THE CONSULAR NETWORK OF XVIII CENTURY MALTA

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The figure of the Consul de Ultramar, or overseas consul, as a representative and defender of a nation's subjects abroad is not to be confused with that of the Consul de Mar, concerned with the administration of justice amongst mariners and merchants in the Middle Ages and early Modern period. In this paper I propose to look at the former, namely, the overseas consul. More specifically I shall be having a look at the evolution of Malta's overseas consular network as a mirror of changes in the island's commercial relations in the course of the XVIII Century.

In an article dating back to the opening decades of this century Mifsud claimed that the Maltese had consuls in other lands from as early as the late XV century, but it was with the coming of the Order of St John that the island really entered the mainstream of Mediterranean affairs and that the matter of foreign representation became of critical importance.1 This was reflected in the ever larger sums of money being spent on the maintenance of ambassadors and other official representatives abroad.2

The first, namely the ambassadors, were ordinarily concerned with political and military issues. Only exceptionally would they take a direct interest in matters, such as commerce, which most would have considered below their station as noblemen-at-arms.3

But in addition to the ambassadors, the Order also had a vast network of administrators who looked after its estates and other related matters.4 This

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1 A. Mifsud, "I Nostrì Consoli e le Artì ed i Mestieri" Archivium Melitense, iii No. 2-3 Malta 1917-1919, 57-82.
financial department, treasury or "general banker" as Thornton has called it, was primarily responsible for the Order's own affairs, but a lesser known role was that of defending the Maltese traders' commercial interests, acting on their behalf and at times arranging for the transfer of their funds.  

Well before the emergence of an extensive network of consuls therefore, Maltese merchants could count on the protection and support of the Bailiwicks and Receivers, as well as the many members of the Order distributed all over Europe.

Nevertheless, and with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the Order's Receivers and other officials were thinnest on the ground exactly in those areas, namely the Kingdom of Valencia, Murcia and Andalusia, where the Maltese were carving out new markets for themselves during the course of the XVIII Century.

It is probably as a consequence of this lack that the XVIII Century was to witness an impressive expansion of consuls for the Maltese in the Western Mediterranean to attend to the mundane needs of merchants and ships' captains. I specifically use the term consuls for the Maltese and not Maltese consuls because the overwhelming majority would not in fact be natives of the island.

A quick glance at MS. No. 6429 at the A.O.M. entitled Consoli fuori di Malm ed in Malta is enough to demonstrate that well into the XVIII Century the vast majority of consuls for the Maltese were to be encountered in Sicily and Southern Italy, traditional sources of Malta's victualling and raw material needs.

In fact around 70 different ports lying fairly close to the island, from Augusta to Vittoria in Sicily and from Ancona to Viterbo on mainland Italy, provided the bulk of supplies for Malta's day to day survival. Their importance was to continue undiminished throughout the whole of the period under review.

The major innovation in the XVIII Century was an expansion beyond the aforementioned traditional boundaries which took Maltese merchants as far as Portuguese ports, on the shores of the Atlantic. This westward drive must have already been underway in the preceding century because, according to Mifsud, the need for a consul for the Maltese in Leghorn had already been felt before 1680.  

In any event, expeditions to the Iberian Peninsula were already a regular feature on the eve of the XVIII Century with at least a dozen sailings in 1699.  

The 1720s may have seen a temporary dip in commercial activity but by the second quarter of the century the expansion to the West had become an established fact and the expanding consular network was a consequence of this.

Consular appointments during the course of the XVIII Century totalled around 260. Just over a third of these occurred during the first half of the century but the bulk, nearly two thirds, took place in the latter half.

Some of this increase consisted of appointments in France (Languedoc, Marseilles, Suèt, Toulon and Villefranche) and Northern Italy (Genoa, Leghorn, Trieste and Venice) but most were in Spain where Malta acquired at least 19 consular posts dotted all along the coast.

Consular appointments in Portugal show a totally different evolution from that shown by the above-mentioned Western European states. In fact, of four consular posts existing in the earlier part of the century only one (Lisbon) was renewed in the second half. Once again this reflects what we know of Maltese commercial contacts with Portugal, namely that there was a notable decrease during the second half of the XVIII Century.

But going back to Malta's principal trading partners we find that the 60 consular appointments to 19 different Spanish posts during that century represented a considerably larger number than the total of 32 appointments to 10 different posts in Northern Italy and France combined and constitute additional proof of the ascendancy of Spain in XVIII Century Malta's commercial system.

In the rest of this paper and using mostly material from Madrid's Archivo Historico Nacional it is my intention to take a closer look at the network of consuls for the Maltese in XVIII Century Spain.

The Maltese Consular Network in Spain

As Kamen has noted, the principal trade centres of Spain could usually be identified by the presence of a foreign consul. These were continually on the

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5 W. H. Thornton, Memoir of the Finances of Malta under the Government of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, during the last years of its Dominion and as compared with those of the present time, Valletta 1836.

6 Mifsud, 71.

7 NAM CM. Manifest Vol. I Year 1699 passim.

increase but from the XVI Century onwards there was a gradual shift in the structure of foreign consular representation within Spain as the previously predominant Italian Republics like Genoa and Venice declined in importance.9

As these lost ground as centres of trade and finance, their place was gradually taken over by France, England, Holland and the Hanseatic states which, from the mid XVII Century onwards, extended their consular networks in Spain, the Mediterranean and the Muslim states. This was a consequence of their vigorous trade in these areas but also reflected the long term shift in the Western world's centre of gravity towards the Atlantic.

One exception to this shift away from the Mediterranean was the case of Malta whose consular network in Spain multiplied six fold from two or three at the beginning of the XVIII Century to at least nineteen at the end of it.

The procedure used by the Grand Master to appoint consuls has been described by Mallia-Milanes in his study on Maltese consuls in Venice during the XVIII Century.10 In the first instance the Grand Master would remit the commission consulaire, or letter of appointment, to the governing body of the receiving state, either directly or through the Order's authorized agent or receiver, residing in either that particular city or, more likely, in the district comprising that city or port. The receiving state would then normally furnish the respective consul with an exequatur or placet, a document showing that it had recognised his character and was declaring him free to discharge his duties as consul and to enjoy consular privileges. The commission consulaire had no legal significance until the exequatur had been granted.

As far as early XVIII Century Spain is concerned, the Order would seem to have had consuls recognised as such in Cartagena,11 Alicante and Valencia.12

The first was a regular port of call for the Order's ships in their joint operations with the Spanish Navy13 while the latter two were already being frequented by Maltese commercial shipping.14

There is, on the other hand, no definite confirmation of a Maltese consul in Barcelona at the outset of the XVIII Century, as claimed by Eloy Martin Corrales.15 The person who acted on behalf of the Maltese traders in their dispute with Barcelona's cloth retailer's guild in the mid 1720s was the Receiver of the Order in Barcelona, Don Anton or Antonio Ribes.

The earliest evidence we have of a Maltese consul in the critically important port of Barcelona is the nomination, in 1743, of Bonaventura Canet but there is no sign that he was ever confirmed in his post.16 It would, in fact, seem that none of the consular appointments made by the Grand Masters up to 1762 in the cities or areas of Barcelona, Cadiz, Seville, Malaga, Denia, Vinaroz, Campo de Gibraltar, Majorca, Almeria, Algeciras and the Canary Islands were found acceptable to the Spanish authorities and there is no sign that the increasing amount of Maltese trade with Spain was being matched by a corresponding increase in its formal consular network.17

The reason lay partly in the hard-line policy adopted by the Spanish State in the early part of the century vis-a-vis the appointment of all foreign consuls. In fact during this period only renewals of consular posts existing at the time of Charles II were, in principle, being granted.18

But there was also another obstacle peculiar to Malta, i.e. that practically all the consular appointees put forward by the Grand Masters of the Order were non-Maltese. This went directly against one of the stipulations for appointment as a foreign consul in Spain, namely being a national of the country making the appointment and this was simply not feasible for the Order.19

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11 AHN Estado Leg 611 Document 128 s.f. In his application to be confirmed in his post as a consul of Malta in Cartagena dated 21 January 1708, Mitre talks of his predecessor Don Pedro Pablo Merizano's term of office lasting from 4 July 1703 to 7 February 1707.
12 Another document in AHN Estado Leg 619/1 dated 11 April 1713, "Extracto sobre Instancia de Don Bartholome Mitre, Consul de Malta in Cartagena", unsigned, speaks of a consul for the Order in Alicante by the name of Juan Antonio Corsiniani.
13 J. Salva, La Orden de Malta Y Las Acciones Navales Españolas contra Turcos Y Berberiscos en los siglos XVI y XVII, Madrid, 1944. Passim.
14 AHN. Estado Leg. 610/2 Num. 405 s.f.
15 E. Martin Corrales, "El Comercio de Cataluña con el Levante Otomano en el siglo XVIII (1782-1808)" in La Mediterrania Antropologia i Historia VII Jornades d'Estudis Histories Locals, Palma de Mallorca, 1990 155 fn 50.
16 NLM AOM 6429.
17 Ibidem.
18 AHN. Estado Leg. 610/2 No. 405. Año 1716.
The level of Maltese trade was not yet sufficiently high to enable the Order to draw upon a stable pool of Maltese nationals resident in Spain. Neither could it justify the expense of sending and paying for full-time consuls and this was made clear in a letter written by the Bailío Don Pedro Davila y Guzman to Spain's Council of State in support of the appointee to the Maltese consulate in Alicante in 1723.  

There is correspondence relating to attempts to get non-Maltese accepted as consuls for the Maltese in Spain on at least six other occasions in the period 1715-1761 but none were successful.

It may nevertheless be that at least part of the responsibility for this lack of success may be attributable to a breakdown in communications. We, in fact, have documentary evidence indicating that the Grand Masters were not aware of the rule prohibiting foreigners acting as consuls for nations other than their own until as late as 1768.

Be that as it may, it would seem that Maltese merchants coped with the absence of formally recognised consuls by recourse to agents lacking official status, but with the advent of the second half of the century the position of the Spanish authorities seems to have changed radically.

The Second Half of the Century

Confirmation of the change in the official Spanish attitude towards the Order's consular appointments came in 1762, with the approval of Juan Bautista Gavarri, a non-Maltese merchant, as consul for the Maltese in Valencia.

The commission consulaire, dated 30 November 1761, was accompanied by a covering letter stating arguments in favour of the application, such as the multi-national nature of the Order and the claim that the native inhabitants were but simple sailors, weavers and market gardeners. These were exactly the same arguments as had been put forward and found lacking earlier in the century!

The question we must pose ourselves therefore must be: what had happened to make the Spanish authorities change their position?

The answer, or so the official explanation would have it, lay in events immediately after the signing of the Treaty of Aachen in 1748 when it had been considered expedient to dispense with some of the normal requirements for the appointment of consuls for several European states.

With this precedent in mind therefore the authorities recommended confirmation of Don Juan Bautista Gavarri as consul on condition that it did not constitute a precedent as far as the Order was concerned.

Within a year the Junta de Comercio y Dependencias de Etrangeros, the body entrusted with such matters, proceeded to disregard its own recommendation and confirmed another consul for the Maltese, Don Carlos Maria Dodero, to the post of Cadiz, Europe's gateway to the Americas and the location of the most numerous Maltese merchant community in Spain.

Dodero's appointment constitutes definitive confirmation of the volte-face in the official position vis-à-vis Maltese consular appointments. It was undoubtedly greatly helped by the precedent set by the Gavarri appointment in Valencia but no less important must have been the personal qualities of Dodero himself. In the recent war with the English he had proven his loyalty to the Crown by organizing a force of 500 men from Malta and Ragusa to help defend the city in the event of an attack.

After the Gavarri and Dodero appointments the Spanish authorities put no further obstacles to non-Maltese individuals as consuls for the Maltese.

During the rest of the century the overwhelming majority of consuls for the Maltese would be non-Maltese merchants like Gavarri and Dodero but in the latter quarter of the century we start encountering signs of the coming of age of the Maltese merchant presence in Spain.

This reflected itself not just in the increasing number of merchants in the Peninsula and their ever-widening spatial spread but also in the appointment, from amongst their ranks, of consuls for the Maltese and for the other nations and perhaps even more importantly, the appointment of a Maltese to the post of Consul-General in Madrid with overall responsibility for the whole of Spain.

20 AHN. Estado Leg. 612. Año 1723.
21 AHN, Estado Leg. 607/2 No. 933 Año 1744. As late as 1768 the Grand Master was not aware of this rule, according to a letter from his Spanish secretary Lores to Melgarejo dated 15 March 1768 AHN OM SJJ Asamblea Caja 8048/1.
22 AHN Estado Leg. 615. Año 1762.
The first Maltese consul, as opposed to the first consul for the Maltese, was probably Michele Pastorfido who received the Grandmasters' *commission consulaire* or patent, for Almeria on 12 June 1758.25

We do not have much additional information on Michele Pastorfido but he is probably the same Michele who is cited in another source, the records of the Tribunal of the *Consolato di Mare* for 1756, as having absconded with company funds and used them to buy property in Almeria.26 He was probably the father of Ramon Pastorfido who was appointed Maltese consul in Almeria on 19 May 1796 and declared having been born in Spain of a Maltese father.27

We also have information concerning Juan Francisco Caruana, confirmed as Maltese consul in Alicante in 1782. In a letter dated 30 January 1782, the Governor of Alicante informed the *Junta* that Caruana was a solid and respected merchant as well as being a subject of the Grand Master.28

The last strictly Maltese appointee to a consular post on whom we have information relates to Benito Sacco, named by the Grand Master to be consul in Barcelona in 1793.

Barcelona was a very important port and centre of Catalonia's emerging cotton industry and as such was the main consumer of the cotton yarn supplied by Maltese merchants.

We have already mentioned that the Order's Receiver in Barcelona was apparently the one to represent Maltese interests in the earlier part of the century but there may have been a system of official or unofficial commercial agents. Catalan *Corredors d'Orella*, or brokers, like Ferrusola, Canet, Malet, Peramas and the Burgés brothers were particularly prominent.

But going back to the subject of this paper we know from a declaration made by the acting *Comandante General de Cataluña* that the first known consul for the Maltese recognised as such was Don Onofre Gloria, a prominent Barcelona merchant who was confirmed in his post on 28 August 1769.29

Gloria's term of office was a long one, lasting until 1793 when he went bankrupt. When that happened, Grand Master Rohan instructed the Order's Receiver Frey Don Salvador Xatmar to arrange for both the removal of the Order's coat of arms from Gloria's front door and the withdrawal of his consular appointment.30

Asked about the need for a replacement, Xatmar advised the Grand Master that he felt a Maltese person should be appointed but he also forwarded information concerning several non-Maltese applicants for the post.31

In his letter dated 10 October 1793, Grand Master Rohan answered that he felt there was no suitable Maltese candidate in Malta and suggested instead Gabriel Company, a Catalan *Corredor de Cambios*, or broker, and that if Xatmar felt he was suitable would arrange for the usual patent to be issued.32

We are unaware what finally decided the Grand Master to pick Benito Sacco, but it was an unfortunate choice. The *Comandante General* of Barcelona in fact described Sacco as a man of very little substance with whom other consuls would have no dealings owing to his debts.33 He therefore recommended that Sacco should not be confirmed in the post.34

We do not know the outcome of the Sacco affair but there is confirmation that a new consul, Giuseppe de Soquet was appointed to the Barcelona post on 7 January 1796 so we can assume that the Grand Master must have withdrawn Sacco's appointment.35

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25 NLM AOM, MS. 6429.
26 NAM, C M Anti Originali Vol 52 Year 1756 Don Lorenzo Gauci, Francesco di Giorgio e Joachin Grech, f. 8ss.
27 AHN, Estado Leg. 628/1 Año 1795.
28 AHN, Estado Leg. 631 Año 1782.
29 ACA RA, Registro 564, Acordadas Año 1769, ff. 329v. There is in fact mention of the appointment of Bruno Peramas in 1756 but there is no record of his confirmation (NLM AOM 6429).
30 ACA OM GP Leg. 612 Letter from Grand Master Rohan to Don Salvador Xatmar dd. 27 June 1793.
32 ACA OM GP Leg 612. Letter from Grand Master Rohan to Xatmar dd. 10 October 1793.
33 AHN, Estado Leg. 632/2 Año 1794.
34 Ibidem.
35 NLM AOM 6429.
The Sacco affair and to some extent Pastorido’s somewhat shady background must surely make us wonder concerning the process whereby the Grand Master selected his consuls, particularly for a post as strategic as Barcelona.

Towards the very end of the XVIII Century and the opening years of the XIX we also encounter a couple of instances of members of the Maltese merchant community in Spain becoming consuls for other nations eg. Ramon Pastorido who was vice-consul for Portugal before becoming consul for Malta in Almeria and Don Francisco Amayra, listed as vice-consul for Germany, Naples and Tuscany in Vinaroz in 1807. But the climax of the process which had brought about a six-fold increase in the size of the Maltese consular network in Spain must surely be the appointment in 1789 of Josef Mifsud as Consul General for Malta in Madrid.

In order to put this appointment in its proper context we have to go back to 1771 and the outbreak of the crisis which had threatened the very existence of the Maltese trading community in the whole of Spain.

The Crisis of 1771 and the appointment of the Agente General

In view of the increasing difficulties being encountered by Maltese merchants in the 1760s the Receiver of the Order in Madrid made a recommendation, in 1768, in favour of the appointment of an Encargado de los negocios de Comercio y Marina, a sort of trade attaché. The Grand Master’s response was very favourable and undertook to select a suitable person.

Time passed but nothing seems to have come of it because when Melgarejo, who was entrusted with deciding on a suitable candidate, eventually picked Juan Bautista Gavarri, formerly consul for the Maltese in Valencia.

On Gavarri’s death, late in 1774 or early in 1775, Melgarejo informed Malta and allowed Gavarri’s son to carry on as acting Agente General while he awaited instructions.

These came in a letter dated 22 April 1775. After ratifying his decision to use Gavarri’s son in the interim, the Grand Master’s Spanish language Secretary, the Comendador Frey Francisco Ramiro, told Melgarejo that the Maltese merchants had unanimously requested the Grand Master that he appoint to the post Don Josef Mifsud, a Maltese gentleman who was at that moment in Malta but who ordinarily lived in Spain where he was married to a Spaniard. He was honest, had a sober character and was well-informed on matters of trade.

The letter went on to say that as a consequence the Grand Master had acceded to the Maltese merchant community’s request in order to forestall the considerable discontent that would have otherwise ensued.

When Mifsud was appointed Consul General 14 years later, the Commandante General of Madrid sent the customary report. In it he mentioned that there had not previously been a Consul General for Malta in Madrid and confirmed that Mifsud was of excellent character, prudent and of impeccable manners. He was around 50 years old, was a knight of the Order and had lived in Madrid for the previous 14 years. The Spanish official also mentioned that Mifsud was married to a lady of some social standing who was the daughter of Field Marshal Don Gaspar Bracho.

Some insight into the nature of Mifsud’s duties as Consul General can be encountered in an account, rendered on the 31 July 1791 for expenses incurred in the execution of his duties during the previous year and for which Mifsud was seeking reimbursement from the business community in Malta.

The Consul and Agent General had spent a total of 8,726 reales de vellon of which 1,774 reales, or around 20 per cent, went towards mailing charges and stationery; 2,400 reales, or around 27 per cent, constituted his salary and the remaining 4,552 reales, around 52 per cent, went towards expenses incurred in “…regalos por fiestas de Navidad, a los Senores y Yndividuos de estos consejos,”
Mifsud clearly understood only too well the need to maintain the wheels of government properly lubricated.\textsuperscript{52}

Mifsud was still in office on 15 December 1797, according to a letter by Antonio Magarola, Receiver of the Order in Catalonia.\textsuperscript{43} He is referred to as "...el primero por antiguedad..." in another document, regrettably undated, containing a list of foreign consuls in Madrid.\textsuperscript{44}

Mifsud's term of office coincided with the last quarter of the century when the level of Maltese trade in Spain reached its zenith and it is probable that the man who owed his appointment to the lobbying of the Maltese mercantile class, was paid by it and was Maltese like its members, was a better instrument of the articulation and defence of their interests in the Court of Madrid than had been individuals like the Frenchman Gavarri in Valencia.

There the Maltese had been locked in a life or death struggle with the French controlled Retailers Guild which was trying to counteract the inroads that the Maltese were making into what had essentially been their monopoly in the retailing of cloth.

The conflict of interests confronting the French consul for the Maltese had become unbearable and the Maltese business community had taken the initiative of organizing themselves and electing one of their own to represent their threatened interests.

In this context it is understandable that Maltese merchants eventually lobbied the Grand Master to ensure that the most important consular post of all, that of Consul General in Madrid with responsibility for all consuls in Spain, should go to one of their own.

The Maltese merchant class had come a long way. It had acquired a well defined notion of its own interests and how to set about defending them. It had become a class not just in itself but for itself.

\textsuperscript{42} NAV Notario Michel Angelo Portelli. Signatura 12/1013. d.d 27 September 1791.
\textsuperscript{44} AHN, Estado Leg. 626 No. 32. Relacion de Consules.