

The Early Modern licensed *ridotto*: an attempt to ‘domesticate gambling’? (1650–1798)¹

Noel BUTTIGIEG, MA

Visiting Lecturer, Institute of Tourism, Travel & Culture,

University of Malta

e-mail: nbut0003@um.edu.mt

Abstract: *During the early modern period gambling assumes a greater importance in the everyday life of the Maltese urban dweller. Strict anti-gambling legislation promulgated by the Knights of St. John (1530–1798) was not enough to curb what was seen as a profligate practice. For the authorities gambling was associated with violence, usury, fornication, excessive spending, blasphemy, voluntary poverty, or any attempts to win the favours of fortune or divine assistance through magic. Nevertheless, the pervasive behaviour of the urban dweller supported by the exigencies of a maritime centre soon thwarted the Order’s view on the extent of effective anti-gambling control. Gambling gradually developed from simple backroom activities into licensed public games rooms known as *ridotti*.*

Keywords: *Gambling, Order of St John, *ridotti*, urban culture.*

Introduction

By the closing decades of the seventeenth century, gambling became a major feature of social life within the Maltese harbour littoral. To the government of the knights of St John (1530–1798) and the ecclesiastical authorities, the gambler was associated with vice and disrepute. As a reaction to this urban phenomenon, the Hospitaller policy-makers attempted to transform back-room gambling into licensed gambling houses. In safe-guarding social and moral values, the grand master reluctantly allowed these secluded gambling centres to exist as part of a campaign to ‘domesticate gambling’ and its associated unorthodoxy. The gambling den was one of the most visited places. Its clientele was largely of a foreign extraction, participants in Malta’s multifarious trade.

Few Maltese scholars have as yet studied gambling and its associate culture. The study of gambling behaviour or its influences on social institutions has been relatively ignored by local historians. Despite this paucity of historical literature on the subject of gambling, one cannot start without mentioning the pioneering

¹ A version of this paper was read at the annual meeting of The Renaissance Society of America, held in Venice, 8–10 April 2010.

work of Giovanni Bonello. His short study gives us a brief overview of different aspects related to the gambling experience during Hospitaller rule.² Bonello also looks into the local playing card makers and builds on previous studies by Trevor Denning, Joseph Schiró, and John Thorpe.³ Otherwise, gambling has mainly been a secondary topic only mentioned *en passé* in relation to other broader themes such as poverty, blasphemy, or similar forms of social deviance.

This study attempts to explore the development of public games rooms, otherwise referred to as *ridotti*. The present discussion starts off with a short, and in no way exhaustive, assessment of socio-cultural behaviours associated with gambling. The growing popularity of gambling is then contextualised within the perception highlighted by some official legislative measures promulgated between 1680 and 1798. The focus of the study then probes into the *ridotto* itself. Legislative measures are here employed again to highlight the gradual official recognition of licensed *ridotti*. Finally an attempt is made to suggest a variety of explanations and reflections related to the official programme of licensed *ridotti* and the ‘domestication of gambling’.

The gambling space

Almost everybody knows intuitively what gambling is. Nonetheless, several core elements are essential before any activity can be associated with gambling. Basically, gambling games depend on an agreement between at least two players who are voluntarily motivated to exchange items of value on the basis of an event with an uncertain outcome.⁴ Consequently, betting on games is neither dependent on nor restricted to a particular card or dice game or events such as horse-racing or lotteries. Rather, any leisure time, whether it is a game or an event could immediately be turned into a gambling activity if money is waged.⁵ Playing, and especially gambling, is neither bound to a specialized location. Johan Huizinga, author of *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Elements in Cultures*, explains how magicians, priests, and gamblers all begin their work by circumscribing a consecrated spot.⁶ Any chosen

²G. Bonello, ‘Gambling in Malta Under the Order’, *Histories of Malta – Ventures and Adventures*, Vol.6, Malta, 2005, pp. 48–66.

³G. Bonello, ‘Maltese Playing Card Makers 1684–1750’, *The Playing Card*, Vol. 32, III, 2005, pp.191–97; J. Schiró, ‘Eighteenth Century Playing Cards’, *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. 5, II, 1999, pp. 9–13; J. Schiró & J. Thorpe, ‘Playing Cards with a Malta Connection’, *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. 7, II, 2001, pp.17–22.

⁴A. Blaszczyński, A History of Gambling, www.eap.com.au/blaszczky.htm (26.11.2003) This paper approaches gambling more from a psychological perspective although several arguments lend themselves well to the current study. See also J.F. Smith & V. Abt, ‘Gambling as Game’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 474, 1984, pp.122–32.

⁵Local eighteenth-century archival evidence suggests concern about the excessive sums of money waged that tarnished even some simple popular games.

⁶J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, London, 1970.

gambling site by two or more players originates from a relaxed agreement with the players' high hopes of winning some easy money. Local records abound with references to various sites, both public and private, in which games were played and money was waged.

The Frenchman Joannes Thesaud played a game of *boccie* in a street behind the slaves' prison in Vittoriosa.⁷ Joannes Galea, a 19-year-old from Valletta and his friend Vincenzo spent the night playing cards in the auberge of Italy.⁸ Frà Giacinto de Frachis and Frà Alessandro Vuaz gambled in the house of Amadet situated close to the monastery of St Catherine in Valletta.⁹ In March 1743, four slaves were found gambling close to one of the two cavaliers within the Valletta bastions.¹⁰ Gambling happened in the prison cells of the Holy Office. A pair of dice had been recorded as part of the objects found in the jailer's room in an early seventeenth-century inventory of the Inquisitor's palace.¹¹ During the same period, the prison warden Giuseppe Galdes further enhanced gambling activities since card or dice games could happen on his *tavoliere da giocare*.¹² Board games, such as backgammon, were also found in the slaves' prison situated in Valletta.¹³ Some convalescent patients often met to play and even gamble in the lower internal courtyard of the *Sacra Infermeria*.¹⁴

Scholarly works also mention the presence of gambling in taverns located within the harbour towns. Apart from supplying the consumer with basic daily necessities, the tavern also catered for recreational services. Men congregated in such centres, especially after a day's work.¹⁵ There, they shared news, food, drink, and, occasionally, a gambling bout. The right environment for social and moral disorder, local authorities kept a close watch over such areas until it was felt that such activity also had to be subjected to stricter state control.¹⁶

Gambling was a popular pastime among the numerous galley crew members involved in maritime activities. A penchant for gambling was a natural extension of their job, a service conducted at a high risk. Every sailor who sailed out of port

⁷ A[rchive] [of the] I[nquisition] M[alta] Crim[inial]. Proc[eedings]. Vol. 72A, case 7, f. 74: 18 September 1663.

⁸ Ibid., Vol. 71B, case 253, f. 522: 10 October 1662.

⁹ Ibid., Vol. 72A, case 44, f. 241: 15 September 1663.

¹⁰ N[ational] L[ibrary] M[alta] Lib[rary]. MS. 666, 'Giornale dal 1741–1744 tenuto dal Promotor Fiscale dell'Ordine Gerosolimitano': 24 March 1743.

¹¹ K. Gambin, *The Prison Experience at the Inquisitor's Palace*, Malta, 2002, p. 39.

¹² Ibid., 41.

¹³ G. Wettinger, *Slavery in the Islands of Malta and Gozo c. 1000–1812*, Malta, 2002, p. 550.

¹⁴ N[ational] A[rchives] M[alta], M[agna] C[uria] C[astellania], PC, 92/04, Box 497: 2 August 1769.

¹⁵ Bonello, '500 Years of Inns and Taverns in Malta', *Histories of Malta – Ventures and Adventures*, Vol. 6, Malta, 2005, p. 83–225.

¹⁶ C. Cassar, 'Popular Perceptions and Values in Hospitaller Malta', *Hospitaller Malta 1530–1798*, V. Mallia Milanese (ed.), Malta, 1993, pp. 458–59; J. Galea, 'Commercial Activity in Malta. 1650–1700' (Unpublished BA (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta, 1975), pp. 6–8.

was, given the hazards of weather, corsairing, and accidents, gambling rather than working. Moreover, for those who spent most of their time at sea, the need to seek other pleasures such as getting drunk or gamble was not unheard of. Peter Earle points out that gambling was at times a normal occurrence as an alternative to boredom on board a ship.¹⁷ An instance recorded during a secret deposition found in the criminal proceedings presided over by Inquisitor Lazzaro Pallavicino (1718–19) highlights how even the chaplain, Don Giovanni Gatt of Żebbuġ, integrated quite well with the galley crew. Apart from fulfilling his role as the vessel’s spiritual director, he even got drunk and played cards with the sailors with whom he shared the microcosmic world of the galley.¹⁸

For those sailors who were either still expected to perform on-board galley duties when at port, or else prohibited to leave their ship, any part of the vessel lent itself well to serve as a gambling den.¹⁹ When *accatapani* (police officers) raided these specific locations considered as prone to gambling, gambling objects were often thrown overboard to avoid detection. No wonder that during a recent archaeological sampling of the bottom of Dockyard Creek divers retrieved 38 antique gambling dice mostly carved out of bone or stone.²⁰

Some sailors opted for the mooring quay as an immediate, ideal, and convenient place for gambling. References to the *sbarcatore* (mooring quay) of Senglea, Vittoriosa, and Valletta were often mentioned by sailors who, one time or another, made an appearance at the Holy Office.²¹

These instances are a few examples which indicate how Malta was no exception to the urban phenomenon of public gambling. Similar to other European cities, the local urban populace engaged in playing and, more often, gambling in open public spaces, clearly visible to passers-by.²² Precisely because of these public exhibitions, the authorities showed concern about individual moral decadence. After all, gambling continued to be associated with violence, usury, fornication, excessive spending, blasphemy, voluntary poverty, and attempts to win the favours of fortune or divine assistance through popular magic.

The gambler’s confession

Gamblers came from all walks of life: knights, clergymen, forced and voluntary rowers particularly those of a foreign denomination, soldiers, corsairs, neophytes,

¹⁷P. Earle, *Corsairs of Malta And Barbary*, London, 1970, p. 186.

¹⁸AIM. *Crim. Proc.* Vol. 107 case 92, f. 492: 21 August 1719.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, Vol. 71B, case 261, f. 542: 25 November 1662.

²⁰T. Gambin, ‘A window on history from the seabed’, *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. 10, II, 2003, p. 76.

²¹AIM. *Crim. Proc.* Vol. 71B, case 211, f. 411: 16 April 1662.

²²NAM. Libr[i]. Carc[erati], 11 February 1742.

slaves, and ordinary denizens of the harbour towns. Gambling was neither a peculiar adult indulgence nor limited to one gender. Amid the strict regulations prohibiting gambling among the local youths, several boys under the age of 18 had been reported and tried for their gambling offences. Between the years 1741 and 1746, 68 youths were arrested for gambling small amounts of money.²³ For the young gambler penalties could range from a light torture session²⁴ to forced labour.²⁵ Females were also involved in what seemed to be a male-dominated practice. Dunkley considers gambling as a pastime with particular appeal to women, especially from among the female unproductive social group, such as prostitutes.²⁶ The local case study indicates how several women residing within the harbour area often managed to go to church, finish up their family chores, meet some sailors with money to spare, and possibly gamble on a modest scale. Some even got themselves into serious trouble with the authorities. A *bando* published in May 1771 identified a number of urban female denizens accused of direct and indirect involvement in gambling activities. Giuditta Xerri, Isabella Mallia, Margarita Cristoforo, Catarina Cassar, and the three sisters Rosa, Maria, and Margarita Ricau were threatened with exile from Malta.²⁷

But how is the gambler represented in the archives of the Holy Office? Those ‘unfortunate few’, as Peter Burke²⁸ and Maureen Flynn²⁹ observed, ended up in the *Camera Secreta* of the Holy Office because of blasphemous behaviour or heretical talk. Those brought forward were mainly males that belonged to the lower class strata, especially forced and voluntary rowers of a foreign origin. The reference to gambling is only secondary and often mentioned to justify the reason behind their main transgression.

The historian cannot fail to notice how expressions of frustration were not uttered in isolation, but were accompanied by additional remarks including several symbolic insults. In October 1665, Claudio Vassallo from Senglea made an appearance at the Inquisitor’s court to denounce the forced rower Mirabile di Ridolfo. Vassallo explained how, after losing when playing cards, Mirabile spat against the holy image of the Virgin Mary in the presence of other forced rowers. On the same day, and probably visiting the tribunal together, three more witnesses

²³ J. Attard, ‘Aspects of Crime in the Harbour Area. 1741–1746’ (Unpublished BA [Hons.] dissertation, University of Malta, 1995), p. 72.

²⁴ NAM. Lib. Carc. 1741–43, 6 September 1741. NLM. Lib. MS. 666, 2 January 1742. NLM. Lib. MS. 638, 5 March 1745.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, MS. 666, 26 January 1742.

²⁶ J. Dunkley, *Gambling: a social and moral problem in France, 1685–1792*, Oxford, 1985, pp. 18, 146, 211–13.

²⁷ NLM Lib. MS. 429/5: 15 May 1771.

²⁸ P. Burke, *The Art of Conversation*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 8.

²⁹ M. Flynn, ‘Blasphemy and the Play of Anger in Sixteenth-Century Spain’, *Past & Present*, 149, 1995, p. 49.

denounced di Ridolfo of the same infractions. One of these, the Sicilian Joannes Foria, tells us how the accused was popularly known as ‘The Blasphemous’. Two days later, Mirabile was apprehended and imprisoned at the Inquisitor’s palace. The period of cross-examinations took nearly two months. During the course of this investigation, the Inquisitor gained a lot of information about di Ridolfo’s character and behaviour.

Burke’s claim that the Inquisition considered such act of anger and frustration as acts of ‘aggression against God’³⁰ mirrors the position taken by Inquisitor Galeazzo Marescotti (1663–66). On 22 January 1666, di Ridolfo was read one of the harshest penalties proclaimed by Marescotti during his term of office. As part of his punishment, ‘The Blasphemous’ had to be publicly whipped in the streets of Vittoriosa. Di Ridolfo had to stand bare-footed for an hour holding a candle with his face showing on seven festive days. This had to take place while he wore an inscription explaining his transgression and with *il mordacchio alla lingua*, some kind of a clamp, attached to Di Ridolfo’s tongue or possibly a muzzle.³¹

Another common theme that transcends in several depositions filed in the records of the Holy Office relates to another stereotype. Gambling was normally accompanied by the consumption of alcohol, especially wine. For instance, the new gambling rooms of Valletta situated in the new street of the warehouses were sometimes supplied with wine from the nearby tavern popularly known as *tal Kastel*. In fact, a winning hand occasionally led for a *quartuccio* of wine on the house.³²

Gambling is about money, and the point of playing is profit. Michele de Armendariz’s book on the game of *Riversino* warns players to convince themselves that ‘games have an uncertain outcome and while one gains the other loses’.³³

It was relatively common among forced rowers and slaves summoned to any of the local secular or ecclesiastical courts to admit that material possessions were lost during gambling. One afternoon in May 1719, the forced rowers Pietro Tigatta, Francesco Spagnolo, and Mario di Caccamo all met in the gambling rooms of Senglea. There they spent some time gambling with Tigatta until he lost all his goods.³⁴ It is not unheard of that people of similar rank would gamble their daily ration of food. In March 1720 Gaetano Giarratano, a forced rower from Sicily, gambled and lost the only food made available to him for the day.³⁵ This abuse seems to have become a common practice by the second half of the eighteenth century. Consequently, the

³⁰ Burke, 67.

³¹ AIM. Crim. Proc. Vol. 72B, case 131, f. 638: 22 January 1666.

³² Ibid., Vol. 107B, case 30, f. 260: 13 November 1718.

³³ M. de Armendariz, *La Maniera di Ben Giuocare al Riversino*, Rome, 1756, p. 11. ‘che il giuoco é una sorte varia, incerta, e inconstante, e che uno ha da guadagnare, e l’altro perdere’.

³⁵ Ibid., case 123, f. 655: 21 March 1720.

³⁴ AIM. Crim. Proc. Vol. 107B, case 75, f. 434: 6 May 1719.

secular authorities ordered total prohibition of any gambling stakes involving food and drink, punishable with exile for both men and women.³⁶

Loss for a gambler constituted a number of things. Apart from the loss of movable or immovable property, it also meant loss of social status, honour, and freedom. Although this was in theory understood as part of the gamble by each player, the need to control and possibly avoid these losses was also true. In reality, players hoped for two things, fortune and/or divine intervention. According to the French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, ‘when a player joins a game he freely takes on the initiative, as if he intended to confront the invisible forces and interrogate them about their feelings towards him . . . if he wins, he surely stands in their favour; if he loses, they have turned against him’.³⁷ Supernatural intervention, thus, was believed by some to have control on gambling games.

Several members from the slave community on the island took advantage of the desire of many gamblers who aspired to magically lure fortune on their side when gambling. The forced rower Giuseppe Batta managed to purchase a *carta scritta* from the neophyte slave Giovanni Filippo. Batta was informed about the qualities of the *carta scritta* and its power to make him win at gambling.³⁸

Nothing could beat, however, the imaginative streak found in Francesco de Banda’s experiment to win in games. Hailing from Venice, the gambling hub of early modern Europe, this forced rower believed that a player could be a winner if a needle was passed three times through the left nipple of a dead man’s body and then employed when gambling by touching the other players with the same needle. With all the necessities available, and in desperate need of a winning hand, Aloisio Tucci took the initiative. As instructed by de Banda and without considering any health or safety precautions, Tucci used the needle as instructed on a dead body while going through quarantine in Marsamxetto.³⁹

These tropes represent those who one time or another considered gambling to be a pleasurable distraction from the rigors of everyday life. At the same time, the multiplicity of forms that such disorders undertook laid further emphasis on the importance of vigilance in order to prevent the collapse of the prevailing social structures.

The extent of the problem

Following the seventeenth century, the Hospitallers intensified legislative measures intended to detract what was perceived as a widespread malaise. A cursory look at

³⁶ NLM. Lib. MS. 429/5: 15 December 1768, 27 May 1771, 13 December 1775, ff. 9r–v.

³⁷ L. Lévy-Bruhl, *L’expérience mystique et les symboles chez les primitives*, Paris, 1938, cf. Flynn, p. 52.

³⁸ AIM. Crim. Proc. Vol. 72A, case 30, f. 180: 18 April 1664.

³⁹ Ibid., Vol. 69A, case 153D, ff. 248–49: 15 June 1654.

two legislative measures promulgated by the Hospitaller government further emphasize the popular gambling experience present in Early Modern Malta while indicating the challenge faced by the same authorities in controlling it.

Several decrees were published to regulate the gambling behaviour of the ordinary citizen. A clear understanding of the government's position in respect to this problem was formally established with the ascendancy of Grand Master Gregorio Caraffa (1680–90). The opening statement of a *bando* published in 1681 stated that 'It is mandated that no person, irrespective of social class or status, could organize games involving playing cards, dice or any other gambling games at any time or place . . .'⁴⁰

The language used in formulating anti-gambling legislation, following the 1681 *bando*, is an immediate indicator of the position taken by the government of the knights until their forced departure in 1798. Since evidence of this nature is more abundant for the eighteenth century, it could be said with some certainty that once this formula was established any later changes varied little.⁴¹

The success of this reforming stance, loaded with confidence and conviction is best evaluated against the reflections of Grand Master Manoel Pinto de Fonseca (1743–73). The scribe of this legislative measure reminds us of the growth in the popularity of this pastime, and the difficulties in controlling it ' . . . gambling is becoming rampant and growing every day in his Dominion wanting to, in any way possible, totally abolish and uproot gambling . . .'⁴²

These emphatic statements would lead one to suspect how even the authorities were conscious of their incapacity to control, let alone eradicate gambling. By multiplying the legislative constraints, the government generated at least two dynamics. Periodic updates of anti-gambling measures protracted several games of chance and skill, automatically increasing the number of ordinary citizens affected by the same promulgations. As a reaction to avoid detection, the ordinary citizen sought the alternative of gambling in private locations. These backroom gambling dens satisfied the urge of those players still tempted to go for broke while at the same time placed the harmless small-time gambler in the same environment of the compulsive player.

⁴⁰NLM. Lib. MS. 151. f. 100: June 1681. '*Comandiamo, che all'avvenire niuna persona di qualsivoglia conditione, e qualità che sia presume tenere giochi ne in qualsivoglia tempi, e luoghi giocare a carte, dadi o altra sorte di giochi di ventura . . .*'

⁴¹NLM. Lib. MS.641. f. 230: 25 February 1697; *ibid.*, 429/9 f. 83: 6 July 1797.

⁴²*Ibid.* 429/5, 'Bandi e Prammatiche della Gran Corte della Castellania': 15 December 1768, 27 May 1771, 13 December 1775, ff. 9r–v. '*. . . che il vizio del giuoco e cresciuto e sta giornalmente crescendo à segno molto pernicioso in questo suo Dominio e volendo per quanto si può abolirlo totalmente e troncarlo dalle radici . . .*'

The *ridotto*

The word *ridotto* is derived from the past participle of the verb *ridurre*, meaning ‘to reduce, to enclose’,⁴³ hence ‘private’.⁴⁴ Official anti-gambling legislation propelled interested players to resort to back-room gambling meetings. Gradually clandestine back-room gambling became a lucrative business hidden from the watchful eyes of the authorities. These private sittings gave rise to the first *ridotti* supported by the lower ranks of the urban populace. Against this setting, the authorities started to consider the licensed *ridotto* as another alternative to challenge the popularity of this urban phenomenon. This compelling approach was meant to treat the perils of gambling from an economic and moral standpoint in order to satisfy all parties involved without eliminating such popular pastime from the urban fabric.

Probably the earliest and most specialized gambling location available for seventeenth-century Malta was found in Valletta. The constitution of the Order of St John, the *Codice Gerosolimitano*, enacted decrees intended to prohibit gambling from among its immediate members. Occasionally, these bans were reviewed to meet the changing prevailing attitudes among the knights.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, in a 1659 court case recorded by the notary of Inquisitor Gerolamo Casanate (1658–63), we are informed how the *Illustrissimo Marisciale Girlando* used his house as a location *dove si tiene il giocho dei Cavalieri*;⁴⁶ otherwise popularly known as the *Forfantone*. This aristocratic gambling den situated opposite the auberge d’Auvergne (this building was originally situated instead of today’s law courts)⁴⁷ was also one of the main clients of the card manufacturers Inferrera and Crisafulli.⁴⁸ This gambling service was located close to the house of Catherina and Anna Russo, two prostitutes whose beds were always at the disposal of any winner willing to invest in carnal pleasures.⁴⁹

By the opening decades of the eighteenth century, the harbour towns of Valletta, Vittoriosa, Cospicua, Senglea, and Floriana offered the service of a licensed *ridotto*.⁵⁰ The commercialization of gambling as a private profitable business soon attracted the attention of the knights. The earliest reference to the term *ridotto* is found in an anti-gambling *bando* published February 1697.⁵¹ Again in October 1713, a law promulgated by the Aragonese Grand Master Ramon Perellos y Roccaful (1697–

⁴³ N. Zingarelli, *Lo Zingarelli Minore: Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana*, Bologna, 2001, p. 885.

⁴⁴ J. Walker, ‘Gambling and Venetian Noblemen, 1500–1700’, *Past & Present*, 162, 1999, p. 33.

⁴⁵ Bonello, ‘Gambling in Malta under the Order’, *The Sunday Times*, 21 August 2005, pp. 44–5.

⁴⁶ AIM. *Crim. Proc.* Vol. 70A, case 49, f. 180: 30 September 1659.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. 70B, case 70, f. 244: 18 January 1660.

⁴⁸ Bonello, ‘Gambling in Malta under the Order’, p. 65.

⁴⁹ AIM. *Crim. Proc.* Vol. 70A, ff. 53, 54: 30 March 1659.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. 107B, case 57, f. 374: 24 March 1719.

⁵¹ NLM. Lib. MS. 641. f. 230: 25 February 1697.

1720) clearly stated that players could not participate in any *gioco di parata* (gambling games) with cards, dice, or any other means especially in *ridotti*, shops, town squares, or any other public or private places. The penalty reserved for contravention amounted to the loss of all the money gambled during the sitting. Moreover, the transgressor had to serve on the galleys of the Order for the duration of a year, or pay a fine of 10 *onze*.⁵²

These legislative measures, however, underlined the futility in Perellos' attempt to reinforce tighter measures against clandestine gambling, including the elimination of unlicensed *ridotti*. Successive magistracies, similar to the classic example of Don Quixote's faithful friend Sancho Panza, understood that the elimination of unlicensed *ridotti* was a difficult, if not an impossible, undertaking. As a piecemeal alternative, the *ridotto* was allowed to operate only with the issuing of a license.⁵³

Catering mainly for the lower classes, the licensed *ridotto* became the best alternative to mitigate the apparent growing practice of public gambling and the discreet backroom gambling dens. Amid their pious conviction to bring gambling to an end, the government had to contend with the realities of their times. The grand master was prepared to allow competition as a means of low-class socialization as long as this happened behind closed doors in specifically licensed locations. Seclusion was seen as the best approach to control as much as possible a gambling culture with a long-standing history. In 1768 the two business partners Giuseppe Tortella and Gio Batta Fenech ran the gambling rooms '*ove si giuoca il maglio*' in Floriana. The few lines found in their request remains the only evidence available so far which sheds some light on the emphasis of the *ridotto*'s secluded character. In September of that same year, Tortella and Fenech were instructed to shut down their gambling rooms. The two could not understand the reason behind the closure of their business and explained that:

... moreover, these rooms are secluded and have doors that isolate this space from the outside....the adequacy of the afore-mentioned building is probably the best we can appropriate because it is situated away from the populated neighbourhood thus avoiding any inconveniences unlike the previous building which was located in the city . . .⁵⁴

The emphasis on closed doors, and thus privacy, was renewed from time to time. The last *bando* of this nature published in 1797 prohibited games from taverns and shops and mandated that licensed gambling rooms situated along public streets

⁵² Ibid.: 25 February 1697.

⁵³ Ibid., 429/9, f. 83: 6 July 1797.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 429/5, f. 92. '*(queste) stanze vengono per altro segregate ed hanno le porte divise per il di fuori . . . il luogo sudetto e il piu proprio, che si puo dare perche vien situato fuori dell'abitato e come tale non da fastidio, ne verun incommode per non essere vicini, conforme ne dare prima allor che si teneva dentro la città . . .*'

should keep their doors well locked, thus keeping any indoor activity hidden from the general public.⁵⁵

The various *Bandi* and *Prammatiche* published by the different eighteenth-century magistracies best show the special attention devoted to licensed *ridotti* as legitimate business enterprises. A step forward happened when *ridotti* were assigned operating hours. The hefty fine of 20 *onze* had to be settled if licensed gambling rooms operated between the second Ave Maria auditory signal and dawn.⁵⁶ The same penalty fell on the organizer of *ridotti* if young men, servants, or other suspected persons were allowed to enter and gamble. Emphasis was also laid on the use of foul language, threats, shouting, swearing, or other expressive actions during gambling.⁵⁷ An added boost was given to *ridotti* when the government banned the private possession of playing cards. Transgressors had to pay the heavy penalty of serving for ten years as forced rowers on the galleys of the Order.⁵⁸ Finally, the total prohibition of gambling from taverns, shops, hostels, and other public spaces elevated the role of the licensed *ridotto* into an unchallenged position.⁵⁹

Responsibility towards the services provided within a licensed *ridotto* fell squarely on the sponsor of the private enterprise. The operator, referred to as *maestro di giocho*, provided the player with the necessary set-up and ideally the right environment intended to generate fair play. It can be assumed that those who ran a *ridotto* charged money for the use of tables and the letting out of gambling accessories such as billiard tables, dice, and cards. In 1718 the Maltese Giovanni Andrea Camilleri was *maestro di giocho* running the new gambling rooms of Valletta when his cross examination was recorded by the scrivener of the Holy Office. As *maestro di giocho*, Camilleri was easily identified from the rest of the players since he wore *un giletto rosso* (a red waist coat). He must have been a tough character whose moral standards could be easily questioned. After all, these rooms were mainly hot spots of irreverent behaviour where gambling, consumption of alcohol, and hard swearing were clear affirmations of masculine behaviour. Within this environment, the *ridotto*'s sponsor emerged as the unofficial policing agent intended to enforce official legislative measures. He was held accountable for any unorthodoxy.

The details mentioned in Camilleri's case indicate how the players using his services were quite acquainted with the local legislative restrictions. He was accused of several infringements: continued gambling beyond the established closure time;

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 429/9 f. 83: 6 July 1797.

⁵⁶ *Codice Vilhena, Leggi e Costituzioni Prammaticali*, Naples, 1724, pp. xxvii, 6, 134.

⁵⁷ NLM Lib. MS. 641, f.50, as indicated in the index of this volume.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 429/1, f. 148.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

gambling with a young boy; and, when he failed to recover any of his losses, confirming his frustration through blasphemous expressions, including swearing against God and the ‘bell of God’. The heavy atmosphere around the gambling table caught the attention of several onlookers. Present during this gambling bout were Guliano Ruggero, Giuseppe Spatafaro, and two other forced rowers nicknamed *Sardineo and il Bastaro*.⁶⁰

Camilleri’s case is one of the several reported to the authorities. A cursory look into the criminal proceedings of the Holy Roman Inquisition reveals an interesting trend. Several gamblers resorted to use the services available in *ridotti* showing some compliance with anti-gambling restrictions and the role of licensed *ridotti*. For instance, during 1718, several references to the *ridotto* located in the *Strada delli Magazzini* were recorded by the scribes. Evidence indicates how this *ridotto* was visited by several players including numerous *bonavogli* (voluntary rowers) and other men who spent their free time in the public square close to the gambling rooms.⁶¹

The establishment of *ridotti* should not be seen as a result of the scale as much as the organization of the activity. The authorities were still aware that gambling took place in a variety of places, some of which could not be easily detected by law enforcement officers. Therefore, the licensed *ridotto* and its partial legitimacy encouraged the gambler to operate his interests with less danger. The references to gambling rooms during depositions could be simply relegated as a point of reference mentioned by the individual during the interrogation process. However, the specific mention by players or onlookers visiting gambling rooms indicates the need or responsibility to show to the authorities that their gambling practices were happening within the legislative constraints as stipulated by the government and thus not involved in clandestine gambling. On the other hand, the player was given the responsibility to patrol over other participants and report any illicit behaviour. Consequently, the *ridotto* did have some affect on the process of ‘domesticating gambling’.

Conclusion

The licensed gambling house is seen as a proactive exercise intended to group people with common pastime interests into licensed secluded private spaces emphasizing class cohesion and competition among equals. The presence of several players and onlookers during the playing of games generated a modicum towards controlled socializing. The gambling table knew neither languages nor frontiers. Disciplining the considerable number of foreigners who permanently or temporarily

⁶⁰ AIM. Crim. Proc. Vol. 107A, case 30, ff. 256–79: 13 November 1718.

⁶¹ Ibid., f. 261: 13 November 1718.

resided within the harbour littoral offered the government's administration a significant challenge. Especially when it came to popular simple games, gambling gave foreign players a possibility to meet and intermingle with different people within the local community. Within this context, the gambling den became the melting pot of all philosophical treatises condemning gambling and its associated social, economic, and moral disorders. Without eliminating gambling, the *ridotto* possibly offered the best solution to minimize the perils identified by political and religious commentators. Since clandestine gambling was proclaimed illegal, the licensed gambling house allowed a process of social cleansing. While containing the gambler whose manners could harm others, this legitimate gamblers' playground was also intended to educate the local members of the community who were often attracted by the displays associated with such competition.

At face value, the licensing of *ridotti* could be seen as an indicator of eighteenth-century despotism: the grand master could only rule over his vassals by institutionalizing leisure. The harsh penalties, ranging from whipping to gruesome years of forced rowing, were seen as the means by which the player's mind and body was disciplined through the manipulation of law. The treatment of gambling and its seclusion into gambling dens was intended to protect the virtuous husband, the head of the household, manager of wife and children. It was meant to protect the productive citizen whose honour could be jeopardized at the gambling table. The sponsor of the gambling den was held responsible to operate within the legislative constraints; had the duty to supervise play and safeguard the player from excessive gambling and from ruining the fortunes of his family. These objectives formed part of an apparent calculated policy of manipulation on the body's behaviour.

Gambling in Malta existed in a state of paradoxes, to a certain extent a state sponsored 'necessary evil'. This type of political intervention revealed the anxiety of the state towards a problem with no possible solution. Although the licensed *ridotto* campaign must have had some desired effect, the causes of gambling in early modern Malta were far from being understood by the local civil and ecclesiastical authorities. The contradiction in drafting exceptions to gambling and the establishment of licensed gambling dens emanates from the failure of social legislation in achieving its objectives. The urgent nature of legislative measures generated another dynamic, licensed gambling houses were sponsored by people of ill-repute. In the hands of individuals with challenging behaviour, licensed *ridotti* encapsulated the dangers of crooked games, profiteering, prostitution, and corruption. Consequently, civilizing the gambling table by avoiding any illicit behaviour required more than a particular spatial organization.