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Chapter 2

A Living Force of Continuity in a Declining Mediterranean: The Hospitaller Order of St John in Early Modern Times

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Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

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Abstract

The paper discusses two interrelated themes. From 1530 to 1798, the Order of St John, an international institution of the Church, played a significant role from its conventual base on central Mediterranean Malta—one that nourished a strong element of historical continuity within the wider context of a declining Mediterranean. This it did through its traditional twofold raison d'être—as a religious, charitable and Hospitaller Order with great expertise in medical knowledge and practice, and as a military institution whose traditional crusading zeal against Islam kept the 'clash of civilisations' alive. That is the first theme. The second theme concerns the concept of a declining Ottoman Empire and a declining Mediterranean. The paper argues against the idea that the collective impact of the great siege of Malta (1565) and the battle of Lepanto (1571) had marked the initial stage in the decline of the Ottoman Empire. It also claims that the decline of the sixteenth-century Mediterranean needs revisiting. It was only a partial change for the worse. The great geographical discoveries succeeded in robbing the Middle Sea of its primacy in international economy and exchange but in the long term failed to uproot most of its other characteristic features.

Keywords: Order of St. John, Hospitallers, Ottoman Empire, Mediterranean, North Africa, Christendom, Islam, hospitality, crusade, great siege of malta, battle of Lepanto, change, continuity, decline

1. Preamble

History is exploration, reconstruction and interpretation. It is a means 'to explain and understand', pointed out Fernand Braudel, the finest twentieth-century historian, in 1984[1], and

[1]Come possiamo proprio noi… erigerci a giudici del passato?'. See Ref. [1].

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should not be turned into 'an instrument' to pass judgement on our ancestors, their ideas, motives and beliefs, their methods, their frailties, lifestyle, strengths and weaknesses, their failures and achievements. It is within this conceptual context that the present paper seeks to address the multiple function the Hospitaller Order of St John, an international, supranational and supra-diocesan organisation [2, 3], played as a dynamic force of continuity in the early modern Mediterranean. The chapter will also briefly revisit the conventional assumptions about the latter's decline.

2. The Hospitaller institution

From its modest inception in eleventh-century Jerusalem, the Order of the Hospital, as it came to be known, the only one of its kind in the Mediterranean,[2] began gradually to assume its four predominant roles, each evoking an alluring image of the Knight Hospitaller—the kneeling monk absorbed in silent prayer, the humble servant attending to his Lords the sick and the poor, the brave and experienced soldier on the battlefield fighting for the faith, and the efficient feudal seigneur, though at times admittedly arrogant and disdainful. It was precisely the integrated performance of all these various, intimately related roles that determined the character and function of the Hospitaller in society. He was 'a constructive factor in European civilisation' [4], one that turned his Order into a living force in the Mediterranean over the subsequent 700 years until the French Revolution evicted it from central Mediterranean Malta in 1798.

Elizabeth Schermerhorn, writing in 1940, asked: 'How did [the Order] manage to persist and endure among the ruins of feudalism down to the very eve of the [French] revolution?' [4; pp. 11–12]. In her endeavour to explain this 'endurance', she identified a number of determining 'elements' [4, p. 12]. Of these, the one that had perhaps lain at the root of its 'heritage' was its massive landownership. The extensive estates it had gradually acquired through donation, purchase, inheritance and absorption spread all over Europe and consisted of all sizes, shapes, forms, architectural styles and purposes, each betraying the geography and culture of its place of origin. The Order's intelligent management and efficient administration of these lands, their cultivation, in ways like 'farming and stock-raising' and various other forms, the meticulous statutory measures rigidly governing their regular maintenance and others as stringently observed against any form of alienation—exposed in a relentless way the Hospitaller institution's contribution to 'the development of the feudal manor' [3; p. 276, 4–6].

These lands, organised into commanderies, the Order's basic units of administration, gave the institution wealth and power. Each constituted a secure source of regular revenue, a centre to recruit and train new brethren [2; p. 340], and a means of social connectivity, of maintaining contact with the common peoples of Europe. They financed all its activities in the Holy Land, on Rhodes and on Malta, in Europe and throughout the Mediterranean. They sustained its crusading ideals and traditions. They were also important 'as retirement homes [and] residences for the Order's many priests' [2, p. 340]. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Order

[2]Only the [Order of the] Hospital,' writes Anthony Luttrell, 'could claim that it underwent no essential change between 1312 and 1798' [2, p. 361].

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owned 564 commanderies. Through them the Order survived in its original privileged status until the enlightened thought of *égalité* was put permanently into rude practice. The *ancien régime* finally succumbed to the rise of the unprivileged, dragging with it the Hospitaller institution of pre-1789. The Order that eventually emerged with renewed vigour like a phoenix from the ashes was a reformed institution, an Order, religious and charitable, as it had originally been before being militarised, responding to the powerful ideals, spirit and mood of early nineteenth-century nationalism.[3] For the umptieth time, it showed convincingly its uniquely remarkable powers of resilience.

Resilience was the Order's strongest shield—its remarkable ability to recoil fairly quickly into its former shape after having experienced a severe crisis. This distinct quality had been callously tested on several occasions in its historical evolution—in 1187, the Hospitallers were evicted, along with the other military orders, from Jerusalem by Saladin; in 1291, they lost Acre to the Mamluks, never to return to the Holy Land; in 1522, they surrendered Rhodes to Suleyman the Magnificent and in 1798, French revolutionary forces under Napoleon drove them out of Malta. After each of these occasions, the Order succeeded in regaining its former state and strength.

Landownership was only one element which lay behind these powers of resilience. The other was the patronage the crowned heads of Europe were consistently willing to extend to the institution. Statute 2, on the rule governing it,[4] makes specific reference to the liberality with which the Holy See, the Catholic monarchies, principalities, duchies, republics and devout Christians dealt with the Order, enriching it with landed estates, together with a wide range of powers, jurisdictions, privileges and exemptions. It was vital for the Hospitallers to cultivate a perfectly healthy relationship with its powerful patrons. This was a reciprocal 'moral code', for in return the Order offered Europe 'direct and constant assistance against the enemies of the Christian faith'.

3. Hospitaller activity in the Mediterranean

The Order of the hospital was a religious-military institution. Its activities in the Mediterranean may be grouped into two large categories, two overwhelming obligations, which corresponded neatly with its character—charity and war—and which, in an early seventeenth-century document, were placed nearly on a par with the three monastic vows which every professed Hospitaller took on admission into the Order.[5] One was of a widely 'defensive' character, intended to extend forms of piety and protection, epitomised in its guiding principle of hospitality in its widest possible connotation. Inspired by the evangelical concept of 'love thy neighbour', it was offered to whoever needed any form of caring attention, with no restrictive qualifications of age, class, faith, gender, colour or country of origin. The second category was

[3]For the Order after the loss of Malta [7].

[4]See Volume che contiene gli Statuti della Sacra Religione Gerosolimitana; Le Ordinazioni dell'ultimo Capitolo Generale…; il Nuovo Cerimoniale prescritto dalla Santità di N. Sig. Papa Urbano VIII sopra l'Elezione de' Gran Maestri ….Borgo Nuovo MDCCXIX. Per Antonio Scionico, Stampatore Generale.

[5]This is discussed in my forthcoming book, *Lo Stato dell'Ordine di Malta, 1630*.

combative or 'offensive' in nature, always ready to launch an aggressive action. This comprised the militia principle or obligation, to wage an incessant war against the enemy of the Cross.

James Reston Jr.'s assertive definition of the state of the Knights Hospitallers after losing Rhodes as 'refugees without portfolio … wondering aimlessly' [8] is wrong and misleading. In the eight long years from 1 January 1523, the Order's movement from one place to another was partly motivated by its strong desire to secure the permanent residence on Malta which Grandmaster L'Isle Adam had requested before leaving Crete[6] and partly dictated by persistent outbreaks of plague. Negotiating the difficult conditions which Charles V had originally decided to attach to his enfeoffment of the island was a protracted diplomatic process. These years constituted a perilous odyssey indeed, where the homeless institution was exposed to potential dissolution, but they were not wasted years. Rather, immediately following the humiliation the Knights suffered at Rhodes, these years were a true trial of Hospitaller strength, an audaciously bold public relations exercise, where their spirit of charity and hospitality, their medical expertise, and participation in corsairing were, as circumstances determined, openly manifested at every stage on their tortuous way from Rhodes to Malta via Crete, Sicily, Viterbo, Nice and Villefranche [11]. These activities underscored, and were perhaps meant to underscore now more than at any other time, the institution's relevance to the general interests of Christian Europe.

4. Health and hospitality

The Hospitallers' conventual fortress on Malta, as on Rhodes, militated against two implacable enemies. Its massive walls surrounding the new city of Valletta and the rest of the Grand Harbour, together with its numerous coastal towers, had been allowed to grow into their awesome architectural grandeur not only to defend the island and scare any potential enemy away. It was a standing symbol of another traditional scourge. The Mediterranean faced a worse threat than either the Crescent or the Cross could offer the opposing half of the great sea—north and west and east and south. The plague was more brutal and devastating than the characteristic violent confrontation between the two, worse than either piracy or slavery in its deadly consequences, worse than any crusading warfare in its destruction. The Hospitallers approached its potential outbreak with unwavering rigour. Their long medical tradition, their knowledge of hygiene, their expertise and direct involvement in health management and their inflexibility in dealing with quarantine and other related mechanisms endeavoured, though not always successfully[7], to keep the plague at a comfortably secure distance, to the extent that their aggressive severity at times provoked a storm of protest from Venice's own health authorities [13].

The Grand Hospital which the Knights built on migrating from Birgu to the new city of Valletta, and 'its numerous subsidiary institutions',[8] constituted their first line of defence

[6]Grandmaster Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam, before leaving Crete, had specifically requested Emperor Charles V to grant the Order either Malta or the port city of Brindisi in Southern Italy on the Adriatic coast, offering him to pay 100,000 ducats for the award [9], and [10].
[7]Hospitaller Malta experienced severe outbreaks of plague epidemics in 1592–1593, 1623, 1655, and 1675–1676. See [12].
[8]Ref. [14]. See also Riley-Smith's observations in Ref. [2], pp. 278–279.

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against this scourge. The lazaretto, lying on an islet in Marsamxett Harbour, and the quarantine station on the Valletta quay on the Grand Harbour, offered a wide range of amenities—accommodation for crews and passengers under observation or in isolation, accommodation for animals, stores and warehouses for merchandise, facilities for disinfection and fumigation, and a chapel for spiritual needs dedicated to St Roche. These services marked an authentic continuity of those that had already been offered to the pilgrims, the sick, the poor and the homeless at the conventual hospital four centuries earlier in Jerusalem (see for example [15]). It was an unbroken tradition 'of extensive alms-giving to the poor, of doctors and surgeons, of nightly prayers in the hospital for benefactors and others led by the Order's priests, of provisions of orphans and lepers, of maternity wards and of financial support, medicine and diet, burial arrangements and the treatment of those wounded in battle' [15].

These services included, too, 'a mobile tented hospital that accompanied Christian field armies', singularly rare for the twelfth century [16, 17]. As his predecessors had done in Jerusalem, Acre, Limassol on Cyprus and Rhodes, and as he and his successors would do again on Malta, Grand Master l'Isle Adam continued, wherever the Order sojourned, to serve from his own hands 13 poor persons every morning in honour of Christ and his 12 apostles, offering bread and wine to the most wretched. The French Secretary to Grand Master Gregorio Carafa, Fra Gio. Batta Le Marinier de Cany, remarked in 1670 that these qualities formed the quintessence of the true grandeur of the Hospitaller ethos.[9] Over the very long perspective, the Order's hospices and hospitals were true centres of selfless commitment and dedication to those in need. The difference between the two conventual hospitals in Jerusalem and Malta lay solely in policies and practices that reflected the progress made in medical knowledge [15, p. 175].

Over 100 years after de Cany, the Order, now economically weakened and reduced to near impotence by the revolution in France and with hardly any powerful patron other than the papacy, was still loyal to its original principles. In 1930, on the strength of what he defines as 'a vast amount of evidence', including fruitful eye-witness accounts of travellers visiting Malta in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries [19–21], Frederick Ryan claimed that the Order remained 'faithful to the duties of Hospitality' to the end of its days in Malta' [22], and that its hospital 'was well abreast of its time from the scientific point of view', and that from the religious standpoint this great hospital was ably fulfilling, with a multitude of other activities in Malta, the great function of a centre for corporal works of mercy' [22].

From the early origin of their hospice in Jerusalem 'shortly before 1071' [23] to their surrender of Malta in June 1798, over 700 years had passed. It is remarkable that, during this very long term, generation after generation of Hospitallers never failed to understand and positively respond as dispensers of charity and hospitality to the needs and condition of the marginalised in society and to the ever pressing demands of public health. Irrespective of where their convent stood, irrespective of the prevailing socio-economic context of the Mediterranean world and irrespective of the state of their priories throughout Christian Europe, the Hospitallers'

[9]National Library of Malta, Archives of the Order of Malta, Codex 1697: Riflessioni di un Cavaliere di Malta, Religioso dell'Ordine Militare degli Ospedalieri di S. Giovanni di Gerusalemme, sopra la grandezza e i doveri del suo stato, 1670. See also Ref. [18].

main concern was ultimately the preservation of humanity. The dynamic driving force behind this ancient and unbroken tradition was their unwavering concern for the common good. As pointed out elsewhere [13, p. 204], men occupied the centre stage of their charitable activities.

5. Hospitaller crusading warfare

Within decades of the fall of Acre to the Mamluks in 1291, the Templars ceased to exist and the Teutonic Knights shifted their focus to north-eastern Europe. The Knights Hospitaller was the only Order for whom crusading warfare in the eastern Mediterranean retained its original appeal and enthusiasm. They continued to operate from their conventual base first on Cyprus, then on Rhodes and from 1530 from nearer Western Europe on Malta. Their direct and persistent involvement in holy warfare prolonged the life of the crusade to the end of the eighteenth century. Organising and participating in holy warfare justified the Order's retention of its western priories and commanderies [2, p. 334]. This early-modern form of the crusade was distinct from the old, medieval one associated with Jerusalem. Its objectives were different: the Holy Land was gone and gone forever; no vows, temporal or spiritual privileges, no plenary indulgences or remission of sins and no papal sponsorship appear to have been attached to it; no age restrictions were imposed; no physical fitness or material wealth were demanded. This post-Acre role was in harmony with the normal expectations of a dynamic religious-military institution, whose *raison d'être* after all was to pray, help and fight. It was an uninterrupted continuation of the Order's old practices, methods and beliefs.

On Malta, more perhaps than on Rhodes, Europe was converted into a new 'holy land' for the Hospitallers to defend against Islam. On the central Mediterranean island, as on Dodecanese Rhodes, the Order's military role assumed four distinct forms [24]. It participated in practically all the holy leagues, like that formed by Paul III in 1538 or by Pius V in May 1571, placing all its naval forces at the disposal of the allied Christian fleets.

On other occasions, it contributed its entire galley squadron and other craft to the Habsburgs' punitive campaigns against the infidel. To instance one classic example: in preparation for Charles V's large-scale expedition to regain Tunis, which Khaireddin Barbarossa had seized in 1534, exposing the southern coasts of Spain, Italy and Sicily to Muslim attack [25], the Order first secured the necessary supplies of food from Sicily and then had its galley squadron strengthened, raising it from four to five by launching the *Santa Caterina* in mid-April 1535. The sixth was under construction. To the four Hospitaller galleys, 200 Knights were assigned [26]. On board the *caracca Sant'Anna*, which accompanied the Hospitaller squadron, there were another 70 Knights and a strong regiment of soldiers [26]. By the end of June 1535, the allied fleet, not without great difficulty [8; pp. 366–338], took the fortress of La Goletta. By 21st July, the fortress and city of Tunis were both in Christian hands. That gave the Habsburgs complete control over the entry into the western Mediterranean from the east. The only criticism of this great achievement was that Charles V failed to follow the logic dictated by geopolitics—to follow up that victory by an immediate assault on Algiers. That came 6 years later and ended up in disaster.

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The list of similar collective enterprises can be stretched indefinitely. From Tunis to Lepanto, the role played by the Hospitallers pursued a predictably regular pattern of participation in nearly all the activities of the allied Christian fleet. Its four-galley squadron was present at Corfu (1537) [25; iii: pp. 425–427, 26; iii: pp. 170–172], Prevesa (1538),[10] Otranto and Castelnuovo in Dalmatia (1539) [25; iii: p. 446, 26; iii: pp. 186–187], and the waters of Taranto (1540) [26; iii: pp. 186–187]. That same year, too, the Order, allied to the Sicilian forces, took part in the conquest of Monastir and Susa [26, p. 194] and in the unsuccessful siege of Sfax [26; pp. 194–195]. The next year Charles V decided to repeat at Algiers what he had achieved at Tunis six years before [26; pp. 199–200, 205–211]. The allied forces reached Algiers towards the end of October. When the fall of the fortress was about to be secured, the 'natural elements' intervened in favour of the besieged. 'The besiegers', observed Mori Ubaldini, 'were immobilised for three whole days by a violent storm with torrential rains and raging winds' [30]. Giacomo Bosio, the great historian of the Order, draws a very dramatically detailed portrait of the situation on the morning of 28 October [26, iii: p. 208]. In 1550, the Hospitallers found themselves once more engaged in the allied campaign against the port town of Mahdiya (today a Tunisian coastal city, south of Monastir and southeast of Sousse) [26; pp. 243, 257–258, 266–267, 27; p. 910, 31], and in 1564, they participated in the conquest of Peñón de Velez [32].

So much has been written on the Ottoman siege of Malta (1565) and on the battle of Lepanto (1571) that they hardly need any further remarks here, but their historical significance will be brought up towards the end of the present chapter. After the siege of Cyprus and Lepanto, the Order continued to respond equally positively to requests for help from the Republic of Venice. The long-drawn-out Venetian wars first at Crete (1645–1669) and then twice at the Morea, towards the end of seventeenth century and the second decade of the eighteenth century. The Order could hardly decline requests to contribute to either of these two types of formal anti-Muslim war. Invitations emanating from the papacy, the Order's ultimate authority, were synonymous with instructions. They could not be turned down unless for a very serious reason. Neither could it dismiss with any modicum of comfort requests from the powerful Spanish monarchy, its feudal lord.

The intervals between one formal war and another, between one Holy League or Habsburg campaign (which were hardly distinguishable) and another, gave the Order some respite to accommodate its statutory provisions, ambitions and aspirations, to live up to its naval and military tradition. This was the third form of Hospitaller crusading activity when it could design its own priorities and organise similar expeditions on a less spectacular scale in all parts of the Mediterranean. The objective of such ventures on seasonal crusading cruises was to harass Muslims on land and by sea, ravage their coastal towns and villages, harass Muslim merchants, raid their shipping, seize their merchandise and carry their men, women and children into slavery [33, 34].

The corso was the fourth genre of Hospitaller warfare. The initial involvement of individual member of the Order in formal anti-Muslim corsairing activity has been assigned to

[10]Refs. [25; iii: pp. 445–447 and n. 208, 26; iii: pp. 178–180], 'Prevesa gave Islam that control of the sea of which the Christian victory at Lepanto was to deprive it in 1571' [27–29].

the first years of Spain's *Siglo de Oro* [30; p. 108], when individual Hospitaller was authorised, like other ordinary privateers, to set out on their own on what may be termed a private crusade. On 25th November 1503, for example, the Knight Ynyogo Ayalla was licensed to arm the Order's *barcia Santa Maria* and sail out on a privateering expedition in Levantine waters on condition that two-thirds of his booty would go to the Order's common treasury. The event coincided with Spain's *Reconquista*, whose unintended repercussions delivered the birth of the Barbary regencies and dramatically widened the scope for the ruthless excesses of the pirates of Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and, after 1551, Tripoli, spreading their activities over a vastly grander scale, and extended the Ottoman Empire's sphere of direct influence all along the Maghribi coast. The Barbary corsairs' activities in the Mediterranean, the sense of insecurity they created, and the general threat they offered to Christian trade proved beneficial to the Order as they highlighted the Hospitaller's political relevance in the region, providing tangible evidence in support of their claimed indispensability [32; pp. 388–397, 35–37].

These years indicated the first stages in the Mediterranean's gradual loss of the primacy it had long been enjoying in global economy [38, 39]. Hospitaller privateering, under the guise of crusading activity and covered by the magistral emblem or the Order's eight-pointed cross, eventually escalated into an endemic warfare, reaching spectacular peaks in the next century. These colourful exploits against Islam undertaken both by individual members of the Hospital and by a wide section of the native population were reconfirmed when the Order moved from Rhodes to the central Mediterranean and encouraged to develop into a major industry on Malta. Indeed, the island itself was transformed into a thriving corsair base with a flourishing international slave market. No wonder the Venetian Senate in the late 1580s dubbed the Hospitallers 'corsairs parading crosses' [40], who fostered a culture of piracy, ransom and plunder.

6. 'Coexistence and symbiosis'

In history, long-held assumptions often need to be revisited. In *Venetians in Constantinople*, Eric Dursteler argues how thin the distinction was between word and action, between rhetoric and reality, how 'porous' and 'pliable', the borderline or frontiers were between the two in matters of faith and geopolitics in the early modern Mediterranean world. Within the broad framework of the ideological chasm between Christianity and Islam not only were 'coexistence and symbiosis' possible; they were 'almost certainly the quotidian norm rather than the exception'. He questions the historical validity of the traditional reconstruction of these two powerfully determining forces as being in perpetual engagement 'in a life-and-death struggle' [41]. The relationship between Venice and Constantinople provides a perfect example. They cannot be defined as two friendly empires by whatever criterion is adopted. They were declared enemies. They fought several wars against each other. But when times 'were not distorted by hostility' [41; p. 20], their relationship was marked by 'interaction and coexistence' [41; p. 19]. This state of living in near harmony despite different ideologies and interests marked almost the entire history of the Republic.

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It has now been claimed that the Hospitaller regime on Rhodes too adopted such sensible and realistic approach towards the Ottomans and the Mamluks, one based on practical rather than on theoretical consideration [42]. Unlike what we have hitherto believed, the inflexibility of the Order's stance towards Islam was more apparent than real. Geography, the weather, war and the overall political atmosphere prevailing throughout the eastern Mediterranean at the heart of which lay the island order-state[11] [32, 33] of Rhodes dictated an unavoidable form of 'interaction and coexistence' with its otherwise hostile neighbourly Muslim powers. The general perception entertained of the institution's unwavering militant opposition to Islam was of the Order's own creation. It was the intended outcome of its profession of its mission and propagated through the wide network of its experienced diplomatic representatives in Europe for the consumption of its Christian patrons in the West. There is no doubt, of course, that the Hospitallers were sworn enemies of Islam. But concealed underneath the art of Renaissance rhetoric stood another Order. The fifteenth-century picture that emerges of the hospital from its surviving chancery records does not in fact correspond very neatly to this traditional interpretation [42; pp. 109–119]. The reality of this other phase of the institution uttered a different dialect. The brutal truth, we are told, is that 'safe-conducts, licenses to arm ships and licenses to trade tell of the peaceful passage of Turkish merchants and diplomats through the Port of Rhodes. The Master of the Order licensed trade with Muslim ports in Syria and Egypt and enacted treaties with Muslim powers, with or without papal consent'[42; p. 110].

Rhodes ruling regime, it has been pointed out, 'could not afford to alienate the Ottomans completely because Constantinople was an important grain source for the region. Likewise the Hospitallers maintained diplomatic relations with the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt because Rhodes and Alexandria were trading partners' [42; p. 116].

The pragmatism of Hospitaller policies is still under-researched. It needs to be scrutinised further, more deeply, over a longer timeframe, and on a much wider spatial scale. Was the Order on Malta as pragmatic in its attitude towards the Ottoman Empire and the Muslim powers on North Africa as it had been on Rhodes? If so, such interaction must have been much more subtle and refined. Archival documentation does indicate a few isolated cases of apparently similar practices during its Maltese phase, but these were carried out through the mediation or intervention of French agencies, exchanges under cover of the French flag. In 1754, for example, severely strained relations between the Order and the Kingdom of Naples resulted in the suspension of Malta's trade links with that Kingdom. To counter the effects of the embargo,

[11]According to Luttrell's definition, the island order-state of Rhodes 'demanded the establishment of a naval tradition and the arrangement of the local economy and government in ways which would support defensive measures. The harbour brought shipping, pilgrims, pirates, trade, and taxes; the island was populated to produce foodstuffs and auxiliary forces; its forests furnished timber for shipbuilding; the inhabitants constructed and manned towers and castles or served as galley oarsmen' [2. pp. 334–335]. Most of these attributes applied equally well to Hospitaller Malta. Like the Greeks on Rhodes, the Maltese too were 'reasonably fed, protected… on the whole the population felt reasonably well treated and was prepared to collaborate' [2. pp. 334–335]. The central Mediterranean island-fortress offered all captains of vessels sailing the Mediterranean, all sailors, passengers and merchants of Christian States access to a strongly fortified, fully equipped base for all forms of operations, a safe neutral port of call, an arsenal, a lazaretto with other quarantine facilities, an efficient hospital, a flourishing market, spacious warehouses, courts of justice and consular assistance. They produced ashes and cultivated cumin and cotton for export. These attractive conditions explain why very few riots or protests occurred over 268 years of Hospitaller rule [43, 44]. See also the resident Venetian Minister's comments on the so-called 'uprising of the priests' in Ref. [45].

Grand Master Emanuel Pinto's *Uditore* sought the help of the French consul in Tunis to provide the order-state with some 5,000 heads of cattle and other livestock.[12] Another example concerns Hospitaller Malta's relations with Morocco in the 1760s [45; Letter CCVI, p. 596, n. 496].

The geographical proximity of central Mediterranean Malta to Europe, especially to the papacy, probably placed the Order under closer observation than it could have possibly been in the south-east Aegean. The inquisitor resided on the island to combat heresy; from 1575 he assumed too the function of a nuncio or apostolic delegate. His double surveillance role could not have been too enticing or comforting for the Hospitaller regime. His regular correspondence with the Secretariat of State at the Vatican shows a much wider interest than the eradication of heresy. And along with the nuncio, there were several other resident ministers and consuls representing the interests of various European royal courts on the island. France, for example, had her *Homme du Roi*; Spain, Sicily, Sardinia, Tuscany, the tiny principality of Monaco and others: each had their own minister or *chargé d'affaires*. From the mid-eighteenth century, Venice had her *Uomo della Repubblica* in the person of Massimiliano Buzzaccarini Gonzaga. Each corresponded regularly with his sending state to report, at times in minute detail [46], on what was going on in and around Malta. As late as 1770, for example, during the Russo-Turkish war of 1768–1774, the Venetian Minister received a note from Venice's Magistracy of Trade saying that it would be greatly appreciated if he continued to keep the Senate abreast of developments in the central Mediterranean.[13] Though himself a high-ranking member of the Hospital, like all the other similar representatives on the island except the nuncio [47], there were moments when the Venetian minister was quite critical both of Grand Master Emanuel Pinto's style and method of government [45; pp. 77–78] and of Benedict XIV [45; p. 79]. It is also interesting to observe, and quite revealing and enlightening, that no such foreign representation existed on Hospitaller Rhodes,[14] which goes some way to make the Order's stance there perhaps more understandable. There was a Venetian consulate for a while but was discontinued in about 1410 on the grounds that other nations wanted consuls as well.[15]

7. The siege of Malta and the Battle of Lepanto

Within the context of what Samuel P. Huntington has defined as the 'clash of civilisations' [48], the epic siege of Malta (1565) and the large naval Battle of Lepanto (1571) were the two most outstanding events in the history of the early-modern Mediterranean. In both, the Hospitallers were involved directly: in the first, they were the leading protagonists; in the second, they participated in Pius V's Holy League with three fully equipped galleys and

[12]National Library of Malta, Archives of the Order, codex 1511: The two letters, each dated 11 March 1754, addressed to the French consul Plowman in Tunis.

[13]The note, addressed too to various Venetian consuls, said: '[Il Senato] trova opportuno e necessario di aver da voi una regolare anticipata cognizione di tutte le cose che vanno succedendo a codesta parte' [45; Letter CXXXIX, p. 449, n. 355].

[14]I thank Dr Anthony Luttrell, Professor Juergen Sarnowsky and Professor Helen J. Nicholson for this observation. Emailed communications, 13, 16 March 2017.

[15]Dr Anthony Luttrell, in a private communication, 13 March 2017.

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manned with experienced Knights and soldiers along with the allied forces of Spain, Venice, the papacy and other Italian principalities [30; p. 270]. In 1565, the small, weakly fortified island, exposed and vulnerable, succeeded in withstanding, for four whole months, a furious assault unleashed by Suleyman's mighty armada. In 1571, the fragile Holy League destroyed nearly the entire Ottoman naval forces. News of both developments, at merely six years apart, spread all over Christian Europe like wild fire, followed by widespread rejoicing and celebrations on a grand scale and commemorated by contemporaries and later generations in various shapes and forms—in eyewitnesses' accounts, in literature, on canvas, in music, in archival records. But euphoria of victory and jubilation do not recast near-permanent structures.

Historians have tended to identify the outcome of both events as a determining stage in the gradual decline of the Ottoman Empire. Halil Inalcik claims that the withdrawal of Suleyman's forces from Malta in September 1565 'marked the beginning of a halt in the Ottoman advance into … the Mediterranean' [28; p. 41]. Colin Imber assigns 'the end of the Ottoman maritime expansion towards the west' to the conquest of Chios, the Genoese island in the Aegean, in 1566 [49]. Thomas Dandelet asserts that Lepanto 'signalled the end of Ottoman expansion beyond Crete' [50]. This historiographical discourse casts grey clouds over the reality, somehow obscuring the skyline. It should be discreetly relegated to the mythical spheres of the past where it comfortably belongs. The true significance of both events lies elsewhere.

The outcome of the siege greatly enhanced Philip II's 'imperial reputation … because it revealed him to be living up to the old … humanistic programme of reviving ancient Roman military power to crush the Ottoman threat' [50; p. 153]. It was to him that the Order, Malta and the central Mediterranean owed an enormous deal. His timely Spanish intervention had 'saved [them] from the Turks' [51]. On landing on the island, the relief force of some 10,000 men instantly scared the enemy away without even engaging it in battle.

Within the narrow sphere of Hospitaller and Maltese history, the siege helped the Hospitallers to survive and retain their Convent firmly in the central Mediterranean. It revamped their political relevance to Christian Europe much more than Tunis had done three decades earlier, and reconfirmed their institution's traditional role as a force of continuity. The siege also transformed their island order-state into an almost unrecognisable form, turned it into a formidable fortress, and ushered it into the forefront of Mediterranean politics and the modern world. It may well have set the Ottoman naval expansionism temporarily back, but failed to reverse the Turk's dominance in the Middle Sea. It simply defined his Empire's 'geographical limits' [52].

On the other hand, the Battle of Lepanto was not a collective effort to eliminate Christian Europe's common enemy as it has often been depicted. Venice depended so much on the empire for its trade. Judged from its short-term result, it was an implicitly professed reconfirmation of the major Latin protagonists that their own interests held pride of place in their scale of values. At Lepanto, the bitterly divided Christian West, allied in a tenuous holy alliance, confronted Islam through extreme, inbred religious fanaticism, a pervasive spirit of raw intolerance and a hysterical ideology of hatred of 'the other', so evident in the rejoicing and jubilation celebrating the horrors and atrocities of the battle. These were the ingredients which formed the texture of contemporary life in the sixteenth-century Mediterranean.

The Ottomans failed to realise their objective in 1565 and were defeated in 1571. Notwithstanding both disasters, they took the Venetian island of Cyprus, 'the greatest feat of Ottoman arms' [28; p. 41]. They defended their new acquisition with a newly built armada that within a few months had replaced the one destroyed at Lepanto [28, p. 41]. The new fleet, reflecting the innovative technological evolution [53], consisted of bigger vessels, including eight galeasses, larger than the Venetian ones and fully armed, apart from other galleys and smaller craft ([54] also in Ref. [55]). Its recovery and the perception of that extraordinary dynamism helped it retain the new acquisition and dictated Venice's 'betrayal' of the Holy League and the latter's dissolution.

Neither of the two events, nor their collective impact, succeeded in destroying the Ottomans' naval power. Ottoman 'presence in the Levant and North Africa' survived and remained as threateningly 'real and dreadful' as before [56]. 'The years after 1571 still gave enough evidence of the aggressive power of the Turks at sea and on land' [56; p. 203]. In 1573, they ravaged the coasts of Southern Italy and Sicily. They occupied La Goletta and permanently seized the fortress of Tunis in September 1574, with which they recovered their 'self-respect' [27; p. 1139]. In 1576, they raided Palermo and captured Fez in Morocco [57]. In 1588, they harassed 'Valencia and its surroundings'. 'The shores of Calabria and Sicily', points out Alexander De Groot, 'were raided in 1592, 1593, and 1594 by the corsair galleys from Bizerta … and the main Ottoman fleet … with 90–120 galleys'. In the last few years of the century and the beginning of the next, Naples and Sicily experienced similar aggressive pressure. 'The main fleet passed Malta and Gozo on its way to and from Algiers in 1598' [56; pp. 215–216]. In the seventeenth century, the Turks took the Venetian island of Crete and early in the eighteenth century they again confronted the Venetians in the Morea. 'The peace made at Passarowitz in 1718 confirmed the naval superiority of the Ottomans over the Venetians' [56; p. 230]. Drawing his data from Giuseppe Bonaffini's *La Sicilia e i Barbereschi* [58], Thomas James Dandelet claims that between 1570 and 1606, 'Sicily alone was attacked 136 times' [50; p. 152]. Not only were the Ottomans reconfirmed masters of the eastern Mediterranean, a dominance they had established since 1538 at Prevesa; they even strengthened 'their hold upon the Maghreb' [59]. That was Lepanto's legacy. Voltaire was not far from the truth when he claimed that 'the victory of Lepanto seemed rather to have been on the side of the Turks' [60]. Alexander De Groot argues that the term *Ottoman decline* 'is devoid of any real meaning' [56; p. 253].

My position on this issue does not diminish the importance of either event by one iota. Both the siege and the battle had indeed been stunning victories for the Christian West; both were extremely injurious to the dignity and pride of the Ottoman Empire. But humiliation is a psychological condition, an obvious discomfiture that was however fairly quickly overcome. The two events were strategically inconsequential in the long-term perspective of historical development, both of the Ottoman Empire and of the Mediterranean. The spirit of ideological confrontation which had inspired them both and, indeed, similar other occasions before and after them, did not disappear; nor did the prevailing mood grow fainter. The *status quo* in the Mediterranean was reconfirmed. 'The cultural shape of the lands around the Mediterranean' writes Gregory Melleuish, survived unimpaired, 'with a largely Islamic East and South staring across the waters at a Christian North and West' [53].

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8. Conclusion

The idea of the decline of the Mediterranean needs revisiting and redefining. Did the great discoveries, to which it is generally attributed, convert the sea into an isolated backwater, perhaps tranquil and undisturbed? Did the 'great sea' shrink into insignificance as a result? Was its unity, its internal coherence [27; p. 14], shattered? From the evidence to date, it would appear that the decline was only partial: the Middle Sea was deprived only of the primacy it had been for long enjoying in global economy and international exchange. But was economic pre-eminence, however central and determining, the only feature that had constituted the sea's true greatness? Today the validity of the claim of 'the economic decline of the eastern Mediterranean' has been questioned [61].

After 1492, the Mediterranean still retained the natural distinct elements of cultural unity that had been so intimately characteristic of it. The homogeneity of its climate [27; pp. 234–238] remained unaltered. Its winter temperatures did not grow colder with the 'massive invasion' of the Northerners from the 1580s. Nor did the latter turn its often fiercely hot summer months into a pleasantly mild season. The sea kept its 'blue transparency'. The cultivation of the vine, the olive tree and the palm tree does not appear to have been diminished or discontinued. The Mediterranean still held on to its 'relatively easy navigability' [62] and 'maritime interconnectedness' it enjoyed since ancient times [63]. The peoples inhabiting its ancient world still nourished their natural inclination and attitude towards the sea long after Christopher Columbus had crossed the Atlantic. Fishing, pastoralism and farming remained constant features of local economies through the entire region. Plague and other deadly diseases were also shared experiences. Inhabitants from each of the four corners of the Mediterranean who survived such characteristic catastrophes had frightening stories to narrate about these phenomena [64]. Piracy, corsairing and slavery, on either side of the ideological fence, remained vigorous activities that marked everyday life. And the open clash of religion between Christianity and Islam did not diminish in its intensity with the enormous structural changes that followed 1492—the great voyages to the New World, the discovery of the new route to the East round the Cape of Good Hope, the fall of Granada, the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian peninsula and the massive migrations of exiled peoples that these changes set in motion [65], the sudden conversion of the brilliance of Renaissance Italy into a savage theatre of war between Habsburg Spain and Valois France, and the steady spread of Lutheranism.

One other relevant observation. Notwithstanding its loss of economic primacy in the world, the sixteenth-century Mediterranean retained its explosive civilising power and remained as inspiring as ever before. By the time the Order was about to settle on Malta, 'the curtain,' we are told [27; p. 828], had already fallen 'on the splendours of the Renaissance'. It soon became the cradle of the volcanic eruption of the 'sprawling and extravagant' Baroque [27; p.827]. From affluent Italy, it flourished rapidly for centuries, with the Spanish galleons carrying it to the newly discovered lands across the Atlantic. 'The Mediterranean,' asserts Braudel, 'was the donor, the transmitter and therefore a superior power, whose teachings, way of life and tastes were adopted in lands far from its shores' [27; p. 829]. The Baroque, an expression of the vitality of Italian society, demonstrated that Italy, at the core of the Mediterranean, had once more transformed itself into a 'competitive and predominant' civilising force, whose dynamic influence

'spread to cover almost all of Europe, the Catholic and indirectly the Protestant as well: curious evidence of the unity of a world divided' [66]. Whether this civilising overflow of exuberance, which ushered in a new age, was indeed 'a sign of … economic failure' [27; p. 900] is debatable.

W. V. Harris draws up a list of other 'essential elements' which should be reconsidered [62; pp. 11–20]. The unchangeableness, or 'immobility' as he calls it [62; pp. 9–10], of certain Mediterranean attributes can be seen, by way of a tiny isolated illustration drawn from the island of Malta. Today, the colourful Maltese *luzzu* (or fishing boat) still sails elegantly in and out of Marsamxett harbour in the south of Malta, and several fishermen still cast their nets in the blue Mediterranean and have them spread out on the quay to dry, to mend, to have them cleared of weeds, much as their ancestors had done hundreds of years before them. The majestic Dingle Cliffs, over 250 meters above sea level, on the island's western coast, have hardly changed from prehistoric times, except perhaps as a result of natural erosion. These are classic symptoms of Braudelian timelessness: 'permanent', 'unchanging' and 'motionless' features, the 'constants' of the past. But Malta may perhaps be too small an island to demonstrate convincingly the vast recurring realities of the Mediterranean with an estimated total population ranging from 68 to 92 million between 1600 and 1800 [61; pp. 100–101]. An indefinite host of similar instances can be safely, and perhaps more convincingly, sought at Sicilian and southern Italian ports, in southern France and Spain, along the Adriatic, and on Greek islands.

Within this context of near-permanent structures, life did not stand still. The Mediterranean region would have stagnated, it would have been transformed into another 'dead sea', had there been no change at all. Life in the Mediterranean changed, for, after all, is not change the quintessence of history? But change and decline are not synonymous concepts. Only a persistent process of change for the worse over the long perspective can define the idea of decline accurately. In the midst of this historical process of change, there are always opposing forces of resistance, of continuity: they confront and delay the whole process of restructuring, conversion, or indeed decline and therefore slow down the whole course of development for better or for worse. The Hospitaller Order of St John had been one such living force. In its dynamism, and its traditional operations first from Rhodes and then from Malta, it helped preserve, as has been shown above, some of the basic features of early modern Mediterranean culture, lifestyle and society. When Buzzaccarini Gonzaga had first set foot on Malta as Venice's first resident minister to the Grand Master's court in the early 1750s, he observed that the island order-state was playing a vital role for the entire Christendom. Shortly before he passed away in 1776, he was still convinced that the Order was performing its mission in protecting Europe against the enemy of the Christian faith consistently and admirably [46, *passim*]. Despite this strong element of continuity, the Hospitaller institution, points out Anthony Luttrell, 'did not embody a decayed medieval ideal being lived out in a state of terminal anachronism' [2; p. 355].

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