MALTESE BLOCKADE MEDALS

Joseph C. Sammut

Of Maltese medals of the nineteenth century, those most noteworthy, on account of their perennial historical background, are those which are commonly known as 'Blockade Medals'. The rebellion of the Maltese against the French in 1798 and the heart-rending story of the valour displayed by the insurgents in the following months stand out from all other relevant episodes in the varied and eventful history of the Maltese Islands.

As a result of French designs on Egypt and India, Bonaparte captured Malta from the Knights of St John, who meekly surrendered on 12 June 1798, and were hastily bundled out of the island within a few days. After seizing the treasures and money in the Order's churches and public institutions, Bonaparte sailed to Alexandria, leaving behind a strong garrison of about 5,000 men under the command of General Claude-Henri de Vaubois. The Maltese seem to have, at first, desired a change of government but the subsequent conduct of the French military commanders and the troops, the suspension of civil pensions, the heavy taxation imposed to subsidize the upkeep of the garrison, the reduction of the number of convents to one for each Order, and the restriction of the Bishop's jurisdiction gradually reversed every sympathy towards a republican government. The hindrance of a sale by public auction of gold and silver objects as well as tapestries belonging to convents and churches in Rabat and Mdina on 2 September 1798 sparked off a revolt. In a matter of days, the French troops had to withdraw within the impregnable capital city of Valletta and the fortifications of Cottonera on the other side of the Grand Harbour.

The Maltese quickly convened a National Assembly and acknowledged King Ferdinand IV of Naples and III of Sicily as their sovereign. This decision was favourably received by His Neapolitan Majesty who also promised his aid and protection. At the same time they appealed for help to Admiral Nelson who was then returning to Naples from Alexandria, where he had destroyed the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile. The latter, who maintained that 'any expense should be incurred rather than let Malta remain in the hands of the French', accepted a request by the Maltese to blockade their island by sea. Nelson first sent a Portuguese squadron and later a British one to blockade Malta's harbours and prevent as far as possible the besieged French
garrison from receiving assistance or provisions. For more than fourteen months, the siege was entirely maintained by the Maltese insurgents under the leadership of General Emmanuele Vitale, 1 Canon Francesco Saverio Caruana2 and Vincenzo Borg3 assisted by "a lieutenant of the British artillery, five Neapolitan officers, and twenty privates".4 In February 1799, at the request of the National Assembly (later renamed Congresso) and with the consent of His Neapolitan Majesty, Captain Alexander John Ball RN,5 in

1 On the commencement of the Maltese revolt against the French, Notary Emmanuele Vitale (1758-1802) was chosen as General in command of the insurgent troops. The people of Zebbug and Siggiewi, however, refused to recognize him as such and appointed Canon F.S. Caruana as their commandant. After Captain Alexander John Ball RN began to preside over the meetings of the Maltese National Assembly, then renamed Congresso. Vitale began to attend the meetings as representative of Mdina, Rabat and Dingli. He was appointed Governor of Gozo on 20 August 1801.  

2 Canon Francesco Saverio Caruana (1759-1847) was a member of the French Commission of Government. On the rebellion of the Maltese he became General of the forces of Zebbug and Siggiewi and subsequently representative of the Maltese Clergy and Capitular Vicar of the troops after the National Assembly was renamed Congresso. In recognition of his scholastic merits and of his services during the siege of the French he was appointed Rector of the University of Studies on 28 October 1800. At the age of 73 he was ordained Bishop of Malta and Gozo on 28 February 1831.  

3 Vincenzo Borg (1767-1837), a cotton merchant known as Branet, played a prominent part in the rebellion against the French as a commandant of the forces and as representative of Birkirkara and Lija in Congresso. Borg was very pro-British and at one stage during the siege he informed Ball that 'the overwhelming majority amongst us desire nothing so much as to see the Island under the British'. He eventually fell out with Ball who put him under house-arrest because of his alleged political intrigues. In 1833 he was created a Cavaliere in the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG). A bust of Vincenzo Borg donated by the Galea family of Birkirkara to the Aula Capitolare of the Basilica of St Helen, shows the 'Blockade' gold medal awarded to him in 1800. At the top he has a decorative medallion showing the image of a Maltese hero wearing a gold medal to be found in the Parish Church of Gharb.  


5 After the Battle of the Nile (1 August 1798), Captain (later Sir) Alexander John Ball RN, on Nelson's orders, undertook the blockade of Malta's harbours, and later, with the approval of the Maltese National Assembly assumed command of the land forces. During the siege of the French in Malta he governed Malta in the name of the King of the Two Sicilies and endeared himself so much to the inhabitants that he later became known as 'The Father of the Maltese'. He was recalled to the Navy in February 1801. After the Treaty of Amiens (25 March 1802) Ball returned to Malta on 10 July 1802 as His British Majesty's Plenipotentiary to the Order of St John to whom the island was

Gold and silver medals were subsequently struck to commemorate the victory over the French after a two-year siege during which about 20,000 Maltese perished through sickness and famine or in battle. These medals are now virtually unobtainable and are the most highly prized of Maltese medals.  

Gold Awards  

The gold medals were awarded to the leaders of the Maltese for their zeal and courage shown during the defense of their country on the outbreak of the rebellion against the French (2 September 1798) and for offering themselves to represent the inhabitants of their casali in the National Assembly. These medals (36mm. in diameter), are extremely simple in design, and consist of two thin gold flans, one for each side of the medal, joined together by a gold raised rim. At the top they have a decorative fitment through which passes the loop for suspension. Portraits of General Emmanuele Vitale, Cavaliere Giovanni Gafa,6 Filippo Castagna7 and to be restored. Ball lobbied the Maltese so that Britain would retain Malta because of her strategic and commercial value. Ball's second term of office on the island was not popular at all for he refused to countenance the reinstatement of the Maltese Congresso and exiled 'undesirable persons to Barbary without trial': Donald Sultana, Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Malta and Sicily (Barnes Noble, New York, 1969) 15.  

6 Giovanni Gafa was the representative of Gharb in the Congresso. A portrait of this Maltese hero wearing a gold medal is to be found in the Parish Church of Gharb.  

7 Filippo Castagna was at first representative of Gudja in the Congresso, but after the blockade he became Lieutenant for Bormla and Siggiewi. In a confidential dispatch of the Civil Commissioner Charles Cameron (15 November 1801) to the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, Castagna was described 'as a man of excellent public character, exceedingly popular with every rank of the inhabitants. He distinguished himself at the Siege of Valletta, and in the Congresso, both for his
Stanisla Gatt, show the gold medal worn on the breast and suspended from a ribbon vertically striped in white and red, the traditional Maltese colours.

The crowned white and red coat of arms of Malta, flanked by palm branches, is engraved on the obverse, whilst the reverse design consists of two palm branches flanked by the motto PATRIA LIBERATA. In addition to the gold medals, the recipients also received a citation or attestation certificate as the gold medals, unlike the silver ones, were issued unnamed. All citations are identical apart from the recipient’s name and the town or village which he represented. They are all dated 9 February 1801 and bear the signature of Sir Alexander Ball as well as that of his Maltese secretary Felice Cutajar. They are written in Italian, the language of the Government, and read as follows:-

Noi Alessandro Giovanni Ball Governatore dell'Isola Malta e Gozo - Atteso il merito di voi ...... e zelo dimostrato nella difesa della Patria li 2 Settembre

They are written in Italian, the language of the Government, and read as follows:-

Noi Alessandro Giovanni Ball Governatore dell'Isola Malta e Gozo - Atteso il merito di voi ...... e zelo dimostrato nella difesa della Patria li 2 Settembre

Translation: Considering your merit, and zeal shown during the defence of your country on 2 September 1798 against the French and considering your courage in offering yourself as Representative of the inhabitants of Casal...... to constitute a Congress during the most dangerous period of the revolt, we award to you this attestation together with a gold medal so that it will be for you and for your family an everlasting memory and honourable testimony. From the Secretariat of His Excellency, 9 February 1801. (Signed) Alexander John Ball. Felice Cutajar, Secretary to His Excellency.

Vassallo, the Maltese historian, says that the medals were awarded to the Maltese by the British Government. There is, however, no evidence that any British medals were awarded to either Maltese or British personnel for their participation in the war against the French in Malta. In fact, the Royal Mint, the British Museum and the National Army Museum in the United Kingdom have no recorded information regarding such awards. Furthermore, the wafer-seal attached to the citations given to recipients of gold medals reads 'Alessandro Giovanni Ball Governatore di Malta e Gozo per S.M.S. [Sua Maestà Siciliana]' and because Ball, under the direction of the Maltese Congresso, governed Malta and issued laws and regulations on behalf of His Sicilian Majesty, it should be assumed that the awards were made in King Ferdinand’s name and not in that of the British Government.

E.H. Furse, whilst describing a gold and a silver medal repeats Vassallo’s assertion that the blockade medals were awarded by the British Government and adds that a gold medal was also given to Captain Alexander John Ball.

8 During the rule of the Order of St John, the apothecary Stanisla Gatt, held the post of jurat and syndic of the village of Qormi. On the landing of the French in Malta his residence was pillaged by the troops but soon afterwards he was appointed President of the municipality of Qormi. After the rebellion against the French he was elected representative of his village in the Maltese National Assembly and during the blockade he commanded the Qormi battalion. Like many other leading citizens of his village, he also donated money and pledged his own property for the maintenance of his battalion. Guiz, Cardona, "Stanisla Gatt", Heritage, An Encyclopedia of Maltese Culture and Civilization (Midsea Books, Valletta, January 1980) 619-620. A portrait of Gatt wearing his gold medal is in a private collection in Qormi and has been reproduced in the afore-mentioned encyclopedia.

9 Advocate Felice Cutajar took an active part in the siege of the French. He served as Secretary to Captain Ball during the blockade and later as Assistant Secretary and Administrator of Public Property: Diario, Lunario e Calendario delle Isole di Malta e Gozo per l’anno 1805, 11. Cutajar’s original manuscript in Italian, now in the National Library of Malta, gives a historical account of the French occupation of Malta. A translation in English of Cutajar’s narrative has been published in Alfred Zammit Cutajar’s book Biographical Notes on the Ancestry of my Parents (Printex Ltd, Malta, 1987).
Professor Pisani in his Medagliere di Malta e Gozo, a catalogue of his personal collection of coins and medals, lists one gold medal and the silver one awarded to Felice Borg. 13

In 1897, Major Chesney specifically stated that the gold medals were only awarded to the three leaders of the Maltese insurgents, Vitale, Caruana and Borg. 14 This misinformation has been repeated by other authors, 15 even though Monsignor Alfredo Mifsud, a former Librarian of the National Library of Malta, had, in 1907, assumed that the gold medals were awarded to the three leaders of the Maltese insurgents, Vitale, Caruana and Emmanuele Vitale, he had found the gold medals given to

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nation in 1899-Malta Government Gazette (30 July 1909). The silver medal described by Furse had been awarded to Felice Borg (carabiniere nel tempo del blocco cioè della rivolta della campagna contro i Francesi) and belonged to Professor Pisani. 13

S.L. Pisani, Medagliere di Malta e Gozo dall'Epoca Fenicia all'attuale Regnante S.M. La Regina Vittoria (Tipografia di Giov. Muscat, Malta, 1896) 77. Pisani says that the gold medal, presumably that which had been awarded to Filippo Castagna, and which he describes in his catalogue had been given to him by the Cachia Zammit family. It is now one of the three gold 'Blockade' medals in the numismatic collection of the National Museum of Malta.


Alfredo Mifsud, Origine della Sovranità Inglese su Malta (Tipografia del Malta, 1907) 379. The following were elected Deputies and Representatives of the People as from 18 February 1799: General Emmanuele Vitale, for Città Vecchia (Mdina), Rabat and Dingli; Notary Pietro Buttigieg for Ze±bug; Parish Priest Salvatore Curzo for Siggiewi; Parish Priest Aloisio Bartolomeo Caraffa for Mqabba; Gregorio Mifsud for Qrendi; Rev. Fr. Fortunato Dalli for Zurrieq; Rev. Fr. Giuseppe Abdilla for Safi; Dr Enrico Xerri for Kirkop; Filippo Castagna for Gudja; Rev. Fr. Pietro Malti for Gharaxx; Michele Cachia for Zejtun; Agostino Said for Zabbar; Giuseppe 'Montebello for Tarxien; Rev. Fr. Giuseppe Casha for Luqa; Stanislao Gatt for Qormi; Vincenzo Borg for Birikirkara; Giovanni Gafa for Għargħur; Chev. Baron Paolo Parisio Muscati for Naxxar; Parish Priest Felice Calleja for Mosta; Salvatore Gafà for Lija; Giuseppe Frendo for Balzan; and Notary Saverio Zarb for Attard: Hardman 191; Testa ii, 488-489).

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Maltese Blockade Medals

Giuseppe Frendo of Balzan 17 and to Notary Pietro Buttigieg of Ze±bug, 18 and traced three other medals in private collections. Furthermore, Mifsud also referred to the citation presented to Michele Cachia of Zejtun 19 and reproduced those given to Stanislao Gatt of Casal Formaro (Qormi) and to Saverio Zarb of Attard. The author of the present monograph has, in the meantime, traced the citation given to the representative of Mosta, Parish Priest Felice Calleja. 20 Dr Testa, the now established expert on the French occupation of Malta, states that Enrico Xerri, the representative of Kirkop, was also the recipient of a gold medal. 21

I have now been able to establish, with certainty, that the gold medals were awarded to all the representatives of the villages after the surrender of the French. This is confirmed in a petition made by Salvatore Gafà, the representative of the village of Lia, which is to be found in the National Archives, Rabat. When Gafà had to resign his post in 1809, because of

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17 Giuseppe Frendo was the Chief and representative of Balzan.
18 Notary Pietro Buttigieg, the representative of Ze±bug was not only awarded a gold medal for his distinguished services during the blockade. In 1799, Captain Alexander Ball gave him exclusive rights to work as the sole notary in Ze±bug: Testa 489-490 and after the war he continued to hold the post of Lieutenant of his village: (Diario, Lunario e Calendario 1805, 14).
19 "Michele Cachia, military and civil engineer, representative of Casal Zejtun, constructed all the batteries during the siege of Valletta, and contributed money towards the expense of the war. He is famed for his wisdom in counsel, and is the most popular man in the Island, his integrity and talents have acquired him a great reputation and the entire confidence of the people of every description": Mifsud, 249. In recognition of his services during the war he was appointed Capo Maestro of Government buildings and one of the Amministratori di Beni Pubblici: Diario, Lunario e Calendario 1805, 11.
20 E.B. Vella, Storja tal-Mosta bil-Knisja Tagha (Empire Press, Malta, 1930) 102. This citation is in the collection of Dr M. Agius Vadalà who kindly pointed out to me its existence.
21 Enrico Xerri graduated as medical doctor at Salerno and returned to Malta shortly before the uprising of the Maltese against the French. During the blockade of the French garrison he was the representative of Kirkop in the Maltese National Assembly and commandant of the village battalion. Like Vincenzo Borg and Filippo Castagna he also held the post of military inspector of the Maltese battalions (Testa, 523, 737), and after the surrender of the French he was appointed Capitano di Porto: Diario, Lunario e Calendario 1805, 15.
illness, he was left practically penniless. In his request for a pension, which was eventually granted, he specifically states that for his meritorious services during the blockade, he, like all the representatives of the other villages, had been awarded a gold medal (riguardo a tali meriti l'Oré [Oratore] e stato dall'E.V. [Sir Alexander Ball] garantito con una midaglia (sic) d'oro conforme i'erano nell' altri Rappresentanti...).22

The issue of these medals, after the end of the blockade, is also confirmed by entries in the Libro Introiti ed Esiti 1800 - 1801 (Accounts, payment of Salaries, pensions etc.) extant in the National Library of Malta. According to these records, the gold medals cost 1400 Scudi which were paid on 13 and 29 January 1801 to the Vicar-General Salvatore Susano who, it appears, undertook to provide these awards.23

Silver Awards

The silver medals (42mm. in diameter) were awarded to those recruits in the village battalions who distinguished themselves in the sorties against the French, as well as to a few leading inhabitants who contributed substantial funds for the upkeep of the troops or mortgaged their own property for the provision of grain from Sicily. Like the gold ones, they consist of two flans, one for each side of the medals, joined together by a raised rim. At the top they also have a decorative fitment, to which is attached an ornate solid silver bow. The obverse displays the motto MALTA AL SUOI DIFENSORI and the date 1800 surmounting two olive branches. The whole design and lettering are embossed. The reverse shows the recipient's name, incusely inscribed over two impressed olive branches identical to those shown on the obverse.

It is clear that a good number of silver medals - exactly how many is not known - were issued. According to official records, Mario Schembri, the Consul for Silversmiths, was paid for 60 medals.24 On two other occasions, 6 October 1800 29 and 7 February 1801,26 he handed in more medals.27

Maltese Blockade Medals

However, because the payment made to him on those dates included also the wages of Palace guards, the number cannot be established.

Vassallo27 says that amongst those who were awarded silver medals for their distinguished participation in the siege were the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pietro Paolo Bezzina28</td>
<td>Francesco Farrugia29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvatore Bonanno30</td>
<td>Costanzo Morgo31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luigi Briffa32</td>
<td>Giuseppe Musci33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giuseppe Brignone34</td>
<td>Modesto Sapiano35</td>
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</tbody>
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22 NAR [National Archives, Rabat], Ordini e Decreti (Gennaio 1808 - Dicembre 1811). ff. 72-73.
24 Ibid., 1, 16, 17, 19, 27 (Esiti).
25 Ibid., 1.
26 Ibid., 32.
27 Vassallo, 833. It is to be assumed that the recipients listed by this author were awarded silver medals.
28 Pietro Paolo Bezzina was appointed Receiver of Grain on 4 September 1798: Mifsud, 202.
29 During the early French rule Francesco Farrugia was Secretary to the municipality of Siggiewi (Testa, 139) but after the insurrection took an active part in the blockade of the French in Valletta. Farrugia was one of the delegates sent to Naples to solicit the aid of King Ferdinand soon after the uprising of the Maltese: Hardman, 110. However, there were two other soldiers whose names were Francesco Farrugia; one served in the Żabbar battalion, the other in the Tarxien battalion.
30 The Rev. Fr Salvatore Bonanno was the assistant of Canon F.S. Caruana. On the outbreak of the rebellion against the French he was appointed commandant of the camp at San Giuseppe. It is very unlikely that a silver medal was awarded to him as he died on 7 April 1799: Carmelo Testa, Manoż-Żewg Nahat tas-Swar: Żmien il-Francizz il-Malta, (Klabb Kotba Maltin, Malta, 1980) 245.
31 On 3 September 1798, the day after the Maltese rose against the French at Rabat, the insurgents, led by Emmanuele Vinale, succeeded in effecting an entrance into Mdina with the help of Costanzo Morgo, known as 'Tal-Kantur', through a secret passage behind the Cathedral: Testa, 228.
32 Luigi Briffa, a native of Żebbuġ, was one of the delegates of the Maltese National Assembly who were sent to solicit the aid of King Ferdinand IV of Naples soon after the insurrection - Mifsud, 204. During the blockade Briffa was appointed first on the board of the Università de Grani and later as portmaster at St Paul's Bay: Mifsud, 280.
33 Giuseppe Musci was one of the inspectors of towers held by the Maltese insurgents during the blockade: Mifsud 202.
34 Notary Giuseppe Brignone acted as Secretary to the municipality of Żebbuġ under the French: Testa, 139. After the Maltese rebellion he served as cancellierof the camp at San Giuseppe (Mifsud, 267) and as Aide-de-Camp to Salvatore Bonanno. Zammit Cutajar, 80.
35 Modesto Sapiano was appointed Chief of the Artillery at the first meeting of the Maltese National Assembly held at Mdina on 4 September 1798: Mifsud, 202.
It is also known that Sergeant Giuseppe Darmanin and Stefano Spiteri, a soldier, both in the village battalion of Żurrieq, were recipients of a silver medal.\(^1\) E.B. Vella says that Baldassere Attard, Gian Battista Mamo and Giuseppe Bonnici, artillerymen in the Żejtun battalion, were also awarded medals.\(^2\) Four silver medals awarded to Paolo Borg.\(^3\) Giovanni Maria Cassar, Felic Borg\(^4\) and Andrea Attard,\(^5\) are to be found in the numismatic collection of the Malta National Museum.

It is unfortunate that no official full list of recipients of these 'Blockade' medals has been traced and that only five gold medals and five silver ones are known to exist either in the Malta National Museum or in private collections. It is a great pity that so many of them have either been lost or found their way to the melting pot of the local silversmiths.

These awards have a stirring human story behind them and will forever remain a living proof of the valour of our ancestors, confirmed at one stage of the war against the French by a spirited address to the Maltese by Brigadier-General Thomas Graham (later General Lord Lynedoch) who, in April 1800, raised the Maltese Light Infantry (I Caccitori Maltesi).\(^6\) On 19 June of that year, in an appeal to raise more companies of armed peasants, Graham asserted: “Brave Maltese - You have rendered yourselves interesting and conspicuous to the world. History affords no more striking example...without arms, without the resources of war, you broke asunder your chains. Your patriotism, courage and religion supplied all deficiencies...”\(^7\)

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\(^1\) Lorenzo Bugueja, a native of Rabat, acted as Secretary to the Maltese National Assembly on 4 September 1798 (Mifsud, 190) and on the next day he was appointed Inspector of Towers and Batteries in the area of St Paul's Bay (Mifsud, 202; Zammit Cutajar, 80). Bugueja's chronicle of the events leading to the landing of the French and the rebellion of the Maltese is to be found at the National Library of Malta (MS. 269). Another person, whose name was Lorenzo Bugueja and served in the Żejtun battalion, could well be the recipient of this medal. (For a list of Maltese recruits, Cfr. Abstract of Maltese serving at the surrender of the Island of Malta on the 4th September 1800 and entitled to share Prize Money for the same, NLM, Libr. MS. 2, f. 19).

\(^2\) Notary Gaetano Vitale held the post of Receiver of Grain along with Bezzina: Testa, ii, 247. After the surrender of the French, Vitale was appointed chancellor and archivist of the magistracy of Mdina: Diario, Lunario e Calendario 1800, 11.

\(^3\) Andrea Calleja was the leader of a group of Maltese insurgents from the Birkirkara battalion who rowed across the Grand Harbour on 12 January 1799 during the unsuccessful attempt to enter Valletta. The insurgents were accidentally discovered in the quarantine stores at Marsamxett and in the mêlée that followed a number of them lost their lives or were taken prisoners. Calleja, however, managed to escape and later in the siege took an active part in the fight against the French as commandant of one of the Birkirkara battalions in charge of the Gharghar battery: Vassallo, 833. Another Andrea Calleja, who was a soldier the Żabbar battalion, might have been the recipient of this silver medal: NLM, Libr. MS.2, f.19).

\(^4\) Alessio Xuereb acted as courier of messages between the military camps: Mifsud, 202.

\(^5\) Andrea Cilia was Chief of the battalion at Tas-Samra: Hardman 416.

\(^6\) Saverno Żarb was a soldier in the Żabbar Battalion: NLM, Libr. MS.2, f.19.


\(^8\) Giovanni Maria Cassar could well be one of the priests who, like Dr Paolo Borg, mortgaged their own property to procure provisions for the insurgents enrolled in the Birkirkara battalions - Vella (1934), 293. His medal was also bequeathed to the National Museum of Malta by Magistrate Dr Parnis.

\(^9\) Professor Piana simply says that Felice Borg came from the village of Żebbuġ: Piana, 77. However, it has been officially recorded that Borg was a member of the Żabbar battalion: Joseph Galea, "The Maltese Militia of 1800", The Armed Forces of Malta Journal, 27, (1977) 7.

\(^10\) Andrea Attard was a soldier in the Mosta battalion: NLM, Libr. MS. 2, f.37


\(^12\) Graham’s Appeal to Brave Maltese reproduced in Cobbett’s Annual Register (January - June 1803, col. 774).