

THE DECLINE OF THE MALTESE CORSO IN THE XVIIIth CENTURY

A STUDY IN MARITIME HISTORY

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Nothing illustrates better Malta's peculiar position in her relations with powers of whom she boasted she was independent, but to whom she had necessarily to be subservient, than the complicated business of the Corso. This was, until the latter half of the 18th century, the staple industry of the island. But in pursuit of what were acknowledged her legitimate gains, she found that she came up against conflicting interests before which she had to bow. The first was France's commercial ambition, the second, and ultimately more complex and dangerous, was Rome's jealous disapproval of her development as a sovereign and independent state.

France had, unlike Spain, Naples, Tuscany and Sardinia, the other naval powers of the Mediterranean, come to terms with the Sublime Porte and the Barbary Regencies early on and though with the latter periodic disputes led to hostilities, the French traders occupied throughout the Levant a highly favoured and privileged position, while the trade with North Africa increased perceptibly throughout the 18th century. The position of the Order vis à vis Moslem shipping was clear: the galleys went out twice or thrice a year *en course*, with the object of hunting out and destroying Barbary pirates. Maltese *armateurs* equipped their own ships and sent them out to prey on Moslem shipping of all kinds. The ships, cargoes and crew when captured were brought back to Malta, and sold publicly, each member of the crew receiving a share of the prize money. If among the captured ships or goods were found any belonging to a Christian from whom they had previously been looted, then, if the owner were ascertained and they were claimed in either of the prize courts, the captors would take a third of the value for their pains. The galleys were not primarily concerned with gain but with their police duties: the Maltese were. In a poor island, dangerously placed, a prosperous local industry was difficult to establish, but with the settling of the Knights, that industry became the Corso. The Order and its subjects were bound only to observe the strictest neutrality between Christian nations, but could freely plunder the Moslem.

The Maltese were among the finest sailors of the Mediterranean, a fact attested by many sources, and, though estimates are difficult, between roughly 1650 and 1750 about half the able bodied male population was at sea during the greater part of the year (1). Raiding raiders was the concern of the galleys; the

1. In 1760, according to Camillo Spreti (*Description of the Island of Malta*) the population of Malta was given as 73,312. In 1761, during a threat of invasion consequent upon the arrival in Malta that year of a Turkish soltana with a mutineering Christian crew, 15,000 men capable of bearing arms and aged between 15 and 60 were called up. The rest of the male population was then stated as being either exempted or at sea. It would be possible to assess this number at something like 10-12,000 at sea.

Maltese corsairs turned their attentions to civilian shipping in the Levant and the Aegean with such success that the sight of the Maltese flag in the waters of Rhodes and Cyprus and Alexandria was enough to put all shipping back into port until some sort of escort had been summoned by the local Pasha from Smyrna or Sidon.

These Maltese corsairs were ships locally built and often very big carrying as many as 22 guns. Their *armateurs*, included in addition to the Maltese themselves, (both nobles and bourgeois) Knights and foreigners who sent their money to Malta for the purpose. The Grand Master could give one of two flags: the flag of the Religion or his own Magistral flag, and furnished with this the Corsair was at liberty to sail, with express injunctions to refrain from attacking any Christian vessel; this prohibition was mostly strictly enforced, though there were many occasions when it was disregarded. The Grand Master had established in Malta a prize court called the *Magistrato degli Armamenti*, where any cause concerning the Maltese corsairs was heard. The main business of this court was to settle disputes between individual armateurs and their captains and to sort out division of the booty according to contract, but it was also the Tribunal to which an unlawfully plundered merchant might plead his case. Owing to an increasing number of these plaintiffs and the bewilderingly confused evidence which both plunderers and plundered would produce, Perellos in 1697 set up a second tribunal known as the *Consolato del Mare* (2). Here four merchants (3), skilled in matters concerning the sea, were to sit in judgment, two by two, three times a week, to dispense summary justice in cases which concerned more than ten scudi: their job was now to deal with all matters relative to cargoes, wage disputes, breaches of contract and debts. Whereas the old *Magistrato degli Armamenti* had concerned disputes between subjects of the Grand Master, the new *Consolato*, with its procedure copied from institutions of the same name in Barcelona and Messina, was to be an open forum — in the exact sense of that word — for the growing number of foreign merchants based on Malta, whose crews were largely Maltese (4). It was too a prize court to judge all prizes taken by Maltese corsairs and the tribunal for disputes among foreign merchants themselves. Though not explicitly stated in its foundation, the Tribunal was subject to the Grand Master as sovereign prince of Malta, and it was a court of first instance. Appeals were to be heard in the *Castellania*, the law court of the Principality, and justice was to reside in the last instance with the Grand Master. The Grand Master held throughout that this court had been set up by him purely in his capacity as a lay prince and that beyond himself as the sovereign there could be no appeal. This was to be one of the major disputes of the country with Rome, who refused to accept this decision.

Privateering, therefore, in Malta was bound within a form of law, breaches of which were punishable by prison or hard labour aboard the galleys. The rules were simple: any Turkish or Infidel vessel was legitimate gain, and any Christian vessel was not. But, as always, no rule could ever in practice be so

2. Ms. in the Royal Malta Library (Lib. Ms.) No. 392. Articles of the *Consolato del Mare*, dated Sept. 1st, 1697.

3. Raised to six in 1722.

4. Archives of the Order in Malta (A.O.M.) No. 1464. Letter of Grand Master Perellos to Bailiff Sacchetti, Ambassador of the Order in Rome, dated 28 April, 1703.

simple, and as often as not what seemed a perfectly legitimate prize might be contested and condemned in Malta owing to the existence of patents or passports which were designed to put Infidel vessels beyond the power of Maltese corsairs. In the first place, Turkish vessels, with wholly Turkish crews and wholly Turkish cargoes, would purchase French passports from the Consuls in the Levant (5): in the second, Turkish traders would put their ship in the nominal charge of a Greek Christian, who as a Christian, could resist being depredated and could appeal in Malta (6); in the third there were ships armed with more than one passport, the second often granted by the Guardian of Jerusalem, Custodian of the Holy Land, who was entitled to grant pontifical passports; this was often kept back until the ship was actually boarded and then produced (7). It was not difficult to get passes. In 1747 a black market in passes came to light in Malta itself, where a Maltese, Mathew Zammit, sold a blank Jerusalem patent which he had obtained 15 years before, to cover a Turkish cargo going to Smyrna (8). At the same time there was always a confusion of flags. Owing to the existence of Barbary pirates in Turkish waters, Turkish vessels who had Venetian or Imperial passports did not fly Venetian or Imperial flags, but Turkish. Thus they were likely to be attacked by Maltese corsairs as Infidel shipping: and very often these found out their mistake too late after they had done considerable damage to the vessel for which they were to prove responsible. In order to prevent enemy shipping from running up whatever flag they thought would protect them at the sight of a corsair, the practice of the Maltese was to fly a white flag, which would keep the enemy ship guessing until they had boarded her. If in face of a white flag, the suspected merchantman ran up the Turkish flag, she could be attacked: as the wretched Turk would not know whether the Maltese corsair was Maltese or Barbary, he did not dare run up a Christian flag. Every ship which did not fly any flag at its masthead was liable to a purely legal action known as the *visità*: this meant simply that the corsair was permitted to come aboard and inspect the ship's documents. If they were in order and the ship's captain could produce a Venetian or French or Tuscan passport, the Maltese had to leave him alone — if he could produce no protective patent he was a fair prize. There was in all the Mediterranean only one universally respected flag — respected by Barbary pirates was what that really amounted to — and this was the French (9). Hence Corsairs could not gaily attack the Turkish flag wherever they saw it, since it might be covered by a Christian patent, while passes which were doubtful, being either forged or out of date, though

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5. A.O.M. 1562. Perellos to le Maire, Consul in Cairo, 17 Jan., 1717. A.O.M. 1563. Zondadari to Bailiff Demesmes, Ambassador at Paris, 22 June 1720.
 6. A.O.M. 1482. Zondadari to Bailiff Spinola, Ambassador at Rome, 22 Sept. 1721.
 7. A.O.M. 1473. Perellos to Fra Lorenzo di San Lorenzo, Guardian of Jerusalem, 12 August 1712.
 8. A.O.M. 1572. Pinto to Bailiff de Froullay, Ambassador at Paris, 16 May, 1747.
 9. In the course of the 18th century, the Venetians and Neapolitans made separate treaties with the Regencies, but the Dutch, English and Spanish enjoyed no proper diplomatic relations, though the English and Dutch enjoyed consular representation. British and Dutch ships secured immunity from depredation by an annual subvention to the Beys, but it was tantamount to being blackmailed. The Spaniards were at perpetual war with them.

theoretically conveying no immunity, in fact were often the cause of long and tedious litigation.

The Maltese corso, despite its difficulties, was still the most prosperous and worthwhile local industry. In fact until its decline it excluded the establishment in Malta of any regular trade. It was dangerous, since capture by Turkish or Barbary vessels meant years of slavery, and it was hard, but there is no doubt that considerable fortunes were made from it. But unfortunately being a pirate community, like the Barbary Regencies, and having international obligations, unlike the Barbary Regencies, were likely to prove incompatible. In 1647 the first formal restriction was made on the scope of the Corso. In response to representations from the Procurator of the Holy Land, Fra Gaspero Garzia, the Council of the Order put the Palestinian coast out of bounds to all Maltese ships, the nearest they might approach being 10 miles: within the distance they might do no harm to any ship whatsoever (10). In 1697 the distance was raised to 50 miles on further representations from Palestine (11). The ostensive reason was to prevent the Turks from venting their anger at raids on Turkish shipping upon Christian communities in the Holy Land. It was the first breach and it was to grow wider. As French trading interests grew so the French government became increasingly touchy over Maltese activities in the Levant, while the Porte, seeing how close appeared to be the connections between Valletta and Versailles, and looking on Malta with some justice as an appanage of France, was not above putting moral pressure on the French government to restrict Maltese activities in that area. Occasionally Maltese corsairs, suspecting not without reason that French officials in Turkish waters were unlawfully protecting Turkish goods, took action into their own hands and broke the law themselves. In 1707 Vincenzo Portuzet, Captain of *La Madonna del Carmine* attacked the house of the French consul at Scios and abducted 4 Greeks (12). The Greeks were as it happened two well-known traffickers in slaves and the French consul himself had requested previous corsairs to ship them away. But Portuzet was recalled and forced to pay the Greek substantial damages since he was covered by the French flag. This was the first of many attacks on French protected interests and during the period of the War of the Spanish Succession there were repeated complaints coming in to Versailles, so many in fact that the Grand Master was forced to exclaim to his ambassador that the French consuls were too ready to attribute to Maltese corsairs any violent and irregular action in the Levant (13). The French complained so vigorously about the Maltese habit of flying a white flag that despite the Grand Master's protestations that it was a common practice among corsairs to fly not only a white flag but even a false one, an

10. A.O.M. 258. *Liber Conciliorum Status* (LCS) 10 Dec. 1647.

11. A.O.M. 264. LCS 28 April 1699.

12. A.O.M. 1216. Bailiff de Noailles, Ambassador in Paris to Perellos, 5 April, 1707.

13. A.O.M. 1561. Perellos to Bailiff de Vieuville, Ambassador in Paris, 24 Oct., 1712. For example, two corsairs, Michel Bonnet and Ninon, both Frenchmen flying the Maltese flag, were accused of forcing entry into the harbour of Kacamo by the Consul at Rhodes. The offender was a French privateer flying another flag (Monagasque perhaps) called Marion.

order was given to Maltese corsairs to desist (14). French goods taken off a Greek vessel were to be returned forthwith.

In 1714 Pontchartrain said that if these depredations continued he would have to send the royal frigates to round up all Maltese corsairs in the Levant. The galleys of the Grand Signor, ordered to redouble their preventive action against the Maltese, had taken reprisals on innocent French shipping (15). The Grand Master, anxious to justify himself, was forced to accuse the French of failing to make certain whether these corsairs were really Maltese not Livornese or Sicilians — many of whom used Malta as a base but who had their patents from the Duke of Tuscany or Viceroy of Sicily and not from him. In return the French produced a formidable list of complaints from their Levantine consuls and these cast considerable light on the sort of thing that went on in those peculiar times.

In 1717, for example, a Corsair flying the flag of the Religion appeared in the Levant, commanded by one Jaufret dit Galand, a native of La Ciotat near Marseilles. His boat was armed with 22 guns and numbered a crew of nearly two hundred. Most of these were Frenchmen, He it seemed was in collusion with certain merchants in the Echelles who tipped him off about Turkish cargoes. His presence embarrassed the consuls because Turkish *caravaneurs* came to ask them for passes and certificates which should cover their whole cargo instead of the small percentage they had bought in the Echelle proper, destined for France and so due for a patent. By the Grand Master's express prohibition, Jaufret was forbidden these waters anyhow, but in the spring of that year, Jaufret's lieutenant and his men had forcibly entered a monastery of Greek religious near Tripoli in Syria. They had stolen the sacred vessels and beaten the father superior. The wretched community had sent to M. de Monthenault, Vice Consul of Tripoli, to complain (16). On the same trip Jaufret and another pirate from La Ciotat, Picard, flyng the Spanish flag (17) appeared

14. A.O.M. 1561. Perellos to Pontchartrain, French Foreign Secretary and to Louis XIV, 26 Nov, 1712. In a letter to de Noailles, on 7 Oct., 1711, Perellos had complained of a Turkish ship that took a Maltese prize off Calabria while flying the English flag; similarly, some four or five years previously, a Turkish vessel flying the French flag had landed at a point in Calabria and taken off 100 slaves. The fault was not entirely on the Maltese side, though Pontchartrain in a letter to the Chevalier de Tincourt, French Minister in Malta dated 8 March, 1713 (A.O.M. 1217) accuses a Maltese corsair of taking three Tripolitians while flying the French flag.
15. A.O.M. 1562. Perellos to de Vieuville 16 May, 1714 (A.O.M. 1217). Pontchartrain to de Vieuville, 10 Jan., 1714. The order to round up all Maltese corsairs was never given.
16. A.O.M. 1218. Copy of a letter from Poulard, Consul at Sidon to French *Conseil de Marine*, 3 April, 1717, contained in letter from Demesmes in Paris to Perellos. This evidence is corroborated in AOM 58 in a letter from Mothenault to the same council, enclosed in a pro-memoria with letter from Demesmes to Perellos, dated 16 Sept., 1719. "Ces corsaires leur (the religious) ont causés les années précédentes de grandes avanies de la part des Turcs; ces brigandages compromettent beaucoup la nation des Echelles et les religieux de Terre Sainte; ils altirent la hayne générale des Turcs et des Chretiens du pays et causent une préjudice irreparable a la religion dont ces pirates sont le scandale."
17. AOM 58. Monthenault in his letter 27 March, 1717, says he flew the flag of the Religion. Pelleran, Consul at Aleppo, forwarding this complaint, attests that it was the Spanish flag Picard was flying in a letter to the *Conseil de Marine* dated 7 April, 1717.

off Alexandretta in the same month, March, and took a Turkish caïque. The outraged Turks, who owned the ship, appealed to the *Cadi* of the *Douane* to arrest the French vice-consul and two fathers of Latin religious communities and hold them until the French, whose countrymen composed the greater part of Jaufret's crew, should reimburse them. The arrests were accordingly made, and the expense incurred in bringing about their release put the French community to an outlay of 73 piastres. The indignant consul was astonished at the impunity with which the corsairs failed to follow their instructions (18).

In the same year two other corsairs, a Greek living in Malta called Manette and another whose nationality is in doubt called Francisco, appeared in the roads of Damietta. Warned by two Marsilian merchants that they should not be there and specifically bound on their oath not to attack the Turkish wherries which were being used to load the French merchantment, they promptly captured a pair of them, threw the French flag overboard and made the crew prisoner. The consul was only able to save himself from arrest by promising the Pasha that he would write to Malta for redress. The effect of his action however seemed to have been to invite more corsairs into the Levant than ever (19). Grand Master Perellos replied that Damietta had never been considered one of the Echelles, since there was no consul there, and that the memoire presented by the Chevalier de Laval, French minister in Malta, was not corroborated by evidence at his disposal. The case was however passed to the *Magistrato degli Armamenti*, being the Tribunal for all cases concerning the flag of the Order, and the stolen bales of cloth were temporarily sequestered (20).

The consul at Sidon however averred that the Pasha was going to hold the French responsible, since the depredations had been made under the French flag. Reprisals on Maltese vessels by armed French merchantmen could only be expected (21). The French ambassador at Constantinople, M. de Bonnac, was convinced that two frigates should be armed by the Regent Orleans to give chase to these corsairs along the entire coast of the Ottoman Empire (22). This was a sweeping suggestion and, in effect, in those days was asking too much: but Orleans did make an unveiled threat of naval action if the attacks

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18. *Loc. cit.* "Il est facheux que les ordres de M le Régent envoyés à M le Resident de France à Malte pour faire cesser les incursions de ces corsaires n'ayent pas encore eu leur effet."
 19. AOM 58. Poulard, Consul at Sidon, to *Conseil de Marine*, 23 March, 1717. "Il paroît qu'on fait si peu de cas à Malte des representations qu'on y fait de la part du roi sur ces sortes de sujets qu'il est à craindre que, comme les corsaires maltois se sont multipliés plus que jamais, et prennent tous les français sans aucun regard, les Turcs n'en viennent aux dernières extremités contre la nation qu'ils jugent en devoir répondre."
 20. AOM 1562. Perellos to Demesmes, 30 Sept., 1717.
 21. AOM 58. Poulard in a letter undated in 1717: "M de Laval (French minister in Malta) avoit prevenu que les juges de Malte auraient peu d'égard à cette parole donnée par les corsaires qu'etaient desavouées en cela par leurs armateurs."
 22. AOM 58. Bonnac to *Conseil de Marine*, 23 March 1717. "Puisqu'on ne voit aucun effet des plaintes que l'on fait contre ces troubles à Messieurs de la Religion et que les marchands français de la plupart de ces Echelles ne peuvent plus supporter les avanies que ces désordres font retomber sur eux."

within the prohibited area continued. The Grand Master, seriously perturbed, set up a commission and begged the Regent not to act before the Order was in possession of all the facts from which she could proceed to judgment and action (23).

One thing was certain: the crew of Jaufret's ship was made up largely of Frenchmen and the gentlemen of the Council of Marine were in no doubt as to the type of Frenchmen — "the greater part of these crews are made up of French good-for-nothings (vagabonds sans foi et sans loi), who on the pretext of making war on the enemies of the Religion, only dream of pillaging, thieving, and enriching themselves by any means no matter how shabby" (24). M. Poulard at Sidon had a further complaint: the pillaged Greeks and Turks were confident that since the offending crews were French they must be in collusion with the French traders in the Echelles and that if they did not receive adequate compensation they would have to take the matter into their own hands 25).

In 1718 a French merchant wrote direct to Orleans making a personal complaint and hoping that the protection of His Royal Highness would help his claims in Malta. A Maltese corsair, Anastasi, had boarded his vessel off Sardinia and wanted to take off 44 Turkish passengers. In the scuffle that followed, one or two had been killed and many wounded; the others had been treated with the greatest indignity. Before leaving the ship, the corsairs had lifted a cargo of green grapes and other valuable commodities. The merchant had come to Malta and addressed himself to Laval and to M. Garcin the French consul there but he was not hopeful of a favourable result to his visit (26). Another Corsair, Rissy, flying the flag of Malta, together with another Frenchman, Cigly, flying the flag of Spain, lifted a cargo of Jerusalem yarn bound for a merchant at Rome (27). On February 10th, 1719, a French pink was anchored off Tripoli when two corsair sloops sailed in by night and led off two Turkish caiques anchored in the same waters. The next morning the whole town was in an uproar convinced that the pink was the offender, and when her captain had persuaded the local Pasha of his innocence, they wanted to use his ship to chase the corsairs. The night of the 14th, another valuable cargo was taken from a caique, and the pink having departed the local Turks were quite convinced that the Frenchman had been prevaricating. They broke into the French consulate, whence the consul and his staff but not his wife managed to escape by jumping out of the windows; in the garden however they were caught, pummelled and dragged off to the seraglio of the Pasha. Inside the house, the marauders smashed and stole what they could but did

23. AOM 1562. Perellos to Demesmes, 7 Aug., 1718.

24. AOM 1216. Memoire from *MM du Conseil de Marine* to the Bailiff Demesmes and despatched to Perellos, dated 23 June, 1717.

25. AOM 58. Poulard to *Conseil de Marine* 31 March, 1717. "Les rëligieux qui crient misëricorde pretendent que nous entendons avec les corsaires dont les équipages sont quasi tous français; les principaux Grecs de Tripoli ëcrivent ici à M l'Archevesque de Tyr et Sydon et à leurs amis qu'il se feront justice par leurs mains, si nous ne la leur faisons pas rendre."

26. AOM 58. Le patron Audibert à Malte to SAR le Duc d'Orleans, 30 March, 1718.

27. AOM 58. Poulard to *Conseil de Marine*, 6 Oct., 1718.

no further harm to the Consul's wife than to despoil her of her jewelry. The damage amounted to 21,156 piastres and the offending corsairs were Maltese and Livornese (28). The Maltese was the egregious Francisco who had attacked the Turkish wherries in 1717 off Damietta. The goods he had taken, he sold quite unabashed at Haifa (29). In May, the second corsair, Captain Silvestro of Livorno, stopped a French tartan, from whom he took the big sail and all the ship's armaments. He had two passports, one Spanish and one Maltese, and this gave rise to the grave suspicion that the Maltese corsairs were working hand in glove with the Spaniards, then at war with France (30). The Bailiff Demesmes, the Order's Ambassador in Paris, took this very seriously. The French government, he wrote, was quite convinced that intrigue was the sole occupation of Malta, and that the suspicion of an understanding with Spain, could lead to the confiscation of all the Order's goods in France and the despatch of the English fleets (then in alliance with France) *pour vanger le Roi et écraser Malte* (31). M. de Bourbon, President of the Council of Marine, considered the Order's failure to insist on an indemnity for the 2 caiques taken off Damietta as a denial of justice and made vague threats of violent reprisals (32). In December, by order of Perellos, now a failing old man seriously weakened by illness and old age, all corsairs in the Levant were ordered to return within three months. The crisis passed but the result of it was that the Turks guessed that it was because they put pressure on the French trading interests in the Levant that the Maltese corsairs ceased to appear there. The old prohibition remained: no Corsair was allowed to enter the 50 mile forbidden limit off the Holy Land, but later on the Grand Master in granting patents for Maltese corsairs wrote into their orders direct instructions that they were not to sail into Levantine waters. The decision came hard to the Grand Master. "If our squadrons," wrote Manuel de Vilhena in 1733, "cannot put in an appearance and make prizes in all the waters of the Levant, we shall be just like ships of other nations. We do not recognise prohibitions of this kind: they would be directly to the destruction of our Order, whose institution consists in part in an open war against the Turks in whatever place they may be found" (33). In 1720 Marc'Antonio Zondadari had said: "If the Maltese corso stopped in the Levant, the French flag would not be respected as it is, and Greeks would take up the commerce of those waters and wrest it from the French" (34). Unfortunately the French continued to complain of depredations in the Levant; in February 1724 an old offender Jaufret de Galand, reappeared in his old haunts and took 3 Turkish caiques off Alexandretta: the mob immediately rioted, seized and garotted the Father President of the Holy Land, while the French consul and other merchants had to take refuge on board French vessels anchored in the roads (25). Any piracy in the Levant was laid

28. AOM 58. Monthenault to *Conseil de Marine* 28 Feb., 1719.

29. Ibid. Poulard to *Conseil de Marine*, 11 Mar., 1719.

30. Ibid. Wiet, Consul in Cyprus, to *Conseil de Marine*, 30 May, 1719.

31. Ibid. Demesmes to Perellos, 16 Sept. 1719.

32. Ibid. *MM du Conseil de Marine* to Demesmes, 27 Aug., 1719.

33. AOM 1566. GM Vilhena to Demesmes, 22 Feb. 1733.

34. AOM 1563. GM Zondadari to Demesmes, 22 June, 1720.

35. AOM 1219. Maurepas to Demesmes, forwarded to Vilhena, 27 April, 1724.

at the Maltese door, and since the flag of the Grand Master, under which so many Frenchmen had enrolled in the palmy days, seemed no longer to provide an adequate cover for privateering at all times and seasons against the Turks, they began to take the flags of other nations who were less inhibited. In 1730, the Chevalier Borras, a Knight of the Tongue of Castille, appeared as a private armateur in the Levant, flying the Tuscan flag under which he took two prizes (36). As far as the French were concerned that was just Maltese piracy under another flag; the Grand Master found himself in an embarrassing position. In the past no foreign corsair had been forbidden to arm or take in crew in Malta, as long as he was bound on cruises against the Turks or Moors. Now the French government was demanding that he should firmly disallow this practice and see that all Maltese took flags which would bring them under his control. In effect the Tuscans were the most frequent in their requests for permission to arm in Malta: owing to trade interests in Livorno which the Grand Master did not wish to prejudice, he was unable to promise that no Tuscan should arm in Malta in the future (37). Maurepas, Minister of Marine at that time, said that he would have to send two frigates to round up all Malta based corsairs flying the Tuscan flag. He would not accept the Grand Master's reasons that anyone flying the Tuscan flag was immune from his jurisdiction. If the captain and crew were his subjects then he had a sovereign's control over them and could take punitive action against them. The maritime laws stated that no ship should sail from home parts with a crew of that country under another sovereign's flag (38). Borras, seeing which way the wind was blowing, promptly hoisted the flag of an even more important country, Spain, and all the Grand Master could do to avoid embarrassment with the court of Madrid, was to request Borras on his obedience as a Knight of Malta to disarm (39). The French had their way: the Grand Master was forced to order his subject not to sail under foreign flags. The result was that the whole Eastern Mediterranean was now barred to Maltese corsairs since every time a prize was taken, the Turks immediately complained, often with violence, to the appropriate French consul. The dependence of Malta on the good will of France forced the Grand Master to do as the government requested. By the 1740's there was no future for Maltese piracy in the east, and foreign armateurs were no longer interested in Malta as a recruiting round for corsairs. When Captain Grillo, a Maltese based Venetian, went East in contravention of his patent, the Grand Master hastened to declare him a free pirate for whom he could accept no responsibility (40): in 1756, the Grand Master assured the

36. AOM 1220. Maurepas to Vilhena, 2 May, 1730.

37. In 1729 five out of the seven corsairs in Malta were flying the Tuscan flag. See Lib. MS 429 *Bandi e Prammatiche* for this year where all the licenses to sail are recorded.

38. AOM 1221. Maurepas to Vilhena, 2 Nov. 1732. This law was not usually respected, especially by the major maritime powers. British privateers in 1762 when Great Britain retired from the Seven Years War applied for Prussian flags from the Consul in Naples. See author's article "A British Consul in Malta": *Mariner's Mirror*, November 1957.

39. AOM 1566 Vilhena to Demesmes, 2 Jan., 1733.

40. AOM 1572 Pinto to Bailiff de Froullay, 16 May, 1747.

Pope that there were no Corsairs in the Levant and had been none for ten years (41). The most fruitful and rewarding field for Maltese exploits had been cut off completely, and as a result the Corso for 20 years was moribund.

II

The other lethal factor operating against the Corso, and this was to make recovery from French displeasure quite impossible, was support in the Roman Curia for Schismatic Greeks. The claims of Greek traders that they had been depredated by Maltese armateurs first became insistent in 1702. As Christians, even though schismatic, their ships were respected and their goods normally left untouched; in fact anticipating trouble the Grand Master usually forbade corsairs to enter the Aegean. What complaints there had been before had been settled by a private rescript issued by the Grand Master. But in 1702 the Inquisitor, always happy to bedevil the Grand Master's affairs, decided to make himself the champion of unjustly raided Greeks and demanded a general recall of all Maltese ships in the Levant (1). The Grand Master hotly denied that there was any cause for the Inquisitor to interfere and laid it down with some justification to a desire on the part of that dignitary to be meddling (2). The Inquisitor then objected to the establishment of the new *Consolato del Mare*. The old tribunal, *degli Armamenti*, was a court set up by the Grand Master in his capacity at the Head of a Religious Order: appeals accordingly were always possible from Malta to Rome; this new court was a prerogative court of the lay prince of Malta and no appeal could therefore be made beyond the Grand Master himself (3). In 1705 for example the case of a Greek, pending against Giuseppe Preziosi, Chevalier of St. Mark, in the *Magistrato*, was taken to Rome by order of the Pope (4). That there were genuine complaints of unlicensed piracy in the Levant is shown by the action taken against one Vittorio Corbelli, who was accused by the Bishop of Nicosia of depredating his religious. The captain was tried and condemned in the criminal court of the

41. AOM 1573. Pinto to Dutch Ambassador in Constantinople, 3 Sept., 1757, and to the Pope, 30 Sept., 1757.

42. The records (Lib. Ms. 429 *Bandi e Prammatiche*, passim) show that the last corsairs to be licensed for the Levant sailed in 1742. Between 1722 and 1743, the Corso had been languishing visibly. In 1723 and 1729 there had been 7 corsairs at sea, but after that never more than 3, except in 1739, when there had been 5, until 1744. In that year there had been a slight pick-up, due, no doubt, to the War of Austrian Succession, and for three years after there were 4-5 at sea, but it was not until 1767-8 that the number rose again beyond three, to 9 and 6 respectively.

II.

1. AOM 1463. Perellos to Bailiff Sacchetti, Ambassador in Rome, 11 Nov., 1702.
2. AOM 1464. Perellos to Sacchetti, 28 April, 1703. "Speriamo che quando Sua Beatitudine havra riconosciuto le giustificazioni e scritture da Voi presentateLe in prova che questo nostro Consolato di Mare non sia stato altrimenti istituto per defatigare i Greci, e levar loro l'appello a cotesta corte, sarà restata persuasa, che le doglianze, benchè portate a nome dei Greci, sono state inventioni ed artificii soliti dell'Inquisitore per inquietarci."
3. AOM 1465. Perellos to Sacchetti, 20 Feb., 1704.
4. AOM 1466. Perellos to Pope Clement XI, 5 May 1705.

Castellania and his armament in the *Magistrato* (5). In 1706 the Inquisitor proceeded to appoint a Canon Muscat to receive Greek cases against corsairs (6). The practice soon became to appeal straight from any decision adverse to the plaintiff to Rome, where the Grand Master ruefully admitted, "— in all disputable cases we always come off worst, and in cases where there is no doubt, we never see the end" (7).

Then in 1713 a Greek appealed *per saltum* from the *Magistrato degli Armamenti* to the Holy See, ignoring the intermediate stage of the Tribunal of the *Audienza*, the Grand Master's court of second instance (8). After this the volume of cases increased and in 1716 the Chevalier Morosini went to Rome to see if some sort of agreement could be reached which would make all Greek vessels good prizes that were taken while provisioning the Turkish fleet, or serving it in any way. Already the large number of lawsuits which were being settled against the Maltese was seriously discouraging the Corso (9). Morosini was unsuccessful, and as the Grand Master was not prepared to admit a special tribunal in Malta which would include the Inquisitor and so weaken the jurisdiction of the *Audienza*, the matter reached a stalemate. The Grand Master was prepared to enlarge the court by the addition of further judges but what he was really seeking was a guarantee that all cases which concerned depredations made under the Magistral flag — his own personal standard — should be decided in Malta and nowhere else. But since neither the Greeks nor the Inquisitor acknowledged any difference between his flag and that of the Religion, in order not to prejudice his authority in a matter where it might successfully be challenged, he decided to stop granting it. Henceforth all depredations would be made under the flag of the Religion, and as such could be challenged in the last instance in Rome (10). He did this, well knowing that the *Armateurs* would beg him to grant them his personal flag, and when they did, he suggested to Rome that unless some satisfactory solution was reached his *armateurs* would seek the Venetian flag, less amenable to Papal discipline (11). In 1719 a Maronite, Abraham Massard, and his confederates, complained to the French consul at Aleppo that Maltese corsairs had caused them losses in 1718 amounting to 60,000 piastres, and that they had been unable to get any satisfaction from Malta. As Roman Catholics, furnished with French

5. AOM 1467. Perellos to Sacchetti, 24 May, 1706.

6. *Ibid.* Loc. cit.

7. AOM 1468. Perellos to Sacchetti, 28 April, 1707.

8. AOM 1474. Perellos to Sacchetti, 9 Aug., 1713.

9. AOM 1477. Perellos to Sacchetti, 11 March, 1716. "Le persone che sono solite interessarsi in questi armamenti ci hanno fatto assicurare che quando Cav. Morosini ottenga di Nostro Signore la dichiarazione che qualunque lite sopra prese fatte, o da farsi, durante la presente guerra a nome di Greci, si terminerà in questi tribunali, senza ammettersi appello a codesti, in brevissimo tempo metterano in piede altrettanti bastimenti armati e anche di forza maggiore senza ricercare altro aiuto, mentre ad essi non manca la voglia di corseggiare, ma temono le liti, che per lo piu hanno sperimentato costi contrarie, essendo stati detti Greci, a lor modo d'intendere, troppo favoriti."

10. *Ibid.* Loc. cit.

11. AOM 1477. Perellos to Sacchetti, 9 July, 1716.

patents, they claimed that they had been unjustly robbed (12). In Massard's case, however, the depredations had been made under the Magistral flag and the case was being heard in the *Consolato del Mare*: it was a slow process and he wanted it transferred to the *Magistrato* whence, on the precedent of one Demetrius Frangullo who had a case running there concurrently, he could appeal straight to Rome.

Undoubtedly the Greek appeals of unlawful depredation were basically justified, but there began to be another side to it. Seeing how successfully these appeals were hamstringing the Maltese corso, Turks began to put all their cargoes under Greek names (13): Massard himself was accused of shipping Turkish goods under his passport. To Rome, Zondadari made an eloquent appeal for the necessity of a healthy Maltese privateering fleet: it was only by a continual harrowing of Turkish shipping that the Christians were able to boast the greatest maritime skill in the Mediterranean. If there were no Corso, the Turks would be free to practice seamanship and to wrest the control of the inner seas from the Christians (14). This was a subtle appeal to the aged Pope Clement XI who had posed earlier in his pontificate as the last of the Crusaders and proposed in 1714 a Holy Alliance against the Turk. Furthermore, went on Zondadari, the Greeks were untrustworthy; they claimed goods which were not theirs and came to Malta to spy out the land, finding what prize cargoes were being brought in and then sending information to their confederates who would then proceed to claim them (15). Schismatic Greeks had also gone to Rome posing as Roman Catholics. The time had come for a definite pronouncement to be made that the ships and goods of Schismatic Greeks were lawful prizes, as had been decided by Tuscany, for whom a vessel, in order to be immune, had to have her captain and half her crew Roman Catholics (16). But Rome would make no such concession, and in 1722 the new Grand Master, Manoel de Vilhena, wrote to his ambassador in Rome: "not being in any way able to support so many families reduced to the most deplorable poverty by the far too indulgent favour shown to the Greeks, we shall be forced with great displeasure to introduce open commerce with the common enemy and so to break the strictest rule of our statute; this would be in our estimation the worst of our misfortunes and a constant source of bitterness to us" (17). The Greeks looked like achieving what the whole force of the Ottoman Empire had failed to do; they were destroying the Maltese corso (18). In 1724 there were 100 cases before the Segnatura at Rome, many of which, but how many it is impossible to tell, concerned Greek claims: there were only 7 corsairs at sea — a sad reduction from the 20 to 30, common in happier times (19). In Rome, the Grand Master lamented, the Greeks had contrived to

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12. AOM 58. *Memoire de quelques marchands maronites aux MM le Conseil de Marine*, undated, 1719.
 13. AOM 1480. Perellos to Sacchetti, 19 July, 23 Sept., 1719.
 14. AOM 1481. Zondadari to Sacchetti, 31 Dec., 1720.
 15. AOM 1482. Zondadari to Bailiff Spinola, Ambassador, in Rome, 22 Sept., 1721.
 16. *Ibid.* Loc. cit. and letter dated 1 Sept. 1722. (AOM 1484).
 17. AOM 1484. Zondadari to Spinola, 15 Sept., 1722.
 18. AOM 267. LCS. Spinola to Zondadari, 22 Sept., 1722.
 19. AOM 1486. GM Vilhena to Bailiff von Schade, Ambassador in Rome, 16 Oct., 1724.

convince the Pope that the *armateurs* of Malta were merely public robbers.

But in fact, he pointed out, the Greeks were worse: until a method could be found of ensuring that false claims, made on false oaths, should not be heard in the Pontifical Rote, the growing practice of the Turks using Greek merchants for cover would never be halted (20). Vilhena, in 1726, gave no more flags of the Religion to his corsairs in a forlorn attempt to keep all future cases in the lay courts of the island (21). And to reinforce his argument he cited a Latin priest, missionary in Constantinople and Patras, who had reported hearing a Greek boast at Patmos that he had made 100% profit on claims against Maltese corsairs settled in Rome (22). By 1728 the entire corso in the Levant had been suspended, owing to the risk of unsuccessful litigation with Greeks (23): in 1729 of 7 corsairs operating from Malta five were Tuscans; for reasons similar to those he had given France, the Grand Master was unable to prevent them from raiding Greeks, about whom the Tuscan courts had made very different rules (24). Rome in 1730 was prepared to adjust all cases outstanding by returning them to the *Consolato*, but the *Segnatura* formally stated that it did not recognise the independence of that tribunal from appeals to Rome (25). In fact His Holiness would only consider future armaments under the flag of the Religion, so that appeals to Rome might act as a deterrent against raids on Christian ships (26).

✓ By 1733 the Grand Master had come to heel. He decreed that no vessel should be armed under any but the flag of the Religion and he required every foreign corsair based on Malta to be subject to the *Magistrato degli Armamenti*. This was a virtual death blow to the *Consolato*: henceforth no armament would be free from the threat of Roman intervention, and the hazards of Corso in the Levant where Greeks might start litigation that could continue for long years and result in heavy financial loss, proved a great deterrent to would-be

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20. AOM 1334. Vilhena to Pope Benedict XIV, 15 Nov., 1724.
 21. AOM 1488. Vilhena to Schade, 8 Sept., 1726.
 22. AOM 1336. Relation of Giov. Agostino di Lunghignano, sent to Vilhena by Schade, 16 June, 1727.
 23. AOM 1490. Vilhena to Konigsegg, Prior of Hungary, 26 Aug., 1728.
 24. AOM 1489. Vilhena to Cardinal Lercari, Secretary of State, 6 Oct., 1727. The Tuscan rules, according to a memoire presented to the Sacred Congregation by the Bailiff de Romieu, the Order's Auditor in Rome, in March, 1726. (see AOM 1335, letters from Schade for that month passim) were that any prize taken flying the Turkish flag or having a Turkish captain was lawful, even if the crew were, or the cargo belonged to, Greeks and Maronites. A ship to be immune had to be captained by a Roman Catholic and have half the crew Roman Catholic too. None of these Tuscan corsairs operating from Malta was Maltese: they were Livornese, Spanish and Greek. They used Malta as a base and employed largely Maltese crews. They were permitted to enrol crew and to sell their goods openly on the Marina. See AOM 1492. Vilhena to Schade, 21 Jan., 8 Sept., 1732.
 25. AOM 1491. Vilhena to Schade, 25 Dec., 1730.
 26. AOM 1342. Schade to Vilhena, 8 Dec., 1731.

armateurs (27). Finally, too late, an accommodation was made: future cases of depredation were to be tried in a special tribunal made up of Knights Grand Cross and seculars, half of whom would be chosen by the plaintiff, the other half by the defendant, while the Inquisitor had the power to nominate a further member. In the event of a denial of justice, there could be an appeal to Rome (28).

The Corso was never the same again. In 1740 there were 7 ships sailing with the flag of the Religion in the Levant, but the scale of their activities was greatly restricted. When in 1750 the King of Sicily ordered Neapolitan corsairs not to attack Greek ships, even though they were subjects of the Grand Signor, Pinto's order to the Maltese to refrain too was supererogatory (29). The Greeks had long ago won their case and were left severely alone. It is always difficult, in the absence of documents, to assess the real scale of the Maltese privateering. But reading between the lines of this continual correspondence one gains the impression that the days of comparatively free buccaneering in Turkish waters were over. Pinto in 1765, writing to his minister in Vienna, wrote significantly: "The Turks now trading under any flag but their own, our corso is reduced to attacking Barbary pirates, whose ships are, as you know, of no value; such little profit is made from them that it is insufficient for the maintenance of the wounded sailors, for the pensions to the widows or for bonuses to those that make prizes — all necessary expenses if my subjects, who are better sailors than those of any other nations, are going to stay in the service of the Religion" (30).

The fact that every time a corsair landed his men on a Greek island and let them run loose at the expense, very often, of a local Greek community (31), the blame was laid on the Maltese suggests that they had acquired up to the

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27. In June 1733 a Tuscan vessel refused to register her prize in the *Magistrato*, and since she had been built and armed in Malta, the Inquisitor, as Papal agent, insisted that she should. The Grand Master refused to intervene, and when application for registration in the *Consolato* was refused the ship moved on elsewhere. AOM 1943, Vilhena to Schade, 1 June, 1733. The Cardinal Secretary of State, in a letter dated 8 Sept., 1732 (AOM 1342), decreed that all cases concerning ships armed in Malta, and having local '*porzionarii*' or share-holders, should be heard in the *Magistrato*. If any ship refused to recognise this tribunal the Maltese could no longer be share-holders. Furthermore, no Maltese could be a *porzionario* in a ship flying any but the flag of the Religion. However the Tuscans refused to recognise any such ruling and in 1733, a Tuscan ship took off some 20 *vagabondi* as crew. The Grand Master could not risk offending the Grand Duke.
28. AOM 1346. Schade to Vilhena, 18 Sept., 1736. The Congregation of Knights Grand Cross and Ecclesiastical Seculars should be 4 or 8 in number without the Inquisitor's nominee. They should only sit if the sentences in the *Magistrato* and *Audienza* conflicted, and costs should only be computed from the date the case began in the courts. For an appeal the cause had to concern goods of more than 300 scudi in value, and it must be supported by the *Segnatura di Grazia e di Giustizia* by 2 Cardinals Deacon. This removed the power of the Papal Auditor to introduce cases on his own initiative. (AOM 1348. Schade to GM Despuig, 4 March, 1738.)
29. AOM 1508. Pinto to Marulli, Minister at Naples, 30 Nov., 1750.
30. AOM 1521. Pinto to Hamilton, 26 April, 1765.
31. There were complaints of this nature from Patmos and Hydra. In 1724 a priest from Patmos arrived in Malta to press the claims of some Greek merchants in that Island. Complaints were repeated in 1732 when the Grand Master denied that the offender was Maltese. AOM 1485 Vilhena to Schade, 7 Aug., 1724 and AOM 1492 Vilhena to Schade again, 27 Sept., 1732.

end of the 17th century a reputation in the Eastern Mediterranean that rendered such actions quite in character; but in fact towards the end of the first quarter of the new century, the Maltese corsair had become, perforce, a reformed character. The offenders were now Corsicans, Tuscans and Monagasques. The combined complaints of French traders and Greek merchants had achieved this unwilling transformation. They had one other important effect too; the decline of the staple industry meant that a substitute had to be found. It was found in trade: after 1740 and the accession of Pinto, there was a rapid growth in the number of trading concerns in Malta and in the number of Maltese commercial vessels. The ships that had once gone out to raid were now sailing out to trade. It was a change altogether for the better and more in tune with the spirit of the age. Privateering continued, of course, right up to the last years of the Order and there were further disputes, particularly with Venice, but the instances were isolated (32). The rulers of Malta were not free agents; their responsibilities to the various powers from whom the Order drew its members made any independent action impossible. If the Courts of Versailles and Rome were adamant, the Order had to give way. "Voilà," wrote the Bailiff Demesmes in 1730, "voilà le malheur des petits princes d'être mangés par les grands!" (33). It is an aphorism of history the no less bitter for being true (34).

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32. Venice had complained as early as 1714 that Maltese privateers in the Adriatic were disrupting the delicate relations existing between the Republic and the Porte. Perellos had to put the Adriatic out of bounds. AOM 1475, Perellos to Ricci, Receiver in Venice, 18 Sept., 1714. The Venetians watched Maltese activities very jealously. In 1740 they complained that a Maltese corsair had attacked a Turkish ship with a Venetian pass. Retribution was so slow that the Senate ordered a sequestration on the goods of the Order in the Republic and attacks on Maltese shipping. The matter was settled amicably in the end. AOM 1569. Pinto to Froullay, French Ambassador in Venice, 9 April, 1742, to Bailiff de Froullay, Ambassador in Paris, 26 April, 1742. AOM 270 LCS 12 May 1747. Accommodation was secured by the intervention of Rome. The two Froullays were brothers.
33. AOM 1220. Demesmes to Vilhena, 10 Oct., 1730.
34. In 1767 there were 9 corsairs at sea in Barbary waters, and in the next year 6. The number dwindled in the following year to 4 and then for 6 years no corsairs went to sea at all. From 1775-81 the number oscillated between 4-5 a year, reaching 6 in 1781. In that year De Rohan began once again to issue the Grand Master's flag—fifty years having passed since the practice had desisted after the last case had been heard in Rome on the matter. A few corsairs were at sea in the latter years of the Order. In 1795 the last corsair went to sea and foolishly attacked a Turkish ship with a Russian pass. The result of this was to cause Catherine the Great to break off the delicate pourparlers she was having with Giulio Litta on the Order's possessions in Poland. The 1767-8 recrudescence of the Corso has no ascertainable reason, but in that year the largest number of corsairs were at sea for the whole century. See Lib. Ms. 429. *Bandi e Prammatiche* for licenses to sail.