

The Arsenal of Palermo – A Short Overview

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The Arsenal of Palermo is located towards the end of Via Cristoforo Colombo and borders the Fincantieri Shipyard and the fabulous villa of Marquis De Gregorio. The vessels of the Royal Navy and private shipbuilders were built in the area behind the building. Today this part of the city is a true open-air museum, whose unique value deserves broader appreciation. In the area around the Arsenal stand Villa De Gregorio, the Florio shipyards, the English Cemetery, Montalbo Palace and many other buildings of great interest.

The Arsenal was built between 1621 and 1630 on the plans of the architect Mariano Smiriglio, a great figure in Italian Mannerism. The two-storey building has a regular form; in the upper part of the façade there is the Bourbon coat of arms bearing an eagle's head and the following inscription: *Philippi IV His pan, utriusque siciliae regis III, auspiciis augustis, navale armamentarium inchoatum, perfectum MDCXXX*. The Arsenal of Palermo was the place where the xebecs and galleys that helped in the fight against the Barbary pirates in the Mediterranean Sea were built. In fact, Sicilian ships played a leading role in many sea battles. Today the only shipyard in Sicily is the one in Palermo and hence it is the only testimony of the Sicilian maritime legacy with regard to the construction of warships and merchant ships. The museum currently is composed of:

- the historical section
- the photographic section
- the maritime traditions section
- the lighthouse section
- the ship model section
- the Barbary pirates section

Another important activity is the dissemination of elements of maritime culture in schools of all types and the organization of events for the promotion of businesses involving the sea. Besides being a site

for the construction of galleys, the arsenal was a point of reference for the fleets that suffered damage while sailing or during an engagement, such as as the naval battle of Palermo 2 June 1676.

It made it possible for the damaged vessels to be repaired in the port of Palermo. The arsenal is the scene of another military engagement. In 1674 the uprising in Messina fomented by the French was vigorously repressed by the Spanish. The Dutch fleet, under the orders of Admiral Michael de Ruiter, came to the aid of the Spanish fleet and owing to great damage it had suffered, the fleet had to set sail for Palermo for repairs in the arsenal where qualified, guild-associated craftsmen worked.

On the evening of May 30, 1676 news arrived that the French fleet was sighted between the islands of Alicudi and Filicudi, while the next day the Dutch fleet was warned that the French fleet, under the orders of the Duke of Vivonne, could be seen already from the town of Termini, where it had also captured two boats with their loads of wheat. Towards five o'clock in the afternoon the French fleet appeared on the horizon of the Gulf of Palermo. Jon d'Haen, the new admiral who took command of the fleet at the death of the great Admiral Michael de Ruiter, ordered the Spanish and Dutch ships being towed by the gallery to assume an arc-shaped formation, stretching from the fort of the dock to the mouth of the Oreto River. This was a fatal mistake. The ships, flanked one next to the other, had little space for manoeuvre and were positioned opposite the Castle which was downwind, thus blocking its artillery.

The bulwarks of the city walls along the Colonna road – namely the Tuono an Vega – had been deprived of their cannons owing to the suspicion of the Spanish viceroys, who preferred to keep them in the storerooms of the Royal Palace after the rebellion of Palermo of 1647 led by Giuseppe D'Alesi. On Monday, 1 June, there was only a skirmish on the vanguard at Aqua dei Corsari (the Corsairs' Waters). It was a way for the French to test the solidity of the Dutch-Spanish fleet and punish the foolishness of its formation. The decisive clash between the two fleets took place the next day at ten o'clock in the morning. The French had larger and more powerful vessels as well as a greater number of galleys, which, thanks to their greater manoeuvrability, were very important owing to the absence of wind. The French launches and feluccas supported the operations of the other vessels.

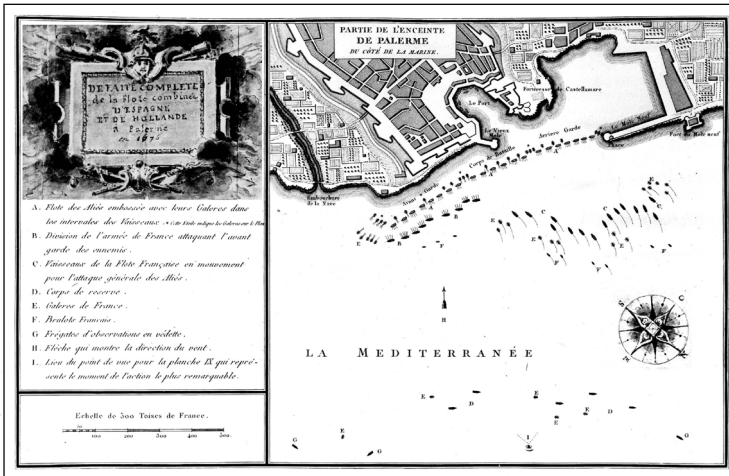
The Dutch-Spanish ships immediately returned fire after the first broadsides of the French fleet, but the wind was blowing towards the city and the smoke produced by the artillery soon engulfed it with a thick cloud blocking its view. At this point the French put into action their strategy. A number of fire-ships – namely barges loaded with pitch and other inflammable materials – camouflaged like warships were sent towards the Dutch-Spanish fleet, thus fooling Don Diego d’Iguarra, the Admiral of the Spanish ships, who moved towards them with the *King of Spain*, a true floating fortress. But, although it sank two of these fire-ships, the ship under his command soon came into contact with the others and caught fire.

Don Diego d’Iguarra was injured twice and was placed half-dead into a feluca to be taken ashore, but the boat, weighed down by some of the panic-stricken crew seeking to escape, sank, thus drowning everyone. In the meantime the other ships, manoeuvring blindly in this inferno of smoke and fire, were severely damaged by the broadsides of the French vessels. The *King of Spain*, “a citadel floating on the sea, magnificent for its size and capacity, superb and rich for its craftsmanship and extraordinary cost, invincible thanks to the thickness and structure of the timbers” became a pyre and exploded, showering debris of all kinds on the city.

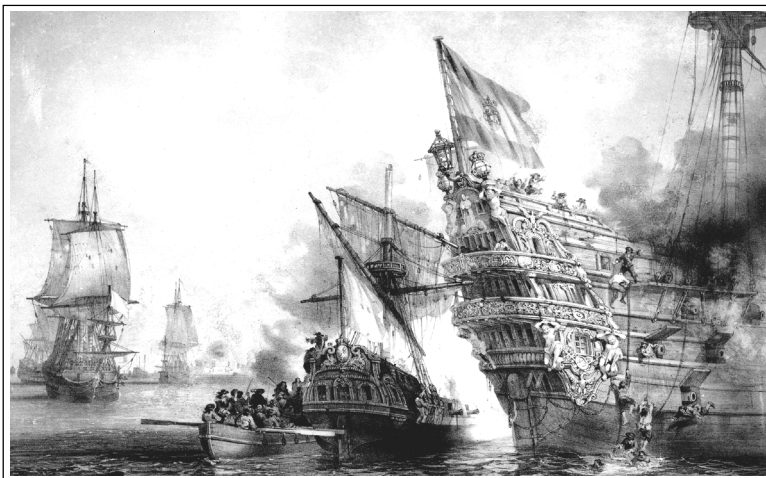
The guilds of Palermo, who had unsuccessfully requested the artillery pieces from the Archbishop who substituted the Viceroy in governing the city while he was absent, broke into the storerooms, carried away the cannons, pulled them along the Cassaro, mounted them on the bulwarks on the sea and fired the first blanks. The French fleet, under the command of Admiral Vivonne, suffered considerable damage and had to retreat without reaping the fruit of its victory. The losses of the Dutch-Spanish fleet were enormous and John Haan, the vice admiral commanding the fleet, died in the battle as well.

The people of Palermo who watched the battle from the top of the city walls ranked themselves with the Spanish not out of any love or loyalty towards them, but only out of their hatred for Messina, whose ambition, fuelled by France, to become the capital of the kingdom, had made it a bitter rival of Palermo.

Today, the Sicilian Underwater Authority and the Arsenal of Palermo with the collaboration of Spanish, French and Dutch public institutions, have a programme to research the vessels.



The Port of Messina.



The naval battle of Palermo 1676.