

MEDIAEVALIA

VENETIANS AT MEDIEVAL MALTA

by

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Maltese history, like that of Venice, is especially one of ships and traders. A barren island in the Central Mediterranean, Malta was sought after as a base but was always dependent for its supplies and defence on a foreign maritime power. After its reconquest from the Muslims in the eleventh century its fortunes reflected those of Sicily (1). From that time onwards Christian shipping must have called at Malta and at nearby Gozo which lay close both to the European routes by way of Sicily to North Africa (2), and to those of the Western traders, Genoese, Pisans, Catalans and others, to the spicemarkets of the Levant. For the Genoese in particular Malta was an important base, and during much of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries they were more firmly established there than the island's overlords, the rulers of Sicily (3). Unlike its Genoese rivals, Venice possessed no base on which to found a strong position in the Western Mediterranean and never acquired any such predominance at Malta. The greatness of Venice grew out of its early connections with Byzantium and the Republic's paramount trading and colonial interests always lay in the Levant, but the sailors of so great a seapower must have been familiar with Malta, even if it was only occasional unfavourable winds or the need for supplies or repairs which took them there.

For centuries Venetian voyages to the Western Mediterranean were rare, but by the end of the twelfth century there were Venetians trading in Sicily and North Africa. These small-scale activities constituted no serious challenge to Genoa or Pisa, but the Republic must have become acutely aware of Malta's strategic value when in 1207 the Genoese Enrico Piscatore, Count of Malta,

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- (1) The studies and documents published by R. VALENTINI in *Archivio storico di Malta*, v-xiii (1934-1942), cited below as *ASM*, largely compensate for the absence of a satisfactory general work on medieval Malta; further material is contained in *ASM*, *Archivum Melitense*, and *Melita Historica*. Very relevant are the historiographical considerations and the bibliography in F. NATALE, *Avviamento allo studio del Medio Evo siciliano* (Florence, 1959).
 - (2) On Tunis and the Venetians there see R. BRUNSCHVIG, *La Berbérie orientale sous les Hafsides dès origines à la fin du XVe siècle*, 7 vols. (Paris 1940-1947); C. TRASELLI, *Sicilia, Levante e Tunisia nei secoli XIV e XV* (Trapani, 1951); F. GIUNTA, "Sicilia e Tunisi nei secoli XIV e XV", in his *Medievo mediterraneo; saggi storici* (Palermo, [1954]).
 - (3) VALENTINI in *ASM*, vii. 43, n. 3, 47; x. 195-204, 226-230; *et passim*.

used the island as a base for his brief occupation of Crete, which later became the bulwark of Venice's commercial and political hegemon in the Levant (4). The presence of the Genoese at Malta remained a perpetual threat. In 1264, for example, acting on information received from their spies, the Genoese were able to sally out from Malta and wreak immense havoc on a Venetian convoy in the Adriatic (5). Genoa's quarrels with the Angevin kings of Naples and Sicily later encouraged Venetian expansion in Sicily and even in Malta, where they acquired a slender interest. In 1274 a Venetian, Bartolomeo de Gulielmo, was resident there, and in the same year a Genoese squadron attacked a Venetian transport ship at Comino, a small island between Malta and Gozo, seizing goods valued at 1300 gold ounces from the patron of the ship, Niccolò de Bodacia, and from the Venetian merchants aboard who were bound for Sardinia. In 1277 the King of Sicily named Venice among the places at which an attempt should be made to sell surplus victuals stored at Malta, and in 1278 he ordered that a ship to provision Malta should be obtained from the Genoese, the Pisans, or the Venetians (6).

The Venetian policy of peaceful economic penetration coupled with political neutrality allowed its merchants gradually to extend their commerce throughout the Western Mediterranean during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Venetian ships and merchants arrived in Sicily from Venice or directly from the Levant; some traded in grain and other commodities in Sicily itself, while others proceeded to Tunis, where they enjoyed commercial privileges, or to other ports in Africa, Italy, Spain, or even, from about 1270, to Flanders and England (7). Some Venetians were established in South-west Sicily at Siracusa, but the regular Venetian routes to Tunis and the Western Mediterranean avoided the southern coast of Sicily and followed the safer, more direct course through the Straits of Messina and along the north coast to Palermo and Trapani. Traffic from the Western Mediterranean bound for Egypt and the Levant usually took a northerly course past Messina, possibly to Siracusa, and then to Coron in Greece, or to Crete or Cyprus. While ships often called at Malta, especially when trading southwards towards Djerba, Southern Tunisia and Tripoli, the island was too far south to be a regular station on the great

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- (4) N. NICOLINI, "Ai margini dell'incontro dei due imperi nell'Italia Meridionale: Venezia nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia," in *Studi in onore di Riccardo Filangieri* (Naples, 1959), 49, *et passim*; G. LUZZATTO, "Capitale e lavoro nel commercio veneziano dei secoli XI e XII," in *Studi di storia economica veneziana* (Padua, 1954), 93, *et passim*; cf. F. THIRIET, *La Romanie venitienne au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1959), 87-88 (on Piscatore), *et passim*.
- (5) *Les Gestes des Chiprois*, ed. G. RAYNAUD (Geneva, 1887), 169; VALENTINI in *ASM*, x, 228, n. 108, mistakenly places the attack in Maltese waters.
- (6) R. CESSI, "La tregua fra Venezia e Genova nella seconda metà del secolo XII," *Archivio veneto-tridentino*, iv (1923), 38-39, *et passim* (1274); V. LAURENZA, "Malta nei documenti angoini del R. Archivio di Napoli," in *Archivio storico di Malta*, v (1934), 143-147, (1277), 158-160 (1283).
- (7) See especially A. PETINO, "Aspetti del commercio marittimo della Sicilia nell'età aragonese," *Bollettino storico catanese*, xi-xii (1946-1947); R. CESSI "Venezia e i regni di Napoli e Sicilia nell'ultimo trentennio del secolo XIV," *Archivio storico per la Sicilia orientale*, viii (1911), cited below as *Venezia e Sicilia*.

routes, and it is doubtful whether Venetian interests there extended beyond an occasional visit (8).

During the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries the alliance between the Aragonese crown and the Catalan merchants led to the conquest of Mallorca, Valencia, Sardinia and Sicily, and to the creation of an economic entity which survived the subsequent failure to maintain the political unity of these lands. The Aragonese and Catalans naturally took pains to secure their position at Malta, situated as it was between Sicily, the vital point on their route to the Levantine spicemarkets, and their long-standing interests in Tunisia (9). The permanent establishment of Aragonese rule at the close of the thirteenth century ensured the end of Genoese predominance in Sicily and at Malta, so that Venice, lacking the resources to establish a base in the Central Mediterranean, was content to maintain its commercial interests there through a policy of friendship and alliance with the Aragonese, which was based on a common hostility to Genoa rather than on any community of interests in the West or in the Levant (10).

The real divergence of their interests became apparent when, on the death of Frederigo III of Sicily in 1377, the Sicilian barons began a bitter struggle against the Aragonese party. For a while Venice transferred its policy of friendly neutrality towards the barons who now controlled Sicily, and in March 1387 Manfredo Chiaramonte, perhaps the most powerful of them, granted the Venetians liberty and security of commerce in the lands under his jurisdiction, including Malta and Gozo. He also persuaded the Republic, whose merchants were being attacked at Tunis, to provide five of the twelve galleys which, under his command, seized the Tunisian island of Djerba in 1388; probably these galleys were based on Malta. Chiaramonte, however, favoured the Genoese, and the Venetians refused to participate in a new Tunis expedition in 1390. When Martin of Aragon arrived in Sicily in 1392 to assert his claims to the kingdom, Venice sent a mission to explore its merchants' privileges and the possibilities of further trade in Sicily, and to ensure the protection of its galleys in the island's ports and waters. Abandoning Chiaramonte, the Venetians treated with Martin's only important Sicilian follower, Guglielmo Raimondo de

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- (8) There is apparently no further evidence of Venetians at Malta until the late fourteenth century. There is nothing to show that a quarrel in about 1335 between the Venetians and a Sicilian subject, Guglielmo di Mileto di Malta, involved Malta itself, as A. MIFSUD in *Archivum Melitense*, iii (1917-1919), 322, n. 2, claimed; see *I libri Commemorativi della Repubblica di Venezia: Regesti*, ed. R. PREDELLI, ii (Venice, 1878), 64, 73.
- (9) The relation between the economic and political aspects of this expansion is a matter of dispute; see F. GIUNTA, *Aragonesi e Catalani nel Mediterraneo*, 2 vols. (Palermo, 1953-1959), and the summary and bibliography in J. VICENS VIVES — L. SUAREZ FERNANDEZ — C. CARRERE, *La economía de los países de la Corona de Aragón en la Baja Edad Media (ponencia for VI Congreso de la Historia de la Corona de Aragón; Cagliari, 1957)*. Cf. A. PETINO, *La politica commerciale di Pietro III d'Aragona in Sicilia* (Messina, 1944); F. GIUNTA, "Sulla politica tunisina di Giacomo II: la missione diplomatica di Guillem Oulomar," in *Miscellanea di studi in onore di Eugenio di Carlo* (Trapani, 1959).
- (10) Details and references in GIUNTA, *Aragonesi e Catalani*, i. 145-147; ii. 145-149 185-189; *et passim*.

Moncada, who had previously shown marked friendliness to the Republic (11).

In 1392 Martin granted Malta and Gozo to another turbulent Sicilian baron, Artale de Alagona. Alagona rebelled almost at once in 1392, again in 1393, and yet again some time after mid-1394 when he attacked the Sicilian coast with two galleys, probably armed at Malta. Martin sent a force to Malta to suppress the revolt; later Alagona submitted briefly to the crown after negotiations at Malta, but he soon rebelled again and by April 1396 Malta and Gozo had finally been confiscated from him and granted to Moncada. He too rose against Martin, and in June 1397 he summoned men and supplies to be sent to him in Sicily from the islands. In November Moncada was formally deprived of Malta and Gozo, and Martin closed their era of baronial oppression by incorporating them into the royal demesne. Subjected to African razzias, piratical attacks and baronial destructions, the Maltese were in a desolate state; many were murdered, imprisoned or exiled; others, their trade in ruins, were reduced to piracy (12).

Just at this troubled time, at the end of 1397 or early in 1398, a Venetian *cocca* commanded by Bartolomeo Natale of Venice arrived at Malta carrying two Venetian merchants, Piero Miani and Lodovico Contarini, together with a cargo including 20,000 *librae* of copper articles and 27 bales of paper, valued in all at 2100 ducats (13). *The cocca*, a small cargo boat, was perhaps engaged in some local commerce such as that which was still maintained between Sicily and Malta (14), or may have been forced into Malta by bad weather or pirates. At this moment the Kings of Tunis and Sicily were raiding each others' dominions, and conditions at Tunis were extremely unfavourable; a Venetian consul did arrive at Tunis from Venice in about June 1398, but no Venetian

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- (11) CESSI, *Venezia e Sicilia*, 321-322, 337-355; BRUNSCHVIG, *Berbérie orientale*, i. 197-198, 203-204; GIUNTA, *Aragonesi e Catalani*, i. 177-179, 224-227; many authors, e.g. BRUNSCHVIG and VALENTINI (in *ASM*, vii. 58), wrongly state that the Venetians played no part in the capture of Djerba.
- (12) For these confused events see VALENTINI in *ASM* v. 37-54; vii. 58-65, 405-411, viii. 75; xiii. 15-20; GIUNTA, *Aragonesi e Catalani*, i. 200-201, and n. 47; I. LA LUMIA, *I quattro vicari: studi di storia siciliana del XIV secolo* (Florence, 1867), 131-132, 136-137, 160, 170-171. A royal document of 4 May 1396, only partly exploited by GIUNTA and LA LUMIA, reads: "cum venisset de Meliveto dicta galea quam patronizabat dictus Bertrandus Lança quo iverat super quibusdam tractatibus factis super reductione castri Iacii..." (Archivio di Stato, Palermo; Reg. Conc., Reg. 24, f. 161v-165).
- (13) "Nobiles viri Petrus Miani et Lodovicus Cuntareno dannificati, ut asseruerunt, in Insula Meliveti, ubi passi fuerunt naufragium, cum cocca Bartolomei Natalis, in florenis duobus milibus, centum, et decem, ut asseruerunt, pro valore librarum viginti milium raminis seu eris de bulla, et ballarum viginti septem bombicis cartarum" (document of 9 July 1400 in Archivio di Stato, Venezia; *Libri Commemorativi*, ix, f. 114v). Commemorativi documents cited here and below are only known to VALENTINI (in *ASM*, vii. 66, n. 3) and others through the scanty details in *Libri Commemorativi*, ed. PREDELLI, iii (1883), 262, 277-278. "Raminis seu eris de bulla" perhaps means rounded or stamped copper articles or ornaments.
- (14) When on 29 December 1396 Martin accorded the men of Lipari freedom of commerce in all places not in rebellion against the crown, Malta was the only place specifically mentioned: "...et ki li Lipparoti pozanu usari in lu contatu di Malta ad loru voluntati"; in R. MOSCATI, *Per una storia della Sicilia nell'età dei Martini; appunti e documenti, 1396-1408* (Messina, 1954), 84.

boat called there in the following nine months (15). The Catalans were continually attacking Venetian and other shipping in Sicilian waters, and the *cocca* may have sailed to Malta to avoid them while on its way to or from the Western Mediterranean. A boat leaving Gaeta in 1394, for example, had sailed directly to Malta to avoid the Catalans, whose presence then compelled it to wait there some weeks before continuing its journey to the Venetian port of Coron in Greece (16).

In 1394 the Venetians sent an armed squadron to protect the Flanders galleys from Catalan attacks in Sicilian waters, and in June 1398 the Senate even considered using Gaeta as a port of call for the galleys, although this would have involved a journey past Messina and Naples which promised little extra security. In May 1396 Martin of Sicily needed peace and money so badly, that although the Venetians had recently been assisting his enemies at Palermo and elsewhere, he sent the Venetian Lodovico Contarini, citizen of Siracusa, to promise the Doge that he would restore the Venetians their property and to request a loan of 60,000 florins or more, offering as a guarantee "a castle or place by the sea". Venice had acquired possessions in the Levant in this way, and while a port in Sicily itself would have offered little safety in a time of civil war, Contarini may have urged at Venice the advantages of Malta as a safe harbour and defensible entrepôt; Martin's offer and the reversion of the island to the crown at this time would have made it possible to establish the Venetians at Malta. Contarini, whose own affairs were centred at Siracusa, might have had his own interests in such a project to account for his presence on the Venetian *cocca* when it reached Malta (17).

Once in port at Malta the *cocca* was somehow wrecked. Since the harbour is a relatively safe one and the boat was apparently not seriously damaged it is possible that this "wreck" was the work of the Maltese, for not only the royal officials but also the local inhabitants seized the merchandise and equipment aboard, according to a custom by which the goods on a wrecked boat belonged to the Admiral of Sicily (18). The Venetians repeatedly protested about this

(15) BRUNSCHVIG, *Berbérie orientale*, i. 219-221; TRASELLI, *Sicilia, Levante e Tunisia*, 37, 81-82.

(16) L. LEGRAND, "Relation du pèlerinage à Jerusalem de Nicholas de Martoni, notaire italien, 1394-1395," *Revue de l'Orient latin*, iii (1895), 577-579.

(17) For the known facts see CESSI, *Venezia e Sicilia*, 352-356; GIUNTA, *Aragonesi e Catalani*, i. 225-228, (who accidentally gives the loan requested as 1000 ducats; the document cited above, note 12, gives 60,000). On the Contarini family at this time and their close connections with the Miani, a family including a Piero Miani, later Bishop of Vicenza (1409-1433), see G. DALLA SANTA, "Uomini e fatti dell'ultimo trecento e del primo quattrocento," *Nuovo archivio veneto*, ns. xvi (1916), 46, n. 2, *et passim*.

(18) On 3 August 1398 Martin wrote to the Doge of the "disrobatio navis illius vestri venetici naufragium patientis in nostra Insula melliveti per officiales nostros ipsus Insule facta", promising "quod patroni navis ipsius procul dubio recuperabunt omnia que ad manus nostrorum subditorum et ipsius Insule officialium pervenerunt..." (Libri Commemorativi, ix, f. 48). A document of 9 July shows that Natale and his *socii* were awarded 1500 florins for the value of the boat, equipment and goods, but this sum can scarcely have included the value of the boat which was presumably safe: "Item Bartolomeus Natali, patronatus cujusdam navis dicte coche naufragate in portu meliveti pro se et partibus sociis pro valore coche, coredorum, mercantiarum et bonarum suorum, in florenis millequingentis" (*ibid.*, ix, f. 113v-114v). The Venetians consistently refused to accept the

and a number of similar incidents, but although Martin promised on 3 August 1398 that their goods would be returned they received nothing. However, neither party could afford a complete break and in July 1400 an agreement was reached (19). On 28 December 1400 Martin's father, the King of Aragon, wrote congratulating his son on making peace with the merchants who would bring trade to the kingdom and riches to the crown (20). Venetian ships continued to frequent the ports of Sicily and perhaps that of Malta as well, but it is unlikely that they played much part in provisioning the latter island, a function performed by Maltese vessels (21).

In 1424 an Aragonese fleet, sailing from Malta on 10 September, attacked the Island of Kerkene off the Tripolitanian coast, provoking the King of Tunis, now in alliance with Genoa, to prepare an immense fleet; he probably intended to seize Malta and use it as a base for his attack on Sicily (22). On his part Alfonso V, ruler of Aragon, Naples and Sicily, concluded a treaty with Venice in January 1425 and it was probably more for diplomatic than economic reasons that the Senate decided in the following July to appoint a consul at Malta, for their nominee, Francesco Gatt, was a Maltese and there is no sign that there were Venetians active at Malta. When Malta was ravaged in 1429 Venice broke off commercial relations with Tunis, and on 14 August 1430 the Senate authorised Carlo Zorzi to serve with his galley in the fleet about to sail from Malta to attack the Tunisians. But the Republic soon resumed its trade with Tunis, and from 1440 a regular service of galleys left Venice for Siracusa, Tripoli, Djerba, Tunis and the Barbary Coast (23). The Catalans retained their predominance in the Central Mediterranean and at Malta itself, and it was the Genoese, hostile to the Aragonese crown, who suffered. Venice followed the traditional policy of peaceful penetration which was consistent with its strength in this area and which best suited its merchants' activities. Venetian ships pro-

ius naufragii; see P. GIANNONE, "Ricerche e documenti sul *ius naufragii* nell'Italia Meridionale al tempo dei primi sovrani angioini," in *Studi in onore di Riccardo Filangieri*, (Naples, 1959), 290. Since Venetian complaints were prompt and Martin was replying to those about the "wreck" in August 1398, it probably occurred at the end of 1397 or early in 1398. That royal officials rather than Moncada's intervened suggests a date after Moncada's downfall late in 1397. References to a Moncada attack on a Venetian boat at this time clearly do not refer to the *cocca* at Malta (*Libri Commemorativi*, ed. PREDELLI, iii. 262, 269).

(19) CESSI, *Venezia e Sicilia*, 356-358.

(20) MOSCATI, *Sicilia nell'età dei Martini*, 124-125.

(21) A Sicilian port book for the single year 1407-8 registered 4 Venetian galleys bound for Flanders at Palermo, and six other Venetian boats, 2 each at Augusta and Siracusa, and one each at Brusca and Vindicari, 19 Maltese boats took almost all the grain exported to Malta; 295 *salme* from Vindicari (where only one Venetian boat was recorded), 58 from Siracusa, 48 from Agrigento and 37 (plus 44 for Gozo) from Terranova. See C. TRASSELLI, "Sulla esportazione di cereali dalla Sicilia nel 1407-08", *Atti della Accademia di Scienze, Lettere, e Arti di Palermo*, 4th ser. XV, part ii (1954-1955), 336, 355, 365; tables I and IIIa. A Luca Moraxinu sending grain from Sicily to Malta in 1432 (VALENTINI in *ASM*, vii. 464, 473-474) was probably a Venetian Morosini established in Sicily.

(22) TRASSELLI, *Sicilia, Levante e Tunisia*, 57-66.

(23) BRUNSCHVIG, *Barbérie orientale*, i. 231, 237-238, 251-253, 263-264, 268-269, 278; N. IORGA, *Notes et extraits pour servir à l'histoire des croisades au XVe siècle*, i (Paris, 1899), 399, 525, and n. 4; VALENTINI in *ASM*, viii. 259.

bably continued to make occasional visits to Malta, but they had no serious interest there (24).

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- (24) Although material exists, it has not been possible to carry the story beyond about 1430. Venetian relations with Aragon had declined by 1448 to a state of war (VALENTINI in *ASM*, xii, 108), and Mr. E. R. LEOPARDI reports that he has found no reference to Venetian residents or merchants at Malta in the documents of the *Universitas* (circa 1450-1500) examined by him. Special thanks are due both to him and to Professor FRANCESCO GIUNTA for his valuable help at Palermo.
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RECENT PUBLICATIONS (continued from page 73)

GALEA, Joseph, *The French Occupation of Malta: a study in bibliography*. Geneve, Librairie Droz. 1959. 30 p. (Cahier de Compesieres No. 2).

This list of 144 items useful for the study "of the last phase of the Order of St. John, the French Occupation of Malta, and the cession of the Maltese Islands to Great Britain" fills a long-felt need and provides an important bibliographical tool.

The author had already given a list of publications on the French Occupation of Malta, scattered through the pages of his *Il-Hakma Franciża f'Malta* (1948). The present list, however, is more comprehensive in scope and contains far more entries than the original one. All publications mentioned in *Il-Hakma Franciża f'Malta* are included here, with the exception of the anonymous *Lettre de M. Le Commandeur de T. a M. Depute a l'Assemblée Nationale sur l'Ordre de Malte*, s.l., 1790.

Ten of the items included in Galea's bibliography were listed in 1805 in Boisgelin's Supplement to the Catalogue of works written on Malta under the heading *Pamphlets published on Malta during the Assembly of "Les Etats Generaux"...* ("Ancient and Modern Malta," London, Vol. 1, pp. xlii-xlviii). A reference to Boisgelin's pioneer effort in the same field would not have been out of place in this bibliography.

The list is carefully drawn up in accordance with the rules of bibliography. Students of Maltese History should feel grateful to Mr. Galea, who has produced a really valuable instrument of research.

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