

## THE GALLEY-CONVICTS AND BUONAVOGLIA IN MALTA DURING THE RULE OF THE ORDER

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THROUGHOUT its long stay in the Maltese Islands (1530-1798), the Order of St. John usually employed large numbers of convicts and buonavoglia (volunteer rowers) on the galleys, in addition to the inevitable hundreds of Moslem and Jewish slaves. For its galley-commanders it was really a matter of high policy to do so, because they expected the Christian convicts and buonavoglia to keep a constant watch on the doings and sayings of their non-Christian comrades. Care was therefore always taken to distribute them throughout the places on board that contained Infidels – one of them, for example, being invariably posted to each oar-bench, where he worked in the company of three or four slaves.

In 1632 there were some 357 buonavoglia and 175 convicts, together with the 1,284 slaves, on the six galleys of the Order.<sup>1</sup> About forty years later, Caravita reckoned that there normally were about ninety buonavoglia on the flagship and seventy on each of the other six galleys then in commission.<sup>2</sup> In 1798 Napoleon's officers found seven hundred convicts from the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in the prisons and on the galleys of the Order, at a time when there were only some five hundred slaves there. Several of them had already served their sentence and would have been freed if they had remained in their own country – from which they had been sent to Malta for having been implicated in the plot of a Chevalier Medichi in 1795.<sup>3</sup>

It might not generally be known that few of the convicts and buonavoglia were really local men. Right back in the sixteenth century, we find the Grand Master constantly endeavouring to obtain convicts from other countries of Southern Europe, particularly from France, Naples, and the Papal States. Thus on 4th October 1535 we find Fra Francesco de

<sup>1</sup> Figures taken from the population-estimates of 1632 in RML (Royal Malta Library manuscript) 162, fol. 127rv.

<sup>2</sup> Caravita, *Del Commun Tesoro*, capitolo 260, primo punto (manuscript copy of treatise written soon after 1680: RML 509, fol. 604).

<sup>3</sup> "Depuy à Bonaparte, Malte, le 25 Prairial An VI (13 June 1793)": *Correspondence inédite officielle et confidentielle de Napoleon etc.*, tom. I, pag. 159. Reproduced in full in *Archivum Melitense*, vol. V, pp. 131-2. All names in this article, like Medichi here, are reproduced in their original spelling.

Claramonte, captain of the Order's galleon, receiving instructions to accept on board any convicts aged from twenty to twenty-six, who had been procured for the Order by another knight "in Savoy and other parts". He had to keep a proper guard over them, and provide them with the food and drink they needed, putting their expenses into a separate account.<sup>4</sup> Twenty-one years later, we find another knight on a mission to Naples receiving instructions that the King of Spain, Philip II (who was also King of Naples), had promised to grant the Order two fully furnished galleys together with two hundred convicts, in order to enable the Order to reconstitute its galley-squadron, which had been practically annihilated by the capsizing and sinking of four vessels, with heavy loss of life among the oarsmen, as the result of a tornado in Malta harbour in October 1555.<sup>5</sup>

Three years later, the Grand Commander of the Order was sent to "Provence or Languedoc", where – among other things – he had to collect the greatest possible number of convicts, both from those on the galleys of Marseilles and from others ashore, and he was also to get a licence to take them out of that country. He was to do the same at all the other ports he entered in Italy, taking care to leave Naples for his return journey.<sup>6</sup> The chronicler of the Order, Bosio, informs us of two other occasions when His Most Christian Majesty presented large numbers of convicts to the Order (1561 and 1569).<sup>7</sup> In 1572 we find the Council of the Order ordering a proper distribution among the galleys of the convicts who had arrived from abroad "on the large galleon", thus relieving the Maltese, who had been pressed into service against their wishes – who, in fact, had been sent to the galleys "by force, without sentence of court". Incidentally, this was the only known occasion on which something resembling press-gang methods of recruitment for the Order's fleet was ever used in Malta.<sup>8</sup>

The convicts had to be young and their sentences long ones. It was obviously no use at all getting them to Malta merely to have to return them to their own countries within a few months because of the expiry of their sentence. In 1585 or thereabouts we find the Grand Master approving the conduct of its agent abroad, who had refused to accept forty convicts on grounds of old age or the brevity of their sentence (three years), because

<sup>4</sup> AOM (Archives of the Order in Malta) 416, fol. 197r.

<sup>5</sup> Instructions given to Bernardo de Guimeran, 14 February 1555 *ab Incar.*: AOM 425, fols. 211r f.

<sup>6</sup> Instructions given to Fra Carlo D'Urre, 13 January 1558 *ab Incar.*: AOM 427, fols. 260v f.

<sup>7</sup> Bosio, vol. III, pp. 449-50, 833.

<sup>8</sup> Decree of the Council of the Order, 17 May 1572: AOM 93, fol. 62r.

only young men on life sentences or extremely long ones were really acceptable.<sup>9</sup> In 1625 the knight Fra Luigi Magalotti at Avignon was told not to lose any opportunity of sending convicts to Malta, provided he took care that they were not less than eighteen to twenty years old nor more than forty, and that their sentences were, at least, of six years' duration.<sup>10</sup> Another document informs us that out of the 239 convicts sent to the galleys of the Order by the Papal States twelve years before (i.e. in 1651), 168 had already been set free on termination of their sentence, 62 had died, and nine had been set free but had re-engaged as buonavoglia.<sup>11</sup> An additional 166 convicts had been sent to Malta by the Papal States on 3 February 1663.<sup>12</sup> In fact, several other attempts to obtain slaves from the Papal States are on record. Thus efforts were being made as early as 1591 to obtain 200 convicts from there.<sup>13</sup> Four years later the Order was again trying to obtain some more,<sup>14</sup> and, more than a century later, in 1700, another 150 convicts are definitely known to have been sent to Malta.<sup>15</sup>

In 1588 the Order was promised some 360 convicts from France,<sup>16</sup> and in 1729 the Viceroy of Sicily offered seventy.<sup>17</sup> Some years before 1755 some 120 convicts had been sent to Malta by the King of Naples:<sup>18</sup> they might have been the "150 or at least 120" whom the Order was attempting to obtain in 1751.<sup>19</sup> In 1789, when all the slaves of the Order had been ransomed by the Emperor of Morocco, the Order was hoping to receive some three or four hundred convicts from Naples.<sup>20</sup>

A large number of petitions from these convicts have survived in the

<sup>9</sup> Grand Master to Wiloubier (?), about 6 December 1587: AOM 1542, fols. 88v f.

<sup>10</sup> Letter dated 30 April 1625: AOM 1404.

<sup>11</sup> "Nota di Galeotti ...", *Inquisitoriato di Malta: Registro di Lettere ...*: RML 1176, fols. 8r to 12v

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Instructions to Fra Don Vincenzo Carrafa, Prior of Hungary, etc. on his forthcoming journey to Rome, 12 January 1590 *ab Incar.*: AOM 445, fol. 131rv.

<sup>14</sup> Grand Master to Emilio Pucci, 15 December 1595: AOM 1377, fols. 292-3.

<sup>15</sup> Decree of the Council of State, 14 July and 23 September 1700: AOM 265, fols. 12 and 15v f. Lists of them survive among the records of the Inquisitor of Malta: A. Mifsud, "Appunti sugli Archivi di Malta", *Archivum Melitense*, vol. 2, page 65.

<sup>16</sup> Grand Master to Pupetieres, "sur la conduite à Malte des forçaires qui sont à Paris", c. 1 January 1588: AOM 1542, fol. 159rv.

<sup>17</sup> Decree of the Council of State, 19 January 1728 *ab Incar.*: AOM 268, fol. 104v.

<sup>18</sup> Petition of Raimondo Baldacchino, with decree dated 21 December 1755: AOM 1189, item 110.

<sup>19</sup> Letter of Grand Master to Baglio Marulli, Receiver at Naples, 15 March and 17 May 1751: AOM 1509.

<sup>20</sup> Grand Master to "Venerando Ministro D. Francone, Napoli", 1 August 1789: AOM 1539, fols. 133v ff.

archives of the Order, from which something may be learnt of their affairs and about their ultimate freeing. Thus we learn that Giuseppe di Felice, who had been sent to Malta in 1755 and had served for twenty-three years on the galleys before being transferred to a job ashore, was still in Malta in 1796, having lately served for six years as the distributor of bread to the two prisons of Senglea and Vittoriosa. On 27 September 1796 he was granted permission to leave the prisons and to move about freely throughout the island, provided he relinquished his rights to the issues of bread and clothes, having in future to maintain himself as well as he could.<sup>21</sup> In similar circumstances, Francesco Basile, another convict from Naples, expected to earn his living by working as a carpenter,<sup>22</sup> while Gregorio Magrin worked as a barber and drawer-out of teeth, "being much in demand through his ability".<sup>23</sup> His contemporary and fellow-countryman, Giuseppe Savella, also expected to earn his living, on his release from prison, by working as a barber, in spite of having been subject for several years past to pains in the chest and to blood-spitting.<sup>24</sup>

Though, on termination of sentence, the convicts were normally set free, occasionally things went wrong – as happened to Damaschino di Giovanni, no copy of whose sentence could be found, though the Treasury persisted in claiming that he had received a life sentence. His captain, however, recommended clemency, owing both to his age and to his offer to serve as a sailor.<sup>25</sup> If their ship happened to be abroad when the convicts terminated their sentence, they were usually forced to continue their service until their return to Malta, when they were released and given compensation for the amount of extra service they had performed. Thus on 11 January 1659 the Audienza decreed that the convict Rocco Rizzo should be recompensed for his extra service: he was claiming pay for four extra months.<sup>26</sup>

Except that they could not be bought or sold, and had to be set free on termination of their sentence, there was little practical difference between the condition of the convicts and that of their companions, the slaves themselves. We find them both working at the Holy Infirmary,<sup>27</sup> and the

<sup>21</sup> Di Felice's two petitions, with auditor's decrees, dated respectively 13 February and 27 September 1796, and other documents: AOM 1198, items 37 and 57.

<sup>22</sup> Basile's petition, with decree dated 8 November 1796: *Ibid.*, item 58.

<sup>23</sup> Magrin's petition, with decree dated 12 December 1795: *Ibid.*, item 17.

<sup>24</sup> Savella's petition, with decree dated 23 June 1795 and other documents, including a doctor's certificate: *Ibid.*, item 89.

<sup>25</sup> Registration of Damaschino's demand for his freedom and auditor's decrees, 6 and 22 October 1657: AOM 666, fol. 373v.

<sup>26</sup> Registration of Rizzo's claim, and of the decree of the Audienza, 11 January 1659: AOM 667, fol. 38v.

convicts, like the slaves, were also kept by the knights for domestic service in their homes. In 1654 the knight Colonga was permitted to take a Greek convict with him on his journey to the Levant in return for the slave he had handed over to the Treasury.<sup>28</sup> Ninety-two years later, the *agozzino* of the prison stated officially that he had been allowing six convicts to absent themselves from the prison: two worked at the Holy Infirmary, where they also slept, two worked at the house of a knight named Rosormini, one worked at the Segreto's house, and the sixth was employed at the smithery — the last four of them returned to the prison every evening.<sup>29</sup> Two years previously, he had stated that the convicts in his prison were then employed at the Holy Infirmary, the bakery, and the smithery.<sup>30</sup> For any who escaped the *agozzino* had to pay the conventionally-fixed price, just as if the convict had a marketable value. In 1670 Antonio Scarpello, *agozzino* of the *San Martino*, was fined 100 scudi for the escape at Palermo, several years before, of Lorenzo Massori, a convict from the Papal States.<sup>31</sup> More surprisingly, in 1621 Pasqual Bezina, a Maltese convict, was given permission to send a slave of his own to take his place on the galleys for the remaining part of his sentence of ten years, on condition that he did not leave the island before the ten years had elapsed, and that he sent another slave if the first one died within the said period.<sup>32</sup> Nor is this the only known instance of the practice, because in 1640 we find Gio. Garnier of the city of Aix-en-Provence, who had been condemned to the galleys for life by the court of the Inquisition of Avignon, receiving permission to substitute a slave for himself, provided he found one who was good for rowing, and gave security not to leave the island within six years. He had pleaded that he was completely unfit for rowing on the galleys and for any task ashore.<sup>33</sup>

The *buonavoglia* were also frequently recruited abroad. In 1601 the Grand Master himself personally recommended the efforts that were being made by Vetriano, a knight, to recruit *buonavoglia* abroad for the vessel he was himself equipping for a corsairing expedition.<sup>34</sup> And only two years

<sup>27</sup> Decree of the Treasury, 19/24 July 1685: AOM 646, fols. 524, 530 and 532.

<sup>28</sup> Colonga's petition, and decree of the Treasury, 9 February 1654: AOM 644, fol. 10rv.

<sup>29</sup> Promotor fiscale's log-book, 1 April 1746: RML 638.

<sup>30</sup> Promotor fiscale's log-book, 8 and 10 September 1744: RML 638.

<sup>31</sup> Decree of the Treasury, "Carico dato ad Agozzini per schiavi, *buonavogli e forzati fuggiti*", 16 January 1670: AOM 645, fols. 83-4.

<sup>32</sup> Decree of the Audienza, dated "A di 24 di Novembre benche fusse a 8 di Luglio 1621": AOM 664, fol. 44v.

<sup>33</sup> Garnier's petition, with decree of the Audienza, 20 July 1640: AOM 665, fol. 91rv.

<sup>34</sup> Grand Master to Aponte, 25 April 1601: AOM 1380

later the same Grand Master complained to the King of Spain that his subordinates, the Viceroy of Sicily and Naples, had forbidden the agents of the Order to recruit any *buonavoglia* in their two countries, "from which it follows that the said galleys are now manned entirely by Turks, a most dangerous thing for forces that have such importance in His Majesty's service." He asked for permission to recruit 150 of them in the two kingdoms. As a result, the King through his secretary wrote to the Viceroy of Sicily that he should permit, after his own galleys had been manned, the officials of the Order to recruit in Sicily half the total number of men they required.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps a similar letter was sent to the Viceroy of Naples for permission to recruit the other half there. In 1606 an agent of the Order was told to have some 150 *buonavoglia* ready against the arrival of the squadron of galleys of the Order on its return trip from Barcellona and Marseilles.<sup>36</sup> Other documents of the same nature could easily be produced for any later period. Thus on 6 September 1625 the Grand Master thanked Receiver Valdina for having procured seventy *buonavoglia* for the Order, and on the same day he also thanked Procurator Accarigi for having recruited twenty others and tried to obtain more.<sup>37</sup> Right up to 1798 most of the *buonavoglia* had Italian-sounding names.

The *buonavoglia* entered the service of the Order by accepting from the Treasury a sizable sum of money on loan, which they agreed to repay by means of their personal service on the galleys. Their nominal pay, which went to the gradual extinction of their debt, was raised to twenty-two *tari* a month, i.e. twenty-two *scudi* a year, in 1614,<sup>38</sup> and was further raised by six *tari* a month in 1669.<sup>39</sup> When the whole debt had been paid back in this way, the *buonavoglia* could re-claim his freedom. Thus in 1652 Giacche Vert, a Frenchman, asked for his liberty because he no longer owed the Treasury or his ship's captain any money, and he was duly set free.<sup>40</sup> Four similar cases occurred in 1654,<sup>41</sup> and another one in 1657.<sup>42</sup> There must, in fact, have been hundreds of similar releases.

Those who grew too old or sick for further employment were retired, even if they had not completed the repayment of their debt. Thus on 14

<sup>35</sup> "Lettere al duca di Feria Vice-Re di Sicilia per la concessione di buonavoglie per servitio delle galere", dated: Valladolid, 10 March 1603: AOM 210, fol. 94rv.

<sup>36</sup> Grand Master to Ricevitore Capece, 16 December 1606: AOM 1385.

<sup>37</sup> Copies of both letters are in AOM 1404.

<sup>38</sup> Decree of the Council, 17 July 1614: AOM 105, fol. 73r.

<sup>39</sup> Decree of Council of State, 7 January 1668 *ab Incar.*: AOM 261, fol. 117r.

<sup>40</sup> Decree of the Audienza, 5 October 1652: AOM 666, fol. 16v.

<sup>41</sup> Decrees of the Audienza, 16 January 1654: *Ibid.*, fol. 117r.

<sup>42</sup> Decree of the Audienza concerning the demand for liberty of Battista Pisaila, *buonavoglia* on the *Galera Magistrale*, 24 November 1657: AOM 667, fol. 7r.

January 1634 the Audienza granted complete freedom to Gioanne Pitropoli, buonavoglia on the *Galera Capitana*, though he still owed the Treasury the sum of twenty-two scudi, because Prothomedico Corogna had confirmed that he was completely incapable of further work.<sup>43</sup> On 16 May 1637 Bartolo San Marco, who served on the *Santa Ubaldesca*, was given his freedom for the same reason, on condition that he left the island forthwith, though he still owed eight scudi.<sup>44</sup> At the age of seventy, Vito d'Adamo still owed the Treasury the tiny sum of eighteen tari, when we find him successfully petitioning the government for his release on grounds of age and infirmities, being now unsuitable "even for the ditches". He had served for fifteen years on the galleys as rower or valet.<sup>45</sup>

The government was not always so compliant. Nimico Cassar of the *Santa Ubaldesca* was given his liberty only after he had served for a whole month on constructional work ashore in 1637,<sup>46</sup> and Domenico Jaruffi was told in 1654 that, as he still owed eight tari, he should serve for the whole of the next cruise of the galleys, but without chains, being counted as *homo di capo*, getting his freedom and compensation for his extra service on the return of his ship to Malta.<sup>47</sup> Gioseppi Prover is found similarly facing great difficulties in achieving his freedom, though he had already served for so much more than he was bound to that he was already owed the sum of thirteen scudi by the Treasury: his captain was insisting that he remain in chains, but after ten years of service he definitely wanted to return to his own country, where he could die surrounded by his relatives. His request for freedom and payment of the money due to him was finally accepted.<sup>48</sup>

In 1633 Tomaso Causero, and in 1638 Vincentio Bartolo, were allowed to leave their ships, the *San Giovanni* and the *San Pietro* respectively, only on condition that they immediately paid the money they still owed

<sup>43</sup> Registration of Pitropoli's petition and decree of the Audienza, 14 January 1634: AOM 664, fol. 212v.

<sup>44</sup> Registration of San Marco's petition, with decree of the Audienza, 16 May 1637: AOM 665, fol. 9r.

<sup>45</sup> D'Adamo's petition, with decree of the Audienza, 20 April 1641: *Ibid.*, fol. 111r.

<sup>46</sup> Registration of Cassar's petition, with decree of the Audienza, 16 May 1637: *Ibid.*, fol. 9v.

<sup>47</sup> Prover's petition, with decree of the Audienza, 16 January 1644: AOM 665, fol. 183rv. In 1658 we find Gioseppi Farrugia and Gratio Curcop both asking for compensation for the extra period they had been forced to serve (AOM 667, fols. 17v and 31v).

<sup>48</sup> Registration of Causero's petition with decree of the Audienza, 10 September 1633: AOM 664, fol. 196r; Bartolo's petition, with decree of the Audienza, 14 August 1638: AOM 665, fol. 41r.

the Treasury.<sup>49</sup> In 1650 Aniello d'Angelo, a Neapolitan, asked for a similar arrangement or that he be allowed to find another buonavoglia to fill his place, but was told that he would have to find two acceptable buonavoglia not one.<sup>50</sup> Domenico Gallo was told that not only would he have to find another buonavoglia but would also still have to pay the outstanding part of his debt before he could achieve his complete freedom.<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, Vincentio Tempera and Giovanni de Nicolaci both received their full liberty and complete release from their debt in 1623 because of the promise made them when they were employed in carrying the victims of an outbreak of contagious disease to the Isolotto, where they also saw to the further needs of the sick, thus putting their own life in great danger.<sup>52</sup> Paolo Corrao not only received his freedom in 1660 as a result of his great infirmities, but was also, in recognition of the fifty years of service he had given the Order, granted three loaves of black bread daily for the rest of his life.<sup>53</sup> Paolo Zammit, buonavoglia on the *San Giovanni*, received a grant of bread and pay for the rest of his life as a reward for his eighteen years of service and the wound he received on duty.<sup>54</sup>

Sometimes one wonders what really lies behind the frequently all-too-laconic statements of the documents. Take the petition of Carlo Greco, for example. He asked for the removal of his chains because, he said, it was only through his misfortune that he had missed his ship — an excuse that would not have been accepted if he had not taken care to report himself as soon as the ship was gone. Then what are we to make of the request of Pietro Maccaria to be set free because he had never taken either clothes or money of buonavoglia? Was he being accused merely of common theft or of having taken the uniform and pay of the buonavoglia — that is, of having become one of the buonavoglia?<sup>55</sup> Petty theft, drunkenness and

<sup>49</sup> Registration of d'Angelo's petition, with decree of the Audienza, 12 November 1650: AOM 665, fol. 360r.

<sup>50</sup> Gallo's petition, with associated documents dated 16 September to 7 October 1656: AOM 666, fol. 328v.

<sup>51</sup> Their petition, with decree of the Audienza, 20 November 1623: AOM 664, fol. 79v. Similar freedom was granted on the same occasion to three galley-convicts for the same reason.

<sup>52</sup> Corrao's first petition, referring to 43 years of service, with decree of the Audienza, 5 July 1659: AOM 667, fol. 47v; his second petition, referring to fifty years, with similar decree, 4 September 1660: *Ibid.*, fol. 68r.

<sup>53</sup> Registration of Zammit's petition, with decree of the Audienza, 23 March 1658: AOM 667, fol. 18r.

<sup>54</sup> Registration of Greco's petition, with decree of the Audienza, 2 September 1651: AOM 665, fol. 383r.

<sup>55</sup> Registration of Maccaria's demand, with decrees of the Audienza, one of 13



brawling were common enough occupations of the buonavoglia, as the promotor fiscale's log-book of the 1740s shows, but for our last rather unusual item we have chosen, instead, an extract showing the buonavoglia in a much better light:

On the 12th (January 1745)

The buonavoglia, four of the *Capitana*, two of the *San Luigi*, and another of the *Magistrale*, ask for permission to perform farces (*burlette*) during the night at Birgu, returning to their galleys at 11 o'clock, at the rate of one carlino per head. — Granted —<sup>56</sup>

May 1651 referring it to the commissioners of the Congregation of the Galleys, the other, of 20 May 1651, granting him the liberty he wanted as he had not taken "either the uniform or the money of buonavoglia": AOM 665, fol. 373v.

<sup>56</sup>Entry in Promotor fiscale's log-book, dated 12 January 1745: RML 638. RML 638 is a continuation of RML 666.