Introduction: A Unified Religious Struggle?

In June 1619, Sebastiano Montelupo wrote from Krakow thanking a Medici secretary for “the good news that you sent me of the peace in France and of the seizure of Turkish vessels by the galleys of the religion of Santo Stefano.” Montelupo found this news “carissima” and prayed that God would maintain the “union” in France and grant “prosperous fortune” to the galleys. Montelupo’s linkage of religious struggle within France to Christian warfare against the Ottoman Empire suggests that he saw these conflicts as aspects of a unified religious struggle. Writing from central Europe, Montelupo might be expected to confine his vision of religious warfare to the expanding conflict within the Holy Roman Empire that would become the Thirty Years’ War, and the Habsburg warfare on land against the Ottomans. Yet even in the heart of central Europe, Mediterranean maritime warfare could be perceived as a significant facet of a global religious conflict, as Montelupo’s correspondence shows.

Montelupo’s comparative focus on civil conflict in France in 1619 may at first seem curious. The historiography of early seventeenth-century France has long portrayed conflicts as unconcerned with religious issues, but instead motivated by noble rivalries, opposition to absolutism, or peasant discontent. However, I have argued elsewhere that the 1598 Edict of Nantes was never fully implemented and that it hardly ended religious conflict within France.
Confessional politics and religious activism continued to shape French nobles’ participation in civil conflicts in early seventeenth-century France. Thus, when members of the French court reacted to the Ottoman sack of Manfredonia in 1620, they—like Sebastiano Montelupo—could easily draw connections between this disaster and the calamities of civil war in France and Bohemia.

This paper will explore the concept of unified religious struggle in the early seventeenth century through the experiences of French nobles involved in Mediterranean maritime warfare.

_Military Migrations_

We can better understand the connections between Christian-Muslim and Protestant-Catholic religious violence in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth centuries by focusing on the noblemen who organized, financed, and directed religious warfare in the Mediterranean. A number of excellent recent studies provide increasing detail on the daily lives of sailors and mariners in the early modern period, although often emphasizing an Atlantic world maritime perspective. Too few historians have followed Carla Rahn Philips’s brilliant example in constructing a comprehensive analysis of noble officers and of the processes of organizing naval warfare. Many of the studies of French nobles’ relationship to maritime activities still focus on prosopographical excavations of admirals and naval officers.

Here, the concept of ‘military migration’ can be useful. Noblemen serving outside of their native lands have often been labeled as ‘adventurers’ or ‘mercenaries’. Such characterizations portray nobles as fundamentally self-interested, emphasizing economic incentives for warfare...
while denying the possibility that nobles might have had sincere religious motives for engaging in warfare. Conceiving of extraterritorial service in warfare as ‘military migration’ allows us to re-think nobles’ relationships with their native society, state institutions, religious bodies, and international organizations. The notion of ‘military migration’ allows us to examine noble involvement in a broad spectrum of maritime activities and to avoid an anachronistic vision of them as ‘naval officers’.

French nobles can thus be effectively considered in the context of a new historical literature on early modern ‘maritime history’ and in comparison with various other social groups throughout the Mediterranean examined in recent studies. Alan James’s important study of French naval organization, entitled *Navy and Government in Early Modern France*, provides a fresh perspective on maritime administrative and naval history in seventeenth-century France. Jean-François Dubost’s work on Italian immigrants to France in the early modern period complements these maritime studies and permits a closer examination of Franco-Italian exchanges.

My current research on the cultural history of violence in southern France and Tuscany during the early seventeenth century builds on these recent studies through an exploration of archival documents, published treatises, and printed pamphlets dealing with French ‘military migrants’. A combination of manuscript correspondence, regional reports, and noble family records conserved in southern French archives départementales, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and the Archivio di Stato di Firenze sheds new light on the role French nobles played in religious warfare in the Mediterranean in the early seventeenth century.

Various motives led French nobles to become temporary, itenrerate, or long-term ‘military migrants’. Early modern noblemen’s education normally included international experiences, and
many French nobles sought training in arms and military skills in Italy during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Henri de Gondi, duc de Retz, thus traveled to Florence to study Italian and horsemanship at the Medici court.

Naval tactics, navigational techniques, and maritime experience were all valuable skills for early seventeenth-century nobles living along the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts. Henri de Nogaret de La Valette, comte de Candalle, served with the Tuscan galleys to gain naval experience. Marie de Médicis wrote to Cosimo II de’ Medici that she wanted La Vallette “to cruise on your galleys…and try to render himself more and more capable to serve the king…through naval practice and the association with foreigners.” Nogaret de La Valette praised the Tuscan Granduca’s fleet as the “best and most courageous Academy” for a first military experience after his cruise on the Tuscan galleys. Members of the Schömberg family also sought military and naval education at the Medici court. Some French nobles sought not only to acquire a generalized maritime education, but also to have an apprenticeship in naval command with the forces of the Granduca.

French Nobles and Religious Activism

Nobles living in southern France eagerly offered to serve in Italy when wars erupted in Savoie or other Italian states in the early seventeenth century. Some of these military activities have been recognized in the historical literature, especially when French and Franco-Italian nobles joined Charles de Gonzague, duc de Nevers, in his effort to claim the Mantua from 1627 to 1631. Yet, looking beyond state-sponsored intervention in Italy reveals a much wider and
more continuous French participation in Italian warfare, especially in Mediterranean maritime conflicts and religious violence.

Members of the Ornano family were active in Corsican maritime activities in the early seventeenth century. Nobles from Marseille, Toulon, and other southern French ports frequently offered to serve along with Tuscan maritime forces. French nobles seem to have been closely involved with galley-building industries in Toulon, and some of those ships later saw service with Italian-led fleets. French nobles played important roles in financing Mediterranean religious warfare, but their use of informal credit mechanisms and patron-client ties often left few traces in archival documentation. However, we can occasionally glimpse their loans, debts, transactions through their exchanges of jewelry, art objects, and currency. The financing and organization of maritime warfare seems to have been linked to religious orders, confraternities, and ‘piety honor’ in this period.

Religious activism promoted joint maritime initiatives to attack Muslim shipping, protect from pirates, and defend Christianity from Ottoman fleets. A French noble in the duc de Retz’s household wrote enthusiastically to the Medici court proposing elaborate military operations against the Ottomans in North Africa in the early seventeenth century. In 1607, Giovanni de' Medici reported on the fitting out of a corsair to be sent against the Turks by French nobles who planned to sail under the ensigns of the Granduca. This “large ship” was to be armed with 40 bronze guns and crewed by 300 Frenchmen. The comte de Joigny coordinated Franco-Tuscan naval operations in 1604. However, a common religious cause could not prevent rivalries and differences from threatening the unity of Christian fleets. Medici correspondence reveals the friction between Italians and French involved in joint maritime activities in the early seventeenth century.
Religious motives can be discerned through the correspondence relating to French captives of the Ottoman naval forces and their families attempts to ransom them. Some French prisoners of war were re-captured by Christian galleys and forced to serve on crews as oarsmen. In the early seventeenth century, Maria de’ Medici and other members of the French court sought to get such French prisoners released through the intervention of the Medici court.

Religious motives were certainly not transparent, instead operating through complex religious-political positions and evaluations. Huguenots’ religious motives can be identified in their separate expeditions and certain joint activities with Catholic forces. As the duc de Lesdiguières and other Huguenots nobles fought in Savoie in the 1610s against Spanish forces and their allies, so did French Protestants engage in warfare against Muslims in the Mediterranean.

Toward a History of Mediterranean Noble Networks

Military orders’ bellicose activities promoted the development of networks amongst Christian nobles throughout the Mediterranean. Members of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, or knights of Malta, represented an international military organization, with significant participation by French nobles. The order had become an increasingly visible symbol of the defense of Christianity during the sixteenth century, especially following the epic siege of Malta itself in 1565 by a powerful Ottoman army and fleet. The Christian naval victory at Lepanto in 1571 confirmed the status of the Mediterranean as a site of Christian renewal, even if the battle’s strategic significance was fleeting. Nobles who wanted to display their Christian
commitment through warfare were attracted to Mediterranean warfare and to service with the knights of Malta.

Contacts between French and Italian nobles were arguably especially important within the Order of Malta during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Two Medici queens of France reinforced Tuscan-French political and social connections. Caterina and Maria de’ Medici both facilitated French and Tuscan noblemen’s participation in Mediterranean warfare. Jean-François Dubost has found that the greatest number of Tuscans served as knights of Malta precisely during the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Members of many Franco-Italian noble families joined the knights of Malta in this period and fought for the Catholic cause. During the early seventeenth century, three noblemen from the Franco-Italian Elbène family, for example, served as knights of Malta.

The Ordine di Santo Stefano, or Order of Saint Stephen, also provided French nobles with possibilities for service in Mediterranean warfare. Cosimo de’ Medici organized this order after receiving papal approval in 1561, providing a new naval force to fight against Muslim navies and pirates in the Mediterranean. Several of the Florentine noble families who were involved in the initial organization of the Ordine di Santo Stefano had close connections with France. Bartolomeo Concini completed negotiations with the papacy for the foundation of the order, and the Concini family remained active in the order. Bartolomeo had two sons who were members of the order, and his grandson Concino became Marie de Medici’s favorite in the early seventeenth century. Domenico Bonsi assisted in the early development of the Ordine di Santo Stefano in the 1560s. An important branch of the Bonsi family soon took control of the bishopric of Béziers in southern France and established themselves as Franco-Italian nobles. Such Franco-Italian noble families could use their connections with the Ordine di Santo Stefano to enhance and expand the
existing cultural and social exchanges between Tuscany and France. Although the *cavalieri*, or knights, of the order tended to be almost exclusively Tuscan, many French and Franco-Italian nobles joined the order’s military-naval expeditions as volunteers to participate in Mediterranean warfare against Muslim fleets and shipping.

The Concini and Bonsi families demonstrate how Franco-Italian families employed their kinship and client ties through religious orders and naval activities. Many other Franco-Italian noble families also developed Mediterranean maritime networks through the financing and practice of naval warfare in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Members of the Gondi, Orsini, Orando, Rucellai, Strozzi, Gonzaga, and Savoie families all seem to have established networks of credit and clientage relating to the organization of Mediterranean warfare.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would suggest that French nobles were much more involved in early modern Mediterranean religious violence than has previously been assumed. More work needs to be done on such ‘military migrants’ and other social groups to understand fully their roles in linking Christian-Muslim warfare with European religious struggles.
Abstract

The great religious wars of the sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries are often completely divorced from one another—the Ottoman-Christian wars in the Mediterranean separated off from the conflicts between Protestants and Catholics within Europe except by Habsburg scholars. An interesting way to reconsider the place of Mediterranean space in early modern historiography and to challenge this divide is to focus on ‘military migrations’ in this period. This presentation will take one group of such migrants, French nobles who engaged in Mediterranean maritime warfare, to reconsider religious violence in the early modern period. French nobles engaged in religious conflict within France throughout the long French Religious Wars of 1562-1629, but they also were very active in other religious struggles throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. Examining archival documents from southern French archives, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and the Archivio di Stato di Firenze should allow me to begin to reexamine the role French nobles played in religious warfare in the Mediterranean. This presentation will examine French nobles’ notions of religious cause, honor, and military education. I hope to expose French nobles’ Mediterranean networks and their connections with Malta and Tuscany in this period.