

# FRONTIERE DEL MEDITERRANEO

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WERE FRONTIER LANDS IN THE CENTRAL  
MEDITERRANEAN 'ISOLATED WORLDS'?  
THE ISLAND OF MALTA AS A CASE STUDY

*The Mediterranean State Boundaries*

In his book, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Reign of Philip II*, Fernand Braudel defines the islands of the Mediterranean as «isolated worlds» and «lands of hunger»<sup>1</sup>. These definitions carry pragmatic implications that may appear contentious if put under the lens of micro-history. Braudel himself recognizes the limitation of these statements, as he considers it appropriate to exclude Sicily from the above description. Indeed, such definitions, while carrying political and economic implications, do not necessarily reflect all the historical realities of the Mediterranean islands, in particular if the latter happen to be frontier territories. In this paper, I propose to study these concepts within the framework of Maltese history, in particular from 1530s up to the early eighteenth century, when the island of Malta can really be said to exemplify the notion of 'frontier lands'.

This is not the first study on the Braudelian idea of 'isolated worlds' as applicable to the Maltese island. Victor Mallia-Milanes studied this concept in relation to other Braudelian ideas, such as that of 'land of hunger' or that the inhabitants of such lands were 'prisoners of their poverty'<sup>2</sup>. What I am proposing in this paper is to build on Mallia-Milanes' study entitled *Was Early Modern Malta an 'Isolated World'?*, and at the same time, relate this concept of 'isolated worlds' to that of 'frontier territories'.

These two concepts – 'isolated worlds' and 'frontier lands' – car-

<sup>1</sup> F. BRAUDEL, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Reign of Philip II*, Fontana, 1986, I, p. 152.

<sup>2</sup> V. MALLIA-MILANES, *Was Early Modern Malta an 'Isolated World'?*, in «Peregrinations. Acta et Documenta», LI, 2000, p. 23.

ry the impasse in which many islands found themselves in Early Modern Times. In other words, the multitude of small and not so small islands that pepper the Mediterranean did not possess sufficient resources to maintain themselves but due to their geographical position, they still succeeded in being on the forefront of history. It is within this context that Braudel developed the above notions, thereby highlighting the lack of internal political power and the islands reliance on constant importation.

Despite the fact that the Mediterranean islands had a precarious economy resulting from their restricted space and lack of security, Braudel expressed the idea that these isolated worlds had strategic value. In this context, these statements cease to sound contradictory or out of tune with historical realities. Indeed they explain why these islands left an impact on historical events that far exceeded «what might be expected from such poor territories»<sup>3</sup>. Braudel's explanation is that these «islands lay on the paths of the great sea routes». This statement, succinct enough in itself, implies a totally different geographical dimension than the one currently applied in perception of this sea. Perhaps it is thanks to Braudel that the Mediterranean began to be perceived as a homogenous geographical basin. But the reality in the sixteenth century was different. The Mediterranean was a succession of small seas and these small islands were a vital communicating bridge<sup>4</sup>, especially along the transversal route, which was often dangerous and difficult.

Such oxymoronic concepts designate Braudel's perspective that these small worlds did, in fact, begin to play an active role in the unfolding of international relations during the sixteenth century. Many of these islands happened to find themselves on the borderlines of either the emerging Ottoman or Habsburg Empires. As the centre of power of these two empires lay at the two extreme ends of the Mediterranean, all forms of isolated worlds began to be threatened by these two political giants. At first, it was the isolated worlds situated close to their frontiers that fell under their spell; later the two powers' influence spread to the Central Mediterranean.

Hence, within the political paradigm of a divided sea, the sixteenth-century Mediterranean World was subjected to two principal types of boundaries. The first type was of an ideological nature.

<sup>3</sup> F. BRAUDEL, *The Mediterranean* cit., I, p. 154.

<sup>4</sup> F. BRAUDEL, *The Mediterranean* cit., I, p. 108.

Both these new emerging empires were the expression of religious antagonism. Religion played a dominant part. It was used by both the Ottoman and the Habsburg dynasties as a rallying cry but in reality, it was less important in the expansionist urge of both Empires than one would have expected from a century that experienced the most feverish religious movements and persecutions. In other words, the Ottomans did not find difficulty in annexing territories belonging to brothers professing their same faith; nor did Catholic Spain hold back from suppressing revolting Christian provinces. The second type of boundary delineated what in modern jargon would be called an inter-state function: that is, the frontiers in question were territorial borders that lacked an exact demarcation. These boundaries remained opaque up to the early eighteenth century<sup>5</sup>. To borrow Salvatore Bono's words, they «erano (...) a lungo come semplici indicazioni astratte senza corrispondenza nel paesaggio naturale ed umano e senza riscontro in una concreta linea lungo la quale si esercitassero le predette state-functions»<sup>6</sup>.

In geo-political terms, these isolated worlds together with many of the European and North African regencies, kingdoms and also empires lacked exact delimitations of a theoretical nature that could concretise into boundary lines. Sixteenth-century borders can be described as artificial, if not fluid in nature. They originated from a human decision and were subject to the powerful claims that could be raised by any magnate who held the upper hand in the region. There were naturally marked boundaries such as rivers, streams, mountains and the desert, whose historical impact has been amply discussed by Braudel, but these only controlled part of the geographical asset. The true physical boundary was the sea. But its role in the delimitation of borders was nonetheless ambiguous. The same sea served either as a unifying factor or as a demarcation line. Like rivers, mountains or deserts, it could represent a physical demarcation at which the territory of a kingdom, principedom or empire ended. At the same time, the sea was a fluid medium that could easily be translated into a matrix for imperial expansion. Any state or kingdom that succeeded in building a formidable navy, could automatically lay claim or alter the ephemeral Mediterranean boundaries.

<sup>5</sup> S. BONO, *Le frontiere in Africa dalla spartizione coloniale alle vicende più recenti. 1884-1971*, Milano, 1972, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> S. BONO, *Le frontiere cit.*, p. 2.

Through the ages, any power aspiring to control this sea sought to extend its boundaries, by creating a tassel-like structure, where the unity of the state was not held by any compact land territory but by the building of different stations at strategic points held together by a mauradering navy. This was what both the Habsburg and the Osman dynasties sought to achieve.

In their efforts to superimpose new boundaries on adjacent lands, both Spain and Turkey sought to annex neighbouring territory. This involved respectively the reign of Granada, and the Mameluk kingdom of Egypt and Syria. Thereafter, the first territories to fall into their fold were the small isolated worlds situated next to their coasts or borders. The united Spanish monarchy started the ball rolling. The belligerence shown by Spain in conquering the 'isolated worlds' of Melilla in 1497, Mers-el-Kebir in 1505, Peñón de Velez in 1508, Oran in 1509, Mostaganem, Tlemcen, Ténès, Bugie and Tripoli in 1510, and the small island of Peñón off Algiers in 1511 is in keeping with the desire for expansion towards Africa. Meanwhile, 1522 marked the effective start of Suleiman the Magnificent's reign, 'inaugurated' with the conquest of the island of Rhodes.

### *The Hospitallers' International Commitments*

Edward W. Said in his book *Orientalism* portrays the Orient as quiescent while the West is seen to have been more dynamic<sup>7</sup>. At the opening of the sixteenth century, the question of Western superiority was scarcely the subject of diplomats' or generals' deliberations. The East appeared to be more dynamic, capable of foreseeing through various initiatives a place on the international scene. Christendom sought to achieve a sort of balance of power in the region, even, if the case would be to partially support isolated Muslim kingdoms. After the conquests effected in the East by the Ottomans and in the West by Spain, the Central Mediterranean rulers began to appear to both Spain and Turkey as dispensable, and the dismantling of small states or kingdoms as practicable. The latter appeared to the big powers as rogue states. Both big powers wished to annex these states but at the same time devised policies preventing the

<sup>7</sup> E.W. SAID, *Orientalism*, London, 1995.

other from having the upper hand on these territories. However, these kingdoms, as many of the European city-states and town councils, remained isolated worlds not only politically but also economically. They could not stand on their own for long. In part, this explains the intervention of both France and Spain in Italy and also explains why Charles V gave the isolated island of Malta to the Knights of St. John, who were homeless following the loss of Rhodes. It is within this context that the conflict between the Cross and the Crescent for the control of Iffriqiya, Tripoli and Algiers should be seen.

In the case of Malta, the island was until the arrival of the Knights Hospitallers governed by a town council called the *Università*, whose autonomy had become anachronistic for sixteenth-century political thinking. The same political feeling existed about the Central North African regencies. A period of political and military harassment was initiated against them by both the Ottoman Turks and Christian Spain. The North African regencies represented anachronistic governments, which like the island of Malta, needed new blood that the two big powers thought only they could transfuse.

The discovery of America had a significant impact on Spain's policy of expansion and a form of *modus vivendi* had to be forged between the realms of Castile and Aragon, with the former focusing more on the Atlantic while the latter continued with its traditional maritime operations in the Mediterranean. Within this framework falls Charles V's decision to give his Aragonese possession of the island of Malta to the Knights of St. John. It is significant that Charles V engaged with the Maltese situation when he was in Spain and that these islands did not figure in his strategy during his sojourn in the Imperial lands. Spain brought the Emperor nearer to Mediterranean realities and to the difficulties that frontier territories posed to the crown in terms of defence. It was immediately after the Hospitallers lost Rhodes, that is in 1523, that the Emperor held discussions with the Hospitaller Grandmaster, Philippe Villiers de l'Isle Adam, over the latter's request to have the islands of Malta and Tripoli<sup>8</sup>. Yet the distraught Knights, despite their precarious situation, only accepted their Grandmaster's plan after roaming for seven years, and when it became clear that no better option could be found.

<sup>8</sup> V. MALLIA-MILANES, *Venice and Hospitaller Malta. 1530-1798. Aspects of a Relationship*, Malta, 1992, p. 2.

In 1524, the Knights sent a commission to inspect the island. The commissioners' report falls neatly within the Braudelian description of an isolated world. Malta appeared to the Hospitallers both geographically and economically marginal. It was distant from Ottoman sphere of influence. Economically the island was not self-sufficient. Indeed whatever the size of the population, it could not have had the resources to sustain itself. Throughout its late medieval history, Malta had a population of around 10,000 to 15,000, living over a surface area of 316 km<sup>2</sup>. Despite the fact that Malta had on average of about one inhabitant for 0.025 km<sup>2</sup><sup>9</sup>, it still needed to rely on importation for its survival. Perhaps, the need for victuals from Sicily broke the total isolation of the Maltese islands but still did not hinder them appearing in the eyes of European aristocrats, as the Hospitaller Knights were, a backwater on the periphery of the new emerging Europe. Yet the Knights' change of mind (determined by the sole important asset of the islands, the unexploited natural harbours) would secure a new historical reality. This small isolated world found itself unexpectedly on the trading routes of bigger nations, with the result that a new era dawned on Malta.

The following analysis of the main events which would place Malta more centrally in the international sphere was undertaken on the basis of both the official history, as recorded by the Hospitaller chroniclers, mainly Giacomo Bosio<sup>10</sup> and Bartolomeo dal Pozzo<sup>11</sup>, as well as unedited material extracted from the ecclesiastical records. While the former recorded the *gesta* of the Hospitaller rulers, in particular the Knights' martial policy throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the latter documents disclosed the social history of common people. These documents, in particular the *Status Liberi*, help the historian to determine whether post-1530 society was indeed cosmopolitanised.

On the political level, the Hospitaller chroniclers were more than ready to record events that, even if they failed to achieve their final political aim, still show the importance that the island began to assume after 1530. It was not long after the Hospitallers had set foot

<sup>9</sup> This calculation was undertaken on an average population of 12,500. Today's population density is that of one person per 0.0012 km<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> G. BOSIO, *Dell'Istoria della Sacra Religione et Ill.ma Militia di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, Roma, 1602, III.

<sup>11</sup> B. DAL POZZO, *Historia della Sacra Religione Militare di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano detta di Malta*, Verona, 1703-15.

on Malta that the island featured in international and inter-imperial conflict. From an isolated world, it became a frontier territory and a stepping-stone for the Christian armies in their wars against powers on the Barbary Coast and the Ottoman Empire. In August 1531, Malta found itself at the forefront of the European War against the Sublime Porte. For the first time, Malta was chosen as the military base for a small squadron of six galleys sent by the Viceroy of Sicily and Genoa, but also including two Maltese brigantines, to attack the city of Modon. In the following year, the island again played a part in the much more important international operation organised by Andrea Doria against Coron. As this expedition proved to be a temporary victory, the Hospitaller galleys were again in action, with Andrea Doria and the Papal galleys sent to rescue the conquered city of Coron from the inevitable fall into the hands of the Ottoman Turks in 1533.

The chronology of international participation continues unabated onto the following decades. In 1535, the Knights answered the call of Emperor Charles V for the recapture of Tunis to restore the deposed Hafsida monarch, Mulay Hasan on his throne. The fleet, after gathering at Capo Pula in Sardinia, proceeded to attack Tunis and to build a Spanish presidium on La Goletta. In 1540, Sousse and Monastir in Tunis were raided by Christian galleys, while the city of Sfax was put under siege. In 1541, Charles V sought once again to extend his territories to North Africa and on the 26 August, his fleet departed from Malta towards Algiers. Despite the fact that the latter attack turned out to be a disaster, as only the castle of Tagiura in Tripoli was attacked, the new geopolitical axis with Malta at the centre of this maritime activity continued to hold for more years to come. Four years later, the Knights used Malta to attack the city of Lmaia near Tripoli. In 1550, it was the turn of Monastir to be attacked again. The fortified city Mahdiyyah was put under siege until it surrendered, but it was a pyrrhic victory. In 1552, the Hospitaller forces attacked Zuaga on the western side of Tripoli.

The next Christian armada to set sail against North Africa was in 1559. Taking the opportunity of the signing of the Treaty of Cateau Cambresis, Grandmaster La Valette solicited Philip II to arm an armada to recapture Tripoli, which had been lost to North African corsairs in 1551. Despite the disastrous outcome of the campaign, the army occupied the island of Djerba temporarily.

In 1563, the Hospitaller galleys were again involved in conflict.



They participated on the side of Spain in the war against Morocco and disembarked at Peñon de Velez. The Order found it difficult to renew military aid to Spain in 1564. During that year, the Hospitallers were concerned by the persistent rumours of an impending Ottoman attack on Malta. In that same year, their attention was totally focused on the Levant and this in part explains their unilateral expedition against the city of Malvasia in the Peloponnese. In 1565, the tables were turned. The island itself became the centre of international attention. The decision of Sulieman the Magnificent to attack Malta, turned the attention of Christian Europe on this small world. Thanks to the printing press, the siege of Malta became the most discussed event in Europe at the time<sup>12</sup>.

The official historian of the Knights for the post-siege period was another Italian, Bartolomeo dal Pozzo. Bosio's history ends in 1571. Dal Pozzo's account covers the period from 1571 to 1688. His perspective of the historical events tallied with that of Bosio, and his account is not less glorifying. He goes into great detail to record for posterity the Hospitallers' international engagements but at the same time focuses on the help given by the Knights to Christian monarchs, in particular when the outcome was favourable. More importantly, dal Pozzo's chronicle of events neatly falls within the new phase of international developments that engulfed the war in the Mediterranean.

Echoing Braudel, Salvatore Bono divided the maritime conflict in the Mediterranean into two phases. The first phase was the one just described above. The sixteenth-century military endeavours in the Mediterranean were primarily driven by the desire for the conquest of territory, the urge of both Spain and the Sublime Porte to have a foothold in North Africa. The second period starts in the seventeenth century, that is after the planned attack by Gian Andrea Doria against Algiers in 1601. From this date onwards, the European attacks against North African cities are judged as corsairing actions, aimed mainly at the taking of booty but without seeking territorial conquest<sup>13</sup>. In this new war, Malta found a new political and economic niche.

<sup>12</sup> A. GANADO - M. AGIUS-VADALLA, *A Study in Depth of 143 Maps Representing the Great Siege of Malta of 1565*, Malta, 1994-95.

<sup>13</sup> S. BONO, *Corsari nel Mediterraneo. Cristiani e musulmani fra guerra, schiavitù e commercio*, Milano, 1993, p. 30: «altri attacchi europei contro le città maghrebine vanno piuttosto giudicati come azioni corsare, per procurare un bottino d'uomini e di beni, che non come imprese volte a stroncare l'attività dei barbareschi».

On a more localised level, these military encounters between the East and the West, but also the religious conflicts in Europe, began to influence the daily life of some of the local people to the extent of being reflected in a number of court procedures. It is here my intention to move a little bit away from the official chronology of events and try to assert the direct impact that these international events had on the common people. The *Status Liberi* furnish important insights into certain perceptions of the local population. They can help the historian to assert whether the man in the street was conscious of the new role that his home country was having in Europe. This is possible as the *Status Liberi* are written requests for marriage by locals who had been absent from Malta for some time, foreigners who wanted to settle here, or local widows whose husbands had died abroad. In all instances, the plaintiffs had to deposit a short dossier about their origins and life experience. Indirectly, a corpus of records of first-hand experiences of a number of international engagements was thereby left for posterity. It is to these documents that I shall now refer to.

The first international event which left its mark on the *Status Liberi* documentation was the Battle of Lepanto; it is described in the acts as the *giorno della presa dell'armata turca*<sup>14</sup>. For the first time, the local records recount, through the viewpoint of widows, the grief suffered following the loss of a beloved husband. It was a battle that had an unfortunate outcome for the Knights as they practically lost their fleet, bringing in requests from the women who were widowed to have their right of remarriage recognised by the local ecclesiastical authorities.

On the political level, the Battle of Lepanto enhanced the centrality of the Maltese harbours as a port of call for the Western Mediterranean Powers against Islam; a warning of more wars ahead. The losses suffered at Lepanto prevented the Hospitallers from sending any galleys to support Don John of Austria's expedition against Tunis. Once this enterprise failed, the Hospitallers took advantage of the change of policy between the two Mediterranean Powers, in which both Spain and the Ottoman Empire sought to achieve a truce in the Mediterranean, and embroiled themselves in a diplomatic imbroglio whose purpose was to reinstate the royal

<sup>14</sup> ARCHIVUM ARCEPISCOPALIS MELITENSIS FLORIANA (AAM), *Status Liberi* (SL), 13.XI.1579.

house of the Hafside in Tunis. The whole plot was short lived and the Knights were once again crossing swords with the Crescent.

The *Status Liberi* make reference to the raid on the town of Algiers in 1579<sup>15</sup>. In 1584, the Greek town of Monsalda in the channel of Caramania was sacked, while in 1590, the Knights tried in vain to recover Tripoli by a coup which had to initiate with the taking of the island of Zauga. However, the most important ventures date to the seventeenth century, that is, when the swirling tide of corsairing attacks began to gather momentum. In 1602, the Order's galleys were at the doors of Hamamet. It was a venture to be repeated again with greater ferocity in 1606. The savagery of this latter event and the defensive stand undertaken by the inhabitants left a discernible impact, recorded in the *Status Liberi*. These chronicles record the predicament of widows who lost their husbands during this attack<sup>16</sup>. Witnesses recounted the tragic end of some unfortunate soldiers who ended up butchered in the counterattacks of the Ottoman cavalry. In 1610, the fleet conducted a successful attack on the city of Corinth in Greece, ravaging and pillaging the town. During this engagement some sailors who were married to Maltese women were killed<sup>17</sup>. For the second decade of the seventeenth century, the *Status Liberi* documents contain details of raids undertaken in 1619 on *Terra di Susa*<sup>18</sup> in Tunis and Tornese Castle in Morea<sup>19</sup>, while during the late 1620s the Greek island of Santa Maura was raided<sup>20</sup>.

These were not the sole warring endeavours undertaken by the Knights, even if they were the bloodiest. Del Pozzo records attacks on the cities of Lepanto, Patrasso, Montasir and the island of Cos in 1603<sup>21</sup>, in Morea and the Kirkennah islands in 1611, in Fogie in the Gulf of Smyrne in 1613<sup>22</sup>. The fact that no references to these pillages were found in the *Status Liberi* documents, can be an indication that they had less social repercussions in Malta than the one discussed above.

<sup>15</sup> AAM, SL, 29.XII.1584.

<sup>16</sup> AAM, SL, 18.X.1608.

<sup>17</sup> AAM, SL, 24.X.1614.

<sup>18</sup> AAM, SL, 29.IV.1620 (B. DAL POZZO, *Historia della Sacra Religione Militare* cit., I, p. 683).

<sup>19</sup> AAM, SL, 1621 (B. DAL POZZO, *Historia della Sacra Religione Militare* cit., I, p. 655).

<sup>20</sup> AAM, SL, 8.VI.1629.

<sup>21</sup> B. DAL POZZO, *Historia della Sacra Religione Militare* cit., I, p. 497.

<sup>22</sup> B. DAL POZZO, *Historia della Sacra Religione Militare* cit., I, pp. 575-577.

On the international level, the Hospitallers' depredations were again in evidence towards the middle of the seventeenth century. In 1645, a corsairing incident of which Hospitaller galleys were protagonists sparked a long war in the Mediterranean which ended with the complete conquest of Crete by the Turks in 1669<sup>23</sup>. The subsequent reaction of Venice, which launched a costly war in Morea, found the full support of the Hospitallers' council and maritime squadron<sup>24</sup>. The Hospitallers also participated in the war in Belgrade, making the Knights full participants in the last international wars fought between the Cross and the Crescent in Early Modern Times.

Within this framework of maritime activity, the *Status Liberi* make direct reference to the Mediterranean policy applied by Pedro Girón II, Duke of Osuna and Viceroy of Naples between 1616 and 1619. Once again these references bring to the foreground the centrality of Malta in the mounting of large-scale operations. The Duke's ambitions to enhance Spain's power in the Mediterranean were first made clear when he was Viceroy of Sicily between 1612 and 1616, and emerged more strongly when he became Viceroy of Naples. This policy had a direct relevance for Malta, as the Duke sought to enhance Spanish hegemony in the Mediterranean by developing a strong fleet to defy the Venetian and Ottoman powers. Such a foreign policy fitted in well with the Hospitallers' goals, as Venice's diplomatic and commercial relations with the Porte was considered in the early seventeenth century an obstacle in the ongoing war against Islam. As Malta became a port of call for the Duke di Osuna's fleet, some sailors in service decided to settle permanently in Malta after finding Maltese spouses<sup>25</sup>. Theirs was not an isolated experience. The Duke of Savoy was another partner in the Western Alliance against Islam. His ships formed part of a number of Catholic fleets that sought to strike against Ottoman might, as was the case in 1601 and 1619. Some Piedmontese sailors and soldiers settled in Malta after withdrawing from service with the forces of the Duke<sup>26</sup>. In particular, the plaintiff Giovanni Ruet and

<sup>23</sup> E. ROSSI, *Storia della Marina dell'Ordine di S. Giovanni di Gerusalemme di Rodi e di Malta*, Roma-Milano, 1926, p. 76; V. MALLIA-MILANES, *Venice* cit., pp. 150-170.

<sup>24</sup> E. ROSSI, *Storia della Marina* cit., p. 81.

<sup>25</sup> AAM, SL, 3.XI.1622; 12.XI.1622; 24.III.1622; 10.I.1622; 28.I.1622; 29.IV.1623; 21.III.1624; 3.II.1624; 14.X.1624.

<sup>26</sup> AAM, SL, [?].10.1596; 4.VIII.1603; 20.III.1618; 27.III.1618; 2.VIII.1618.

his friend Giovanni Fabro confessed to having participated in the war of Piedmont on the side of the Grand Duke of Savoy<sup>27</sup>.

### *The European Impact*

Painstaking research in the *Status Liberi* can also help in the reconstitution of certain aspects of the Hospitallers' naval history in relation to the European continent. Politically, the division between East and West in the Mediterranean was well established by the 1600s. It is important to note that at this stage in time, the Turkish defeat at the Battle of Lepanto and the defeat of the Spanish Armada have become synonymous in Mediterranean history with the decline in Early Modern Times of two important Mediterranean Powers. However, it must also be kept in mind that the decline was not sudden; it developed over a number of decades for Spain and over the course of centuries for Turkey. This decline benefited France, Britain and Holland, but in their case, the ascendancy occurred over decades of internal reforms and costly wars.

The *Status Liberi* can furnish a barometer of the fortunes of the 'Northerners' in Malta, a term used to describe the owners of big ships that began to call in the Mediterranean in the second half of the sixteenth century. The first to enter were the English at the beginning of the 1570s, followed by the Flemish around the 1590s. The reference to English ships in *Status Liberi* dates back to the early sixteenth century. In 1604, the death of Ambrogio Arbamiense from Vittoriosa was recorded. Arbamiense was a sailor on a ship bearing a cargo of wheat, and died fighting when his ship fought against an English *vascello* near Capo Passero in Sicily<sup>28</sup>. Similar stories were reported by other widows, who lost their husbands in 1608<sup>29</sup> and 1611, fighting against English vessels<sup>30</sup>. There were also English sailors, probably deserters who were enlisted on the Hospitallers' or other southern Mediterranean fleets. Some of these appear in the court records both as plaintiffs or witnesses. In 1607, two English sailors demanded authorisation to marry in Malta<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> AAM, SL, 2.VIII.1618.

<sup>28</sup> AAM, SL, 21.VII.1604.

<sup>29</sup> AAM, SL, 14.VIII.1608.

<sup>30</sup> AAM, SL, 24.III.1611.

<sup>31</sup> AAM, SL, 17.VII.1607.

One of the plaintiffs, Giacobbo Giaches explicitly declared that he had worked on an Hospitaller galley. Both plaintiffs had fellow English witnesses to stand in their favour before the ecclesiastical court<sup>32</sup>. Flemish sailors originating from Holland are mentioned for the first time in the *Status Liberi* in the same year as the English<sup>33</sup>. Unfortunately, the study of this latter group is more difficult to undertake, as sailors from the Low Countries and the United Provinces were rarely distinguished by nationality, but identified as having Flemish ethnicity.

The religious divisions that ravaged Europe after 1517 were translated into a language of war which reached the Central Mediterranean with the arrival of the English and the Flemish big ships, for they represented a religious enemy. This is also the reason why Maltese vessels were having violent skirmishes with ships from Protestant nations. The reaction to Protestantism even reached the people of Malta, leading villagers to join foreign armies in order to fight what appeared in their eyes the enemy of the Catholic faith. This was the case of Francesco Zupardo from Casal Burdi, who enlisted as a soldier in the service of the French king, Louis XIII, and only returned to Malta in 1637 in order to marry. The Hospitallers were directly involved in this war for in 1620, the Grandmaster Alof de Wignacourt sent the Hospitaller *Gran Galleone* to assist the French king in these religious wars<sup>34</sup>. Such participation seems to have influenced, even if mildly, French migratory trends to Malta. A year after the Hospitallers' participation in this war, a pensioned-off soldier, Daniele Briffuli from Bordeaux was seeking to establish a permanent settlement in Malta<sup>35</sup>. In 1622, Briffuli declared to the Maltese Ecclesiastical court that he had fought in Toulouse against what he defined as the «*guerre contre luterani*». This can be read as a direct reference to the Huguenot wars in France<sup>36</sup>.

These wars and naval activities influenced mariners to settle in Malta, confirming the centrality that Malta was beginning to have not only for the European wars but also for commerce. But as was often revealed in these acts, migrants followed tortuous routes. Sailors in particular confessed to the ecclesiastical court that they

<sup>32</sup> AAM, SL, 7.IV.1607.

<sup>33</sup> AAM, SL, 28.IX.1607.

<sup>34</sup> J. MUSCAT, *Il-Flotta ta' l-Ordni ta' San Gwann*, Malta, 2000, p. 102.

<sup>35</sup> AAM, SL, 9.III.1638.

<sup>36</sup> AAM, SL, 8.VIII.1634; 16.IV.1638; 20.X.1638; 21.XI.1640.

had undertaken other travels, and lived in other ports prior to settling down in Malta. Broadly speaking, there existed four different itineraries. The first route was for the sailors and soldiers to come directly to Malta. This route was mostly preferred by Sicilians and those who had been working as soldiers prior to seeking service on the Hospitaller galleys. The second concerned crewmen who had been sailing the western Mediterranean. Usually these were Spaniards or French sailors who would finally embark on a vessel heading to Malta from an Italian port. The French, for example, showed a preference for the town of Genoa, where they used to spend some months, prior to their coming to Malta. It was the continuous use of the Genoese ports by the Hospitaller galleys that attracted Frenchmen to Malta. The third route concerned sailors in the Levant, the majority of whom were southern European corsairs whose nationality varied, though their number included also central and eastern Europeans engaged in mercantile shipping. Greek sailors predominated within this latter category: being Christian but at the same time subjects of the Ottoman Empire, they could act as intermediaries between the Latin West and the Muslim East. The last type of sailors would have travelled all over the Mediterranean. They preferred to figuratively describe themselves as having been «to other parts of the world»<sup>37</sup> which meant working on different boats that sailed to both Christian and Muslim harbours.

### *Calling the Shots*

It was a past tendency among historians, but also among sixteenth- and seventeenth-century travellers to depict people living on frontier territories as exotic, different, traditional, sensual and fanatic in an ignorant sort of way. In other words, the images given of these frontier territories, irrespective of whether they were in Europe or in North Africa, were of a passive backward world, monolithic in nature and exotic in its alienism. This was the image left by Nicola de Nicolay of the Central Mediterranean world. His detailed descriptions were sent to the press in Antwerp in 1576.

This apparent 'cultural backwardness' receded with the develop-

<sup>37</sup> AAM, *SL*, 27.II.1603; 30.III.1622; 3.II.1624; 7.IX.1624; 19.XI.1624; 20.VIII.1624; 20.I.1634; 8.V.1635; 13.VI.1636; 13.XII.1636; 10.II.1637; 12.II.1637; 14.IV.1640; 3.VII.1640.

ment of new cities in Malta, introducing to the island new cosmopolitan urban centres focusing around the new city of Valletta. But this new image could only be achieved by the input of the migrants whom I wish in this part to focus on, in particular through their contribution in breaking down Malta's insularity. All this occurred in the shadow of the Hospitallers' fabric. From the moment they set foot in Malta, the Knights of St. John called the shots.

In concrete terms, the Hospitallers' policy to turn the Island into a Mediterranean centre can be summarized in three words; implicit, ministerial and documentary. It was implicit as the presence of the Hospitaller Knights, the flower of the European aristocracy, was in itself an economic and a cultural asset. The main source of the Hospitallers' revenue came from the Order's extensive territories all over Europe.

The way by which the Order carried out the financing of the Island is perhaps the most implicit example that helped Malta break away from the Braudelian model of an isolated world. The Knights of St. John had a ring-fenced finance system. As an ecclesiastical institution, its vast European territories were supposedly to be only enjoyed by the Hospitaller members of the Order. This implies that part of their revenue had to be shipped to the Convent. For the first time Malta had a direct source of income.

Thanks to these financial resources, a constellation of fortifications was built all over the island, making Malta impregnable to corsairing intrusion. Money was also employed towards the changing of the local landscape. A new geographical and cultural scenario came into being, which made Malta more attractive to the more refined visitors. Foreign travellers began to call in Malta and the island found its place on the *Grand Tour* route.

The Hospitallers' policy was also ministerial as the Knights took over the real administration of the island. The head of Malta was no longer living in a distant land, as was the case before 1530, but was directly present on the island<sup>38</sup>. It was in Malta that the Hospitallers set their seat of power. This direct presence meant that any administrative, juridical or political issue was to be resolved by the Grandmaster, who acted as an autonomous prince or despotic monarch. The Knights began to implement from above the necessary political

<sup>38</sup> C. DALLI, *Iz-Zmien Nofsani Malti*, Malta, 2002, p. 217.



reforms, establishing a hierarchical system which while being anti-democratic in essence – there was more democracy in the Middle Ages – effected the necessary changes and reforms, in particular in the judicial field where the most prominent European jurists were commissioned to draft Maltese legislation. In the field of art, the Order sought the direct services of the best Italian artists, and the list includes Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Mattia Preti, and Giovanni Battista Piranesi. It employed the best European architects and military engineers, among whom were Antonio Ferramolino, Bartolomeo Genga, Francesco Laparelli, Romano Carapeccchia, and Maurizio Valperga. In the field of medicine, important foreign doctors were called to the island, as the sixteenth-century plague expert, Pietro Parisi. In the eighteenth century, the advice of the famous French physician Vic d’Azir was sought on mephitic diseases. The Knights were not afraid to import into Malta new technologies from Europe, as in the building of an aqueduct system or investing in new shipbuilding techniques. In the eighteenth century, the state directly intervened to set up a proper university where scientific matters, in particular medicine and mathematics, were given extensive importance.

Finally, in the function of modern states, these reforms were extensively documented, both by keeping the relevant archives but also by informing the public, during the recurring issues of proclamations, about the rulers’ exigencies and law implementation. The above-mentioned reforms and activities were communicated to the local population by extending the use of the town’s criers and the printing press. The Knights had desperately sought to introduce the printing press in Malta, while seeking an absolute monopoly on it to exercise better control over the Maltese elite.

The presence of foreigners in Malta testified to the success of the Hospitallers’ policies. On the international field, the Hospitallers opened embassies or had diplomatic representatives in all the principal Catholic cities of Europe. These buildings helped to make the name of Malta better known abroad. A cultural and economic legacy began to be developed abroad propagating the name of the island of Malta. In return, Malta ceased to appear to the major European Courts an ‘isolated world’, an unknown entity or a place of little importance. This new perception extended all along the main harbour cities of the Mediterranean. The latter became the principal catchments from where the Hospitallers recruited most of the

people to fill posts in the expanding economic, cultural and maritime sectors. The island began to offer opportunities not only to military personnel, but also to traders, artisans and sailors engaged in commercial shipping. A twofold situation developed: the Knights encouraged the settlement of migrants in Malta, who in turn passed their skills to the Maltese; or else the local or foreign gentry supported members from the endogenous community or even from amongst the migrant families to study abroad. In both fields, the Hospitallers successfully called the shots.

The inhabitants of the Mediterranean were accused of being disinclined to leave their confines and whenever they did so the soil of their native land remained too tightly clung to their shoes. Trade, wars and education set people moving. Yet the most important cultural change came through schooling; this educational horizon was unexpectedly, geographically extended. Until 1530, the endogenous population had rarely gone beyond the Sicilian shoreline. Already in the first decades of their rule, young students were sent abroad to study. Local architects and artists received financial support from the Knights or the local Church to specialise in the principal European countries, foremost in Rome. In the medical field, the University of Montpellier had a great impact on the local curriculum. It received its first students from Malta in the 1540s and remained popular with the Maltese elite up to the late eighteenth century<sup>39</sup>. Even in the field of theology, Sicily lost much of its pride of place. Throughout the late Middle Ages, Sicilian dioceses were the preferred destination for those aspiring to the priesthood. By the second half of the sixteenth century, Rome but also the Sorbonne University began to figure more prominently in the local records. Between 1555 and 1560, two Maltese students, Pietro Terrana<sup>40</sup> and Pietro Micallef<sup>41</sup>, received a scholarship from the Bishop of Malta to study theology in Paris. Between 1606 and 1610, another young Maltese pupil, Giovanni Matteo Rispoli, son of a third generation family of Neapolitan migrants, was sent to study theology at the Sorbonne in Paris<sup>42</sup>. It is not my intention to focus on the achievements

<sup>39</sup> R. ELLUL-MICALLEF, *Men from Montpellier*, forthcoming.

<sup>40</sup> ARCHIVUM CATTEDRALIS MELITENSIS (ACM), Misc. 275, f. 90.

<sup>41</sup> ACM, Misc. 275, f. 90v.

<sup>42</sup> F.I.M. DE RISPOLI, *Status Controversiae Praedefinitionum et Praedeterminationum cum Libero Arbitrio*, Paris, 1609.

of these three men. Neither is it my desire to account for their abilities and success. Their academic endeavours were deemed appropriate to the Sorbonne *Alma Mater*, as their works were seen to be a true expression of the theological issues that were inflaming the Christian west at the end of the sixteenth century. They struggled to keep Malta abreast of the dogma of the Catholic Church. Rispoli, in particular, had studied the debates engulfing the Jesuit and the Dominican theologians of his time i.e., the nature of free will. His work found acclaim in Paris to the extent of being published by one of the printing houses in Rue Jacob.

The Rispoli were not the only family of foreign migrants to make headway in Malta. The surname of Pietro Terrana, the above-mentioned Maltese who was sent to Paris, implies endogenous origins. The next two centuries would produce other families, of exogenous origins, who would climb the social ladder. Here I would like to mention three. The Desain and Percomotti families can be cited as seventeenth-century examples of humble *maestri* who settled in Malta and through their alliances with the Church and State enhanced their family's social status<sup>43</sup>. The Prepaud family can be taken as an example of an eighteenth-century migrant family in Malta, who moved to a high level of commercial excellence by exploiting their trading relations with the Levant<sup>44</sup>.

### Conclusion

According to Braudel, «the commonest way in which the islands entered the life of the outside world was by emigration»<sup>45</sup>. «All the islands – continues Braudel – exported their people». Even if the migration records leave much to be desired, this was the case of Malta in Early Modern Times, with the difference that unlike many of the other islands, the out-migration flow in Malta was counter-balanced by a bigger in-migration input. As I sought to highlight in this paper, the breaking out of Malta from its cocoon of isolation

<sup>43</sup> S. MERCIECA, *The Possession of Titles in Early Modern Malta*, forthcoming.

<sup>44</sup> S. MERCIECA, *Commerce in eighteenth-century Malta. The Story of the Prepaud Family*, in *Consolati di Mare and Chambers of Commerce*, Conference (Valletta, 1998), ed. C. Vassallo, Malta, 2000, pp. 185-197.

<sup>45</sup> F. BRAUDEL, *The Mediterranean* cit., I, p. 158.

can be summarised by referring to two factors. The first was its participation in international or regional military operations. The second one was in the better use of its human resources. The latter can be considered as the most difficult to achieve, in particular in a historical context where the Mediterranean seashore provinces were often short of men<sup>46</sup>. In the context of such disadvantages, the migratory experience is more significant than commonly thought. It played a significant role in placing Malta on the European map.

While the military aspect had been extensively analysed, the contribution of the migrants to the development of Maltese culture and economy was often underestimated, with the exception of some important artists or very skilled craftsmen whose media of communication made their impact more durable. Yet, this success is also due to endogenous families and other migrants whose experiences have never attracted the attention of historians, and who form part of that group whom Eric R. Wolf defines as people without history<sup>47</sup>.

For some of the migrants, Malta may have been a disappointment, but for the many who stayed, the island was a place that offered them hope and the love of their life. Studying the parish records, one can conclude that the settlers did not try to recreate their native cultures. They had a 'complementary identity', that is, they viewed themselves, or else were forced to view themselves, as Maltese. The fact that they were of the same religion as the Maltese, helped them to better integrate with the native community. Secondly, the Latinisation policy carried out by the Church led to some harmonisation of different ethnicities, even among the Italians, who in Early Modern Times did not perceive themselves as a nation. One can also affirm that no form of overt ethnic tension was present in Malta. Behind this fact lay the strong familial ties operating within local kinship patterns. Marriage gave to most of the migrants, irrespective of their ethnic origins, one mindset; in principle, they were seeking a better life, and without doubt many found through marriage not only a partner but also thanks to the presence of the Knights, a welcoming cosmopolitan environment that made their stay in Malta much easier. Perhaps, while in-migration went hand in hand with the described military operations, the ultimate success lay in the solid contribution of these migrants, and the ability of the

<sup>46</sup> F. BRAUDEL, *The Mediterranean* cit., I, p. 147.

<sup>47</sup> E.R. WOLF, *Europe and the People without History*, Berkeley, 1997.

local inhabitants to peacefully assimilate them. This aided the Maltese Islands' emergence from their medieval isolation. This was a well-known and visible fact, which did not escape the eyes of an eighteenth-century traveller, Patrick Brydone, who rightly described eighteenth-century Malta as «an epitome of all Europe»<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> P. BRYDONE, *Tour through Sicily and Malta*, London, 1773, II, p. 338.