the Madonna of Guadalupe, is indeed the Immaculate Conception only that she is considered to be the patron saint of Latin America. According to tradition, Our Lady appeared to a poor indigenous farmer called Juan Diego at the Tepeyac Heights close to the Mexican border on December 12, 1531. This image of Our Lady, visibly having the same attributes of the Immaculate Conception, was used by Mexico in her Battle for Independence and was placed on the *Stendardo di battaglia* in 1810. Thus Our Lady too became the symbol of the struggle against Spain to gain independence (Inglefield 1979: 30, 50). In this Mexican banner Our Lady is clad in pink with a blue cape. Her hands are joined in prayer on her chest, her feet resting on the half moon. Below the moon there is an angel with its wings spread open, holding the robe of Our Lady with both hands. One should observe the rays encircling Our Lady, which are edged in red and are scalloped like those that appear on the old religious banner of Bormla, which today is being used as a frontal. After all, the Our Lady of this old Bormla religious flag imitates the colors of the robes of Guadalupe by using the shade of purple, with the blue mantel removed and a veil over her head. The embroidery work has lost much of its richness.

In the case of Bormla, the color chosen is white instead of the red always used by the galleys. Whoever used white intended sending a clear message of greetings. Even its fabric varies slightly from what was used for these

standards or ensigns. This old Bormla banner is made from silk. This material was used for galley ensigns but it was not the ideal. The best was damask, which is far stronger and can face the elements. Most probably it was envisaged from the start that this banner would be used in processions and therefore white was chosen deliberately, since it is a liturgical color symbolising peace.

One therefore cannot exclude the possibility that this frontal was made as a result of a vow. It could well be that, at some point, the parish church of the Immaculate Conception was presented with a Battle Standard by one of the Order of St John's Galley squadrons following a vow taken at sea and that this is a replica. It is also possible that whoever made it was inspired by the battle standards depicting the image of the Immaculate Conception, bearing in mind that a number of citizens at Bormla were sailors aboard the galleys of the Order.

What we do know is that whoever made the frontal intended it to be identical in size and shape to a *Stendardo di battaglia*. The same embroidery pattern used on this ensign eventually became the common motif on all fraternity banners used throughout the Island. It is also possible that the manufacturer used the Battle Standard of Guadalupe as the model, in which case the one from Bormla could be dated to the first half of the nineteenth century.

This frontal becomes of paramount importance because it is the only historical item that reminds us of the standards which were used on the flagship of the galleys of the Order of the Knights of Malta in *segno di battaglia* as is written in the old manuscripts. It is a pity that not a single battle standard of the Order of St John is to be found in Malta. Throughout the Mediterranean, these ensigns had instilled fear in the enemy and respect from every Christian quarter.



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Joseph Muscat is an international acclaimed maritime historian, with special interest in the navy of the Order, ship technology and ship building during early modern times. He has published many books and written numerous articles on Mediterranean shipping, in particular, those in use by the Knights of Saint John. In 2011, he was awarded an honoris causa degree by the University of Malta for his contributions to Mediterranean Maritime history.

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