

# AN OVERVIEW OF A PROBLEM IN HOSPITALLER NAVAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

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*Abstract - The Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta, frequently referred to as the Religion or the Hospital, is a particular institution. Recognised by Pope Paschal II in 1113, this centuries old Order had a double raison d'être - To offer hospitality to Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem and to pursue the Holy War against the Infidel. However, the fall of Acre to the Saracens in 1291, made it impossible for the Hospitallers to fulfill their original vocation. After the capture and transformation of Rhodes into their base, they had to find a way of justifying their existence. They quickly came up with a characteristic answer - to wage naval war against Islam. So successful did the Knights become in this new role that the marine branch of the Order's military activities was to come to the greatest prominence, in Rhodes and later in Malta. What were the characteristics of the Order's navy? Small numbers, excellent design and an enviable tradition became the chief qualities of this small but effective navy. What, however, did the Hospitallers do with their galleys? Did they wage war on Islam? Or did their activities degenerate into privateering? This issue is hotly debated by historians of the Order. European Historians have a habit of shuddering away from accusing the Hospitallers of indulging in the corso, as corsairing is known in this context. This paper examines the topic in an attempt to unravel what has become a veritable Gordian knot.*

## **Introduction**

Since the dawn of civilization, dark deeds and tales of derring-do have always fascinated mankind. As such, tales of piracy and privateering have simultaneously chilled and delighted countless generations. The breathtaking daring of a Drake or a Sir Henry Morgan, the black deeds of a Barbarossa or a Dragut and the literary delights of Long John Silver and Captain James Hook are all part of a tradition reaching back to Greek myths such as Jason's expedition for the Golden Fleece and Homer's Odyssey.

The Mediterranean has only relatively recently been purged of the tor-

ment of the corsairs. Since classical times, piracy has been the scourge of the Inland Sea. From the corsair republic of Cilicia in classical times to the corsair states of North Africa and Europe, such as Valletta, Leghorn and Pisa, these reckless brigands of the sea have carved their crime stained legends on both the Europeans and Mediterraneans alike, thus, in doing so, providing ample material for scrutiny and criticism.

The advent of Islam imparted a new impetus to this age old profession by providing a framework of sanctimoniousness within the parameters of a *Jihad* (the Just War of the Hospitallers), effectively granting moral justification for what was already an extremely appealing way of life. Now, by having pandered to the veneer of civilization that stops most men from indulging wholesale the more reprehensible modes of behaviour, Christianity and Islam had condemned man to several centuries more of legalised brigandage.

After the expulsion of the last Moors from Granada in 1492 and the conquest of Rhodes in 1522, the political situation in the Mediterranean flared up dramatically. On one side of the Mediterranean, the dispossessed Moriscoes of Spain faced making the hard choice between starvation or resorting to the *corso*, while the fall of Rhodes finally gave the Turks unrestricted access to the sea, thus paving the way for them to play a much greater role in the politics of the Mediterranean. In a matter of 30 years the North-Western region of the Mediterranean found itself under siege from the very virile and desperate corsairs by sea and the might of the Turkish Army by land. However, by 1574, owing to the Hapsburg recapture of Tunis and *La Goletta*, the powder keg created by Christendom's precarious situation, was appreciably defused to the extent that Salvatore Bono (1993 : 358) feels justified in writing that by this time was produced

*An equilibrium between the two rival blocs ... with Turkey and Spain swiftly diverted away from the Mediterranean by the force of other threats and more pressing problems elsewhere, the grand old sea faded says Braudel "out of the limelight" of history.*

It is upon this canvas, a background of gradual decline, that the author purposes to tackle a major historiographical problem, of this "minor and anarchic" war in the Mediterranean, through the sources of secondary literature. One hardly needs to describe how valuable such sources can be as a gauge of the mentality that produced them and on those other works that

made use of them. As befits the scope of this work, this paper will be focusing in particular on the public participation of the Hospitallers in the *corso*.

### Were the Hospitallers corsairs?

A major problem faced by historians is whether and to what extent the Hospitallers were corsairs. Can one correctly define all those expeditions that yield booty as corsair expeditions? Or do we have to stick to the formal definition of corsairing? The problems that lie here are manifold, particularly for the unwary, and this is the single most glaring problem the author has encountered in this field during his researches on Hospitaller naval history. Many historians studying the corsairs may deal with either the Hospitallers as private or lay individuals or both, but very few deal with the Hospitallers as an Order. Indeed so intricately are the two issues combined that any scholar trying to assess the Order's formal participation in corsairing runs into very real difficulties.

For the sake of clarity the author is going to adopt Michel Fontenay's definition of corsairing, as it is the most exhaustive and pertinent and, due to this reason, it is going to be quoted in its entirety. Michel Fontenay (1975 : 78) says that:

*The corsair ... works privately on his own account (whence his English appellation: Privateer), but recognized by the law of man, he makes part of the armed forces of the country whose flag he flies. Thus, the corso, was effectively a compromise between individual and state interest: It was for this last reason that he was particularly eager to get rid of his prizes through commerce which in this respect (and others) was an essential activity. This results in two main distinctive characteristics of privateering:*

1. *It was only possible during times of war, which makes us conclude that far from being the norm, it is a sporadic activity.*
2. *An essential part of international law, thanks to the evolution of neutrals' rights, was that privateering was directed exclusively against the enemy.*

Henceforth any use of the word "corsair" and "*corso*" will refer to Fontenay's definition while piracy will be used to describe such illegiti-

mate activity as preying on all and sundry, regardless of state, faith and race. Incidentally, the first characteristic of Fontenay's definition is still in keeping with the Hospitaller corsair war, because for the Hospitallers the enemy was the infidel and thus in this respect, the war perpetual.

This definition might be expected to solve the problem of the Order's participation in the *corso* because according to Michel Fontenay (1975 : 78), corsairing is the domain of the private individual. Unfortunately it does not, as in another work of his, Michel Fontenay (1988 : 365) says that:

*The study of the instructions of the Grand Master to the captains and generals of the galleys show that there were three types of belligerent missions...the third of which was and these were the most frequent, ordinary missions of this type, to corseggiare a danno d'infedeli.*

This is undoubtedly an anomaly as with very few exceptions, no formal navy engaged in practices so manifestly individual. In fact, it clearly contradicts Fontenay's (1975 : 78) definition in that "*the corsair works privately on his own account*". Numerous examples can be given of this. Probably the most famous example to spring to mind is the notorious Sir Francis Drake who, whilst occasionally serving in the queen's navy, certainly falls into this category as any privateering he indulged in, was on his own account. In fact it was only the wiliness of the queen's decision to knight him that obtained, for the crown, a proportion of the spoil he captured during his circumnavigation of the globe.

As Peter Earle (1970 : 107) observes, amongst the exceptions to this general rule were the Barbary Corsairs, for whom the distinction in organization between state-owned and private ships was non-existent. In the anarchical state of affairs that prevailed on the North African coast, a rapacious though skillful freebooter such as Kheyr-ed Din Barbarossa would find the throne of a territory, or city, ripe for him to take, creating a situation wherein it becomes impossible to define precisely where State interests end and private interests begin. This, however, is not applicable to the Hospitallers who were a (relatively) law-abiding order and even if they were not disposed to respect the law, financial considerations would -and indeed did- prove effective at keeping them in a reasonable frame of mind. From this perspective, the very specific Magistral instructions are very surprising indeed, especially as there were no lack of adventurous characters on the island willing to supply the proper corsair element and a cut of their profits to the government.

As it is an undoubted fact that the Hospitallers, both on private owned ships and on the Order's galleys *did* practise corsairing, many historians do not deny it but seek instead to exculpate the Order from the "crimes" committed by its members, on one ground or another. Peter Earle (1970 : 107) states that the reason he considers the navy of the Order as a navy and not as corsairs is because the navy was "*guilty of behaviour which could not be true of any self-respecting corsair. It did not make a profit!*". This is contradicted by Schermahorn (1929 : 227), who says that the Order's navy had:

*The advantage of being largely self-supporting, of making one hand wash the other so to speak. For the rich booty, the captured cargoes and ships and the ransom or sale of Moslem slaves, supplied a substantial subsidy not only to the maintenance of the fleet but also to the order itself.*

A few pages later on, Schermahorn (1929 : 231) goes on to give an example of the importance of these noble corsairs, not only to the Maltese economy but even more so to the Order's, when in 1679, the Grand Master had to recall all corsairs sailing under the flag of St. John due to pressure from Rome and Venice. These must have all been knights because the Grand Master threatened them with the loss of their habit if they failed to comply. However "*the treasury would have become bankrupt without them, and they were soon re-armed*". Michel Fontenay (1988 : 365) has this to say on the matter:

*Many historians seek to exculpate the Order's naval activities from semantic and thematic association with corsairing on the grounds that the Order was a Sovereign state with its own politics and ideological motivations. However the Order itself did not bother overmuch with these scruples. The Magistral instructions are very clear: fare una scorribanda on the enemy coast in wait of di qualche buon effetto al profitto della nostra Sacra Religione et della Cristianita and the word 'profit' is not used figuratively: di qualche rica presa, di qualche guadagno.*

Approaching this problem from another angle demanded an examination of the mode of attack the Hospitallers employed at sea. If they were, as many apologists insist, mainly employed in policing the seas against the infidel corsairs, one would expect this to be reflected in the type of

tactics they employed during battle, i.e. that of sinking their enemies. If on the other hand they were involved in active corsairing, then it is more likely that they relied on boarding their prey. Unfortunately, one tends to find controversy even in this field. Salvatore Bono (1993 : 377) says that the firing capacity of the Hospitaller galley must have served solely to distract the enemy vessel. He goes on to say that it was important to make the largest number of men prisoners and therefore slaves and to take possession of the ship's cargo. This, of course, is the behaviour of a corsair and thus Bono's view is directly at odds with what Sire (1994 : 90) has to say:

*The Barbary vessels carried few guns and large crews, aiming at swarming aboard their victim and capturing it intact; the Maltese ships, by contrast, were more famous for their gunnery, since their ethos emphasized combat more than rapine.*

Sire's statement is fallacious both in substance and in implication. In the first place, it does not follow that the Maltese were famous for gunnery because their ethos emphasized combat more than rapine. It simply means that the Maltese crews had more practice in battle than their Barbary counterparts which, of course, makes sense if one considers that for the Hospitallers the *corso* was but one aspect of the whole war itself. Also the tone of Sire's statement implies that the Knights were more interested in keeping the waters clear from Barbary corsairs than corsairing for profit. This apologetic position is confuted by Fontenay's revelation in the paragraph above. Further investigation reveals that Sire lifted his statement almost bodily from Earle (1970 : 133), however Earle does not tell us that the Maltese relied on their excellent gunnery because they were out to sink and not loot, he merely states the fact that they relied heavily on artillery when they had to fight a battle against a well armed opponent and this is common sense as artillery is just as effective against personnel as it is against the vessels themselves. In fact, the artillery's main function was to overwhelm the enemy defense or to disable a ship by shooting two hemispheres linked with a chain to destroy the enemy ship's masts or oars. This naval tactic had been utilised since classical times when a galley would first shower its opponent with arrows and then board. It is true that artillery greatly reduces the number of slaves but it does not -usually - kill the passengers, probably cowering below deck, who being more important than the crew would obtain a

higher ransom. Furthermore, the risk of damaging the cargo, well packed in the hold, was minimal.

Further investigation reveals more lack of consensus. In the course of his research, the author got the impression that the Maltese were excellent gunners, probably due to the enthusiasm with which this point is usually emphasised. He was therefore intrigued to read in a work by Claire-Elaine Engel (1968 : 228) that "*the gunners of Malta were bad.*" This is quite a departure from the other views so an attempt was made to find further evidence of this in the pages of a work that focused entirely on the Maltese crews of the Order's ships, Ettore Rossi's *I Maltesi Dell'Ordine Di San Giovanni* but no mention was made of the quality of Maltese gunners. However, the importance of Engel's work lies in the fact that for her, there is no question about the corsairing activities of the Order. Unequivocally, Engel (1968 : 228) states that

*In Malta, corsairing was carried out in three different forms. In the first place, one had the fleet of the Order, flying the flag of Malta (white cross on a red background), commanded by the knights and manned by the slaves of the Order"*

Engel clearly distinguishes between the public and private *corso* of the knights because she goes on to describe the latter as the second form (the third form being private *corso* by the Maltese subjects of the Grand Master) and in fact her description of the Hospitaller mode of attack tallies perfectly with her views:

*The attacks on enemy ships were every day more audacious. Boarding was the established rule of the day for quite a number of reasons: it was more dashing, the gunners of Malta were bad, and there was less risk of sending the booty to the bottom of the sea or of the enemy ship managing to escape.*

I find this the more plausible interpretation of the lot. Some of its component parts agree with those of other scholars like Salvatore Bono and I think that it fits in well with the available evidence.

In an interesting postscript to the Hospitaller private vs. public *corso* argument, in Schermahorn (1929 : 137), one reads of the Cardinal Grand Master Verdala's desire to send a galley on the *corso* and this appears to

have stirred up a hornet's nest. The Inquisitor Cefalotto complained about this saying that :

*The private corso is damaging to the public corso of the Order, because it takes the best slaves and interferes with the arming of the Religion's navy.*

On its own, this evidence would be very convincing on the subject, but taken together with the others, it seems to be a pretty damning indictment.

## Conclusion

If the evidence seems to make it clear that the Order had no hesitation in engaging in overt corsair activities, why do so many of its apologists insist on defending the Order from a charge the Hospitallers pleaded guilty to with disarming honesty? There are many reasons why authors and historians would seek to liberate the Order from the accusation of privateering and piracy and this is mainly due to the very negative fame of the Moslem Corsairs<sup>1</sup> -whose notoriety shines undimmed even today- and to a jingoism that pervades the older works, particularly of amateur historians<sup>2</sup> who, even when glorifying the cut-throat feats of the knights, insist on describing them as activities substantially more virtuous than those of their Moslem counterparts. There are also those who do so either because they have some pretensions of association with the Hospitallers or are actually knights themselves. In this context one can mention people like Robert Von Dauber. By their omission and ambiguity, such historians appear to feel, and certainly imply, that the participation of the knights in the "*guerrue de corse*" proper is not worthy of the spirit of the sieges of Rhodes and Malta. As Engel (1968: 233) points out, the war of the *corso*, however, "*was a political, economic and religious necessity for Malta*" and thus, there is no reason why the public *corso* should be considered shameful or unworthy.

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<sup>1</sup> Dragut remains the best known villain in local folklore

<sup>2</sup> see Vincenzo Bonello's article on "*La Marina Del'Ordine di Malta*" for an excellent example of this type of history.

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