Struggling Against Isolation
Communication Lines and the Circulation of News in the Mediterranean:
The Case of Seventeenth-Century Malta

Islands and their problems have elicited a dominant place in maritime historiography. Whether vital stations along important shipping routes or marginal places often by-passed by civilizations and history, their role and condition, their subsistence, their centrality to the flow of goods and the diffusion of cultures and, most prominently, their supposed isolation have much intrigued scholars of the social sciences.

Braudel argues that the sea surrounding them acts as an element of both unity and division, yet confidently asserts that some mountain regions are more insular than many Mediterranean islands. Horden and Purcell energetically brush aside allegations on the remoteness and inaccessibility of many islands, dismissing as a ‘malign tendency’ attempts to depict them as isolated worlds. Matvejević labels them as ‘particular places’ whose characteristics are inevitably determined by their geophysical setting and, primarily, by the distance from the mainland. Mollat du Jourdin, for whom islands are ‘gifts offered to the sea or lands conquered by it following seismic phenomena’, dwells on the mythical inspirations that islands have evoked in man throughout the millennia of his existence. In his oneiric evocations man idealized islands as a paradise lost, an eternal source of nostalgia, elusive Ithacas obstinately sought throughout lifetimes of longing and cerebral peregrination.

Lying along vibrant shipping routes, on the very heart of the Muslim-Christian battle zone border and less than a day’s sailing from opulent Sicily, early modern Malta offers sound arguments to sustain with conviction the debate outlined above against the view that islands were isolated worlds.

However, the scholar’s viewpoint, although privileged in many ways not least because it can adopt a holistic approach and draw on a multiplicity of sources, is inevitably partial. Rather than the effective isolation of islands, the conceptual foundation of the present study is nourished by a diametrically opposite preoccupation, one which tries to assess the perception of isolation from within an insular context.

Separation from the terraferma endowes islanders with distinct features. It weighs on their relationship with the outside world. Tendentially they are of a more introspective nature, yet their welcome to newcomers is potentially warmer than that of mainland populations. Their language is different from that spoken in the nearby coast. In many
ways sea people, and islanders in particular, have often been passive protagonists of history, adopting an attitude of anticipation. Waiting became for them a sort of ‘existential condition’ – they waited for the return of a vessel, for the landing of foreigners, for the safe call at port of eagerly longed-for merchandise, for a cargo of life-saving victuals; they scrutinized the horizon in terrified anticipation of raids by sea sourcerers, hoping that they never materialised; they waited for a storm to abait to cross to the mainland and, most ardently, they waited for news.

Like drifters from a shipwreck, the Hospitallers landed in Malta after eight years of wondering and soul-searching following the loss of Rhodes in 1522. Shadows of the reluctance with which the Order had accepted the islands as fiefs still permeate through the documents handed down to posterity by the Order’s well-oiled administrative machine. In the official outgoing correspondence of Hospitaller Malta, the main source at the core of this study, the various Grand Masters hardly ever refer to the island by its proper name. One of the terms they most frequently used, rather than island, land, or domain, was scoglio - barren rock. The words of the Hospitaller hierarchy consistently betray a glaring lack of affection towards the outpost Charles V had handed them to govern. The nature of the island, the meagreness of its resources and poverty of its soil, its perilous position, so inviting to enemy sorties from Barbary, were obsessively underlined, inflated, and pointed out to popes, foreign monarchs, princes, and, with an even greater vigour, to the Order’s emissaries and agents abroad, as if to remind them of their paramount duty to see to the island’s needs in the daily running of their office.

The Hospitallers had been grappling with the hazards of living cut off from the mainland for hundreds of years. The sojourn in Cyprus followed by two and a half centuries of permanence on Rhodes had implanted the island mentality in the Hospitaller psyche long before their arrival in Malta. That lingering sense of precariousness which became second nature to the Order’s life throughout its years in the East, in the very heart of Muslim territory, surrounded by water and by enemy outposts, was only heightened by the sieges of 1522 and 1565. If there was one lesson learnt by the Order during the siege of 1565 it was that Habsburg priorities lay elsewhere, primarily in the northern heart of Europe. Protestant Netherlands occupied the mind and energies of the Spanish king to a degree far superior than any island south of Sicily could ever have hoped for or aspired to. The delays and procrastination which characterised the saga of Don Garçia de Toledo’s relief expedition, the subject of so much bitter controversy among Maltese historical circles, made the Order realise that in times of future trouble the island would probably have had to stand alone again.

Fear of possible military isolation, closely related to the siege-phobia which accompanied a good part of the Religion’s existence ran parallel with the constant anxiety to provision the Maltese archipelago. Islands may not have been isolated and early modern Malta was
certainly not, yet the Hospitaller hierarchy’s peroccupation of having communication channels with the mainland severed is one perception the historian cannot dismiss or ignore. Striving to keep the Convent informed and updated on the events of the world surrounding it, from the North Sea to the Levant, was absolutely essential in the ongoing struggle against isolation. The thirst for news was comparable to the appetite for grain and the Order’s network of ambassadors, diplomats, and agents deployed along the political nerve centres of Christian Europe was certainly not sufficient to quench it. All potential sources of fresh news – official and occasional – were tapped. The unexpected call at port of a merchant ship could carry with it information as revealing as that brought over by the galley squadron on its return from its periodic missions in the Levant. The Order was very sensitive to any reverberation which the sea brought over from the East and Constantinople in particular. There was docked the Sultan’s armada, the source of so much preoccupation for the Convent. The slightest hint or rumour of feverish activity regarding the fitting of the Ottoman fleet would shuffle any agenda on the Grand Master’s desk.

Like so many other aspects in state structure, the system of Hospitaller Malta’s contacts with abroad was set on a well-defined hierarchy. Resident ambassadors were kept in Paris and Madrid, the diplomatic powerhouses of early modern Europe. Most importantly a resident ambassador was also kept in Rome, the inevitable guiding light for a religious institution, the much-consulted See which conditioned immeasurably the diplomatic activity of the Hospital. Rome did not only mean the Pope, the spiritual and temporal leader whose paternal approval in matters of international relevance was sought and longed-for by an Order in constant crave for justification from the superior authority in Christendom. It also meant an intricate network of unofficial representatives, usually under the semblance of cardinals, whose lobbying activity in the Papal court strove to gain favours for the Hospital in several matters.

Venice, mistress of the Adriatic, architect and jealous asserter of its very own international policy, often independent from Habsburg necessities and Catholic stances, deserves an argument apart. Its geography, privileged ties with the Ottoman world, overall diplomatic network, and celebrated postal service made it the prime Western European recipient, and indeed manipulator, of information from the East. Although the Republic had no resident Hospitaller ambassador, its unique capacity to provide news was vital for the bellicose alertness of a Mediterranean island at war with Islam and the Order strove constantly to draw on the Serenissima’s news sources and diplomatic intelligence throughout its sojourn in Malta. The Hospitaller agents stationed in Venice periodically provided the Convent with what were termed the avvisi or novità del mondo, handwritten chronicles delivered with the normal administrative correspondence which were intended to update the Hospitaller community on the main happenings in Venice and Europe. These avvisi were primarily a product of the climate of the age. At times they were sent in printed format from Venice which had developed into one of Europe’s major publishing hubs. The invention of printing had nourished the crave to publish and was slowly changing the average man’s perception of the surrounding environment, from
local to regional, and from regional to global. One has only to consider that by the late sixteenth century Jesuit missionaries were sending accounts of their daily life, encounters, and evangelical efforts in Japan and China to be printed in Europe. The Seicento, in particular, was a century which witnessed what Villari calls a ‘boom’ in the proliferation and dissemination of information, a result of a general rise in the degree of political consciousness across all strata of society. Strict monarchical rule throughout Europe was instigating a reaction to authoritarianism which manifested itself in publications, flyers, posters, and pamphlets with political content.

Perhaps, however, it was on the Tyrrhenian side of the Italian peninsula that Hospitaller Malta held the most pulsating of all its communication lines. The axis formed by Genoa, Leghorn, Naples, Messina, and Palermo was relied upon on a quasi-daily basis by the Convent. First and foremost came Sicily. Its grain supplies and immediate vicinity to Malta dictated an enduring bond between the two islands which the Order could not avoid to exploit. Dispatches from Malta to the Italian mainland, when not sent directly by sea, were usually delivered via Palermo or Messina. A system of couriers were then employed to carry the dispatches to important centres like Naples, Rome, or beyond. These couriers can be compared to the ‘human carriers’ employed in the East, like the Chinese ‘porters’, which delivered news faster than the horses of Tartary or the chatirs of Persia, capable of carrying urgent letters and precious commodities for hours at a stretch, expertly exploiting short-cuts off the main transport arteries. For more urgent news to be carried by land, the Order would hire *a corriero a cavallo*, although more reluctantly due to the higher costs implied.

Notwithstanding all its flaws and shortcomings, its terrible inefficiency and unreliability, the communication system of an early modern state such as Hospitaller Malta was still capable of remarkable feats. Unmasking an imposter was one of them. Tracking down a renegade, an escaped prisoner, an errant knight, or a criminal on the run was another. In such cases the first ‘stations’ to be informed were the principal receivers in Sicily and along the Tyrrhenian coast of Italy, the most obvious and likely out of all immediate destinations for a Christian on the run from Malta. They were alerted in order to take immediate action in case the escapee happened to land in their whereabouts. In March 1705, for example, the Order reported the flight from Malta of Hospitaller Luigi de Rousset, who had secretly embarked on the *filuca* of Antonio Buttari, docked on purpose for the occasion at the inlet of St Julians, with two boxes of silver lent to him by some creditors a few days before. Two months later de Rousset was tracked down and imprisoned in Naples.

Sicily’s landblock also acted also as a point of encounter for the Hospitaller galley squadron. It was somewhere along the Sicilian coastline, usually the eastern coast, that the squadron regrouped at one stage or another along its wonderings around the
Mediterranean. And the Sicilian coastline was the first destination of the filucas, saicas, or speronaras sent in trepidation by the Grand Master in order to re-establish contact with the squadron when too much time passed by without news of its whereabouts reaching the Convent.

Sicily was the terminal of a Tyrrenian axis which served the Order for two important purposes. One was that of channelling funds from its estates in Western Europe. Hospitaller funds from France and the Iberian peninsula were usually collected in Genoa to be subsequently transported or deposited in Sicily or Malta. The other was that of exchanging news with the rest of the European mainland. Here again Genoa played a vital role, at least up to the mid-seventeenth century. Genoa was the equivalent of Venice on the Tyrrenian, providing the Order with news of major events in Europe through the periodic dispatch of the avvisi. It also acted as a liaison for the official correspondence between the Hospital and Madrid. This pattern of contacts changed drastically after 1655, when an age-old dispute between the Order and Genoa over the question of precedence at sea came to a climax which ended up severing official contacts between the two states for the rest of the century. The outcome of the diplomatic rift not only changed Hospitaller habits in fund transfer, with piazzas further south along the Tyrrenian taking over Genoa’s former role, it also altered routes along which correspondence was delivered to and from Malta. Leghorn, for example, started providing the Convent more frequently with the avvisi and Naples started delivering the Spanish correspondence and also the avvisi pubblici.

The city-ports along the Tyrrenian, together with Venice, enabled the Order to have a relatively wide information network with multiple sources ensuring a greater coverage of international affairs and of other, lesser events, more pertinent to its day to day survival. Outside the Italian peninsula, its direct line with the European mainland, Hospitaller Malta reached out mostly eastwards more than anywhere else for news. The Ottoman threat, whether real, imminent, or simply a mental fabrication stimulated by ongoing war and memories of grim encounters, was a ghost that the Hospitaller and Maltese communities had to live with on a daily basis. This situation created a greater anticipation for information from the Levant than from any other corner of the Mediterranean. The return of the galley squadron from its seasonly missions in the East constituted the ‘official’ and most reliable source for the Convent as regards briefing on the movements and intentions of the Turk. Once safe at port, the captains of the squadron would be summoned by the Grand Master to relate on their mission and to verify, dismiss, or confirm any rumours from the Levant that would have reached Malta while the squadron’s mission was on course. Much pain, in fact, was taken in the verification of news. When a foreign vessel, a merchant ship, or a corso expedition on its homecoming to cash on its booty called in Malta’s harbour, the Order’s officials were prompt to sap all possible information from members of the crew. Captives were also interrogated in the hope of scraping bits of information on the situation in the Levant, with the inevitable appendix of the cross-examination and verification with other knowledge accumulated up
to that time by the Order’s intelligentsia. Hearsay and rumours were in fact rather common, even within diplomatic circles.

The Greek archipelago often acted as a channel through which the political and military climate of the Eastern end of the Mediterranean reached the West. Islands provided other islands with information. It was mainly up to the Maltese consul in Corfu and the Hospitaller agent in Zante to brief the Convent - albeit with inevitable delays in the delivery - with news of any relevance that filtered through Muslim quarters. These contacts with the East, coupled with Malta’s frontier location and vicinity to Barbary, enabled the island to act as sentinel to the rest of Christendom against the Ottoman peril. News or rumours that reached the Convent on the movements of the Porte’s armada or sightings in the channel, or elsewhere in Maltese waters, of sizeable enemy squadrons were swiftly communicated to the Catholic world via Sicily.

Malta’s role as sentry to Christendom was not restricted to military matters only. Rumours or verified information on plague were communicated to the European mainland with an even greater urgency. According to Mallia-Milanes, Hospitaller Malta’s health department and its severe quarantine measures rendered it a ‘bulwark’ against the spread of plague. If siege-phobia was not always justified as claimed by some historians, no similar argument would stand against the widespread plague-phobia throughout the Mediterranean. The strict measures adopted by a state like Hospitaller Malta to avoid contagion in its own territory were fully justified by the biblical devastation periodically caused in all corners of the known world by this epidemic of unknown source and against which a hapless pre-industrial medicine failed consistently to find any remedy. Prevention was the only defence. Solidarity, mutual collaboration, and special agreements between states and cities were normal occurrences. Genoa and Ragusa (Dubrovnik), for example, developed communication links for the mutual provision of political and sanitary information and warnings against plague.

Rumours of a plague, whether founded or not, could cripple an early modern state and islands in particular. Authorities spared themselves no energy in trying to discredit doubts among the international community that the contagion was making headway in their own territory. Rumours of plague travelled faster than the disease itself and the very first precautionary measure of any state was to sever all communication with the suspect territory. In 1675, when the first reports of a mal contagioso in Malta were making headway in Europe, the Grand Master painfully and repeatedly tried to reassure the rest of Christendom and quash the malignant and fatal gossip by attributing the isolated deaths on the island to the mal di stagione, a normal seasonal flu. He failed miserably. It proved to be a true and proper epidemic which ultimately claimed over 11,000 deaths. Inevitably the first ties to be severed were those with Sicily, where orders were given that even correspondence from Malta was to be rejected. Understandably this spelt alarm for the Order, for the interruption of all sorts of contact with Sicily not only meant the obvious headache of finding alternative sources for provisioning the island, but potentially meant the first step towards the interruption of all communication with the much-relied on
Tyrrenian route. On its part the Order showed itself to be mature and sensible enough in 1705, when it refused to interrupt trade with Pantelleria, and in turn contribute further to the isolation of the tiny place, after being adamant in not giving any weight to rumours of the spread of plague on that island.

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When the Hospital settled in Malta in 1530 the island was still a remote medieval reality. Contacts with the outside world were mainly restricted to Sicily, domain of the Viceroy's, feudal lords of the Maltese archipelago. Beyond Sicily laid a world often unreachable, too distant and too alien to the Maltese community. With the arrival of the Hospitaller Order the island’s relationship with the surrounding geography underwent a gradual yet dramatic change. The Order’s religious, military, and hospitaller roles, its estates throughout the European mainland, and its traumatic impact on the island’s economy all contributed sensibly to widen, increase, improve, and intensify contacts with abroad, and especially with the European mainland – contacts of a commercial, diplomatic, financial, mercantile, informative, and at times trivial nature. With the Order, Malta not only was transformed into a military fortress against the advance of Islam and a sanitary enclave against the spread of plague, but developed into Christendom’s southernmost sentinel, a station post which was on the forefront in alerting Western Europe on the bellicose intentions of the Infidel. Notwithstanding its meagre resources, Hospitaller Malta, through the exploitation of its perilous frontier position and its endeavour to cultivate and nurture its communication channels with the Mediterranean and beyond, managed to carve a special role for itself in a divided Mediterranean while continuing its very own struggle against isolation.