An Order in Decline?
An Alternative Perspective

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Introduction

Conflicting positions amongst historians of the Order of St John have characterised the ongoing debate concerning the kind of generic relevance the ancient institution retained during its Malta period, particularly during the last century before the Napoleonic invasion forced it into a major crisis. The question that historians have been faced with has been: How did such an institution, so heavily marked by the peculiarities of the (medieval) times that begot, nurtured and wrought it into a unique institution of religion and chivalry, manage to survive so long (into modernity) after religion had become a matter for the State and chivalry translated into service to one’s sovereign? Such a question, regardless of the diversity of ways that it has been formulated, reveals a baggage of assumptions, largely the product of hindsight loaded with modern rationalist prejudice that has harnessed history into time-categories or ‘Ages’; a strategy largely devised by ‘enlightened’ philosophers of the eighteenth century that viewed their ‘Age’ as the epitome of a singular historical pilgrimage towards the ascent of Reason, debunking the previous ‘dark ages’ as times of superstition and backwardness.¹

Such categorisation, in fact, is often the product of a progressive understanding of history, where ‘historical time’ – to borrow Braudelian terminology – is understood as fundamentally singular and linear; where an ‘Age’ is the progressive development from the ones preceding it. Technological advancement, for one, often reinforces such an understanding of history. This linear conception of history often leads the historian to understand an ‘Age’ in terms of the characteristics that distinguish it from previous ‘Ages’, shunning from serious engagement with the complexities that constants, anomalies and contradictions pose to such categorical

¹ See: I. Kant, ‘An Answer to a Question: What is Enlightenment?’, (1784), www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/etexts/kant.html [17 January 2012]
The choice fell upon this worthy protagonist because (i) his reports are the most detailed and straightforward available, due to the style he adopts, which means that they provide us with ample material for analysis without demanding somersaults of interpretation, where the historian’s voice might end up drowning that of his subject, and (ii) because of the particular time he was writing in, that is, exactly at the turn of the eighteenth century, a time when the Order in Malta could be considered at its peak of glory and wealth, but also when the changes happening in Europe were putting new challenges before that military-religious institution.

In 1700, Giovanni Battista Spinola was Captain General of the Order’s galleys. In early spring he set sail on the usual carovana around the Mediterranean. It was not long before the fleet met an inviting prey: a huge Turkish vessel well laden with goods. Ignoring the adverse weather conditions, Spinola gave the order to attack. The end-result was devastating: the galley Capitana was sunk during the attack, many men were lost and Spinola himself had to be saved from drowning. The Captain General sought refuge, with the remaining galleys, in nearby Zante, then a Venetian dominion. There he was met with hostility from a wary Proveditore that did not want to be responsible for renewed conflict with the Ottomans by aiding the Order’s fleet. Full of knighthood arrogance, Spinola bullied the Proveditore into submitting to his requests.¹

Later the same year, Spinola made up for his previous losses by capturing a Sottana, named ‘Binghen’, described to the Grand Master by Spinola himself as ‘the most beautiful Sottana that sails the sea’.² The following year, in 1701, cruising with the fleet close to the Barbary Coast, Spinola got word from Maltese seamen that in the Tunisian port of La Goletta were two large vessels berthed under the fort that guarded that Ottoman haven. The Captain General did not need to be told twice and was soon heading towards that port, sporting the colours of war. It was a singular feat; no one before had dared so much. La Goletta was a first rate port of one of the mightiest Ottoman regencies along the coast of North Africa. It had been attacked before by the galleys of the Order, but never had a General thought of taking his fleet right under the firing guns of the fortress overlooking the port and nicking away such a prestigious prey.³ The account of Spinola’s adventures can be found, written by his own hand, collected in volume AOM 1771, in the Archives of the Order of St John at the National Library in Valletta. It is the last of four volumes of manuscripts entitled ‘Relazioni dei Venerandi Generali et Commandanti delle Galere et di altri Navigli della Religione’, gathering together reports, written by the Order’s Generals between 1583 and 1701, following their missions at sea. These reports

An interlocutor

The impositions of brevity do not allow for an in-depth analysis of multiple sources, so Captain General Spinola will be our main interlocutor throughout this paper. The choice fell upon this worthy protagonist because (i) his reports are the most detailed and straightforward available, due to the style he adopts, which means that rationalisation. Such complexities, in fact, often throw light on the inadequateness of speaking about historical time, rather than of historical times in the plural, which often prove to be neither concurrent nor linear, neither progressive nor continuous, appearing often haphazardly in the guise of exception, revealing that history is about creatures that transcend categorisation and can never be fully understood through systematic rational processes. Even if a creature is an organisation, as the Order of Malta — but it could easily be today’s European Union, or crisis-ridden Greece — it is the product of human narratives, and as such it is the result of protracted human actions, knowledge and judgements, but also of human idiosyncrasies, individualities and predicaments.

Since, in general, historians have approached the subject of the relevance of the Order of St John in early modernity (to use the word to define the period) from such a categorical position they have been quite partisan in their assessment, either by standing for or against the idea that the Order kept its relevance way into the eighteenth century. The purpose of this paper is to propose an alternative view, which remains, however, a limited exposition of the argument, merely outlining a proposition that could be further worked upon, refined and defined. The argument about relevance is ultimately an argument about change, about the ability — in this case of the Order of St John — to adapt to a changing world. The objective of this paper is to show that the question of relevance (and therefore of change) deserves a much more complex answer than a simple yes or no answer; in fact, ultimately, it might be that yes and no stand together to reveal the myriad complexities not just of the situation but also of its time.

Unlike most historians who have tackled the question put here, the argument will go beyond the eighteenth century; indeed, the main focus is on the late 1600s, in the object of a series of reports filed by the Captains General of the galley fleet of the Order after their seaborne missions. This paper will show that by the end of the seventeenth century the Order had already wrought itself a very complex relationship with the changing times, displaying varying degrees of adaptability to change. Whilst the force of circumstance will be credited for its role in the turn of events, this paper will argue that structurally the Order as an organisation had already rendered itself liable to be swayed by such a force because of the important economic and political developments of the late seventeenth century.

¹ The whole episode can be found in the reports filed in ‘Relazioni dei Venerandi Generali et Commandanti delle Galere et di altri Navigli della Religione’ in the National Library of Malta (NLM), Archives of the Order of Malta (AOM) 1771, ff.139 to 151.
² AOM 1771, f.152v: ‘voiva ricevere ben presto in vedere sua preda, le più bello Sottana sachi in mare’. The report was also published in pamphlet form: Anon., Relazione della Vittoria Ottinuta dalle Quattro Galere della Santa Religione Gerusalemmitana, L’anno Sottana Nominato Bingen, Comandata dal Famoso Rais Solimano ne’ Mior di Borboria Seguita a de 8 Ottobre 1700, Rama 1700.
³ R.C. Anderson, Naval Wars in the Levant: 1559-1851, Liverpool 1952, (passim) gives numerous accounts of attempts against La Goletta both by the galleys of the Order, as well as by other Christian fleets.
were intended primarily for internal consumption, written by the prime actors themselves (or on their behalf by direct subordinates); a matter of authenticity that further heightens their value, even though—as a matter of fact—little use has been made of them by historians so far.

Men of their times

What is of particular interest, for the purpose of this paper, are not the exciting accounts by which General Spinola portrays the adventures he plunged himself in throughout his two years of office, but rather the underlying discourse that emerges from his writings. In this context, discourse is understood as a unified (though not self-contained) structure of concepts relative to a narrative of oneself and the world. Spinola's reports are long and verbose; his style flamboyant, reflecting the flamboyancy of the character that wrote them. Arrogant, courageous to the point of recklessness, there was something of the spectacular in the Genoese General; he could easily fit within the splendours of the court in Versailles, where the Sun King Louis XIV reigned. Setting aside what might be his own idiosyncrasies, his is the image of an aristocrat of the time, following the latest fashion, not just in matters of dress—one presumes, since the reports do not give us detail on the matter—but more importantly in terms of the mores that distinguished that social estate from the rest of society. In an aristocratic culture obsessed with the pursuit of glory, Spinola was one of many desirous of carving a name for himself that would last in eternity.6

Hungry for fame, the Genoese General believed in the honour obtained by the sword. Victory brought honour; but loss did not diminish it, if such loss was incurred at the hands of a worthy enemy against whom valorous resistance was employed.7 Thus, following the loss of the Capitana, Spinola made sure to send reports around Europe through the Receivers of the Order to reassure its patrons about the courage and heroism displayed during battle and that the loss of the galley was due to misfortune rather than anything else that might have tainted his or his Order's honour.8 Spinola was particularly conscious that Honourable conduct came also under the form of spectacle, as understood by that notion of glory imported from the French court during the latter seventeenth century.9 Such a frame of mind explains why rather than choosing stealth and deception—as had previously often been the strategy employed by the Order on numerous occasions on less daunting targets—10 he chose to confront the enemy frontally, 'drum beating, and other warning manifestations ... the sight of which could not be more spectacular and frightening to the enemies.'11

Spinola's versatility with contemporary trends of aristocratic behaviour was by no means unique within the Order. The reports of the Generals are testimony that the Grand Master's court was no backwater of European aristocracy. Generals like Joseph Johann, Count of Herbestein, or Sigismund, Count Thun, not only held important offices within the Order, but also enjoyed prominence in other European courts. Herbestein, for example, not only served as Captain General of the Papal fleet but was also twice called by the Austrian emperor to serve in his armies in the rank of General, eventually reaching the prestigious rank of Lieutenant Field-Marshall.12 Count Thun was appointed Imperial Field-Marshall in 1697 and was a member of the Court Council of War in Vienna.13 Like Spinola, both Generals sought glory through war. In his Relazione on the Count of Herbestein, after showering praise on the Austrian for the 'conspicuousness of such conspicuous offices that Your Excellency splendidly occupies', Francesco Scalletari lauded the knights of Malta for having 'always been fearless against the common enemy.'14

The narrative of glory was a late seventeenth-century phenomenon. As the century progressed, the Generals' reports present us with a gradual shift in their understanding of valour and honour; made even more visible if one were to engage in a comparative exercise related to the numerous Relazioni issued regularly by the Order to celebrate important battles or feats. Whilst definitely celebrating military valour and courage, during the early seventeenth century the knight was presented as a model of selflessness and virtue, risking his life for a greater cause—that of defending religion against the infidel—as a humble servant of the Lord.15 It was the language of balance and discretion, rooted in the Aristotelian virtues adopted by late Renaissance aristocratic discourse.16 By the end of the century, the ambitions of the religious warriors were worldlier. The baroque conception of glory favoured heroic fervour and triumphalism. This change in discourse coincided with a period of increasing confidence by the Order.17 Indeed, one can argue that the discourse

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5 Incidentally, my attention has been drawn by art historian Theresa Vella, that according to the General's spogllo, he had his own portrait drawn by Hyacinthe Rigaud, court painter of Louis XIV (AOM 931 (90), No. 36, f.180). According to Theresa Vella's own research the portrait was bequeathed to a relative of his.

6 Vauban, French minister to Louis XIV, declared that 'true glory does not [fit like a butterfly]; it is only acquired by real and solid actions.' See: J. A. Lynn, The Wars of Louis XIV 1667-1724, London 1999, 31.

7 AOM 1771, f.144.


9 AOM 1771, f.144.

10 Lynn 1999, 30.

11 For example deceit and stealth were employed when the fortress of Loggiemonte (modern-day Hammamet) was attacked by the Order in 1602. See: Anon., Nuova Notizia del Presidio della Città di Mesopotamia in Barbaresco, Fatta dalle Galee della Sacra Religione & il.M.m Ilia di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano, affi 13 di Agosto 1602, Rome 1602.

12 AOM 1771, f.156-156v. 'mi porto, tamburo battente, e altre guerre vtime imaginie, in detta Parto, seguito dalla Squadra, alio di sui camparne non poteva esser piu festoso e spaventevole a nemici.'

13 R. L. Dauber and M. Galea, Austrian Knights of Malta, Malta 2006, 82.

14 Dauber and Galea 2006, 93.

15 F. Scalletari, 'Condotta Naveale e Vera Relazione del Viaggio da Carliseto a Malta dell'il.Mo e Ecc.mo Sig. Gioanii Giuseppe d'Herbestein, Grav 1688, 1.

16 Avisio (1602), [unimpugnato], '[combattere contro gli infedeli niemic della santa fede di Christo]


18 M. Greene, Catholic Pirates and Greek Merchants, Princeton, 2010, 96.
itself mirrors a sense of consolidated assertiveness that - amongst other things - saw the Order sporting the largest galley fleet it ever possessed.  

At war, such earnestness for glory was translated in an increasing annoyance at the reluctance of allies to engage with the enemy. This was particularly true of the Venetians, whose Generals were unwilling to take what to their judgement were unnecessary risks. These conflicting views throw light on the different goals that the Venetians and the knights set for themselves: the Venetians needed victories, either to keep their territory (as in the War of Candia) or to reclaim what was taken from them (as in the War of the Morea); whilst the Order craved war for war's sake, because war brought glory and ascertained its existence, a theme that will be further explored later: Such conflicting views became more accentuated during the War of the Morea (1684-1699). Successive generals were writing back to Valletta asking for leave from the Christian allied fleet led by Venice. Their message was simple: there was no point staying, another season would pass without action, the two armies were caught in a deadlock, there was no glory to be obtained from staying. If released, promised the generals, they would not fear the risks of engaging the enemy and would bring back to the Order what General Ferrace referred to as ‘glorious success’. This discursive change and the sense of assertiveness that it reflected within the Order coincided with what Anthony Pagden calls ‘a new sense of cultural assurance’ throughout Europe; the period of ascendency of the great monarchies and a time during which it is generally considered that the state was spreading on the continent; belying any suggestion that the Order fossilised into some kind of inert relic from the past unresponsive to what was happening in the rest of Europe. Evidence suggests that this sense of nation not only permeated the minds of the top echelons of the Order, but also into that of its Maltese subjects; so much so that a certain Carlo Magri from Valletta, in 1667 was writing to defend the valour of ‘la nation Maltese’ against Venetian polemics.

In practical terms, this narrative meant that within the Order there was a gradual shift in the understanding of its own raison d'être. One must be clear here: at no point did the Order abandon its self-styled vocation as Christianity’s own militia; rather, this newfound sense of finding its own place amongst the nations of Europe sat akin to what had been its military-religious mission since the twelfth century. The Order, therefore, whilst responsive to the changing environment in the political culture of Europe, did not reject its core narrative of being a military order of the church but rather added a new dimension to it. This, in itself, is quite revealing. The Order did not behave differently from any modern-day corporation that, faced by the challenges posed by new markets, seeks to penetrate them by embarking on new ventures that ran akin to its core activity. In his letter to the Proveditor at Zante, haranguing him for giving the cold shoulder to the Order’s fleet in distress, General Spinola described the disservice done to the Order by the Venetian Republic using these words:

It seems to me superfluous to suggest to you that doing nothing in such circumstances is an infinite wrong that will offend all of Europe, even more so going against the needs of a religious republic like ours. It merits a lot of good from the Serene Republic that cannot look towards its conquests without noticing the hands and the blood of country, as from the mid-sixties of the seventeenth century, a new discourse started emerging gradually within the Order similarly inclined towards the aggrandisement of the Order itself and the Grand Master as the figure encompassing within his person the state itself. Already in 1660, writing from Crete to the newly elected Grand Master Rafael Cotone, General Ruffo expressed his hope ‘to see renewed the glory of your Religion [meaning the Order] of great value.’ Similarly, Count Herbestein, in the 1680s, on his appointment as Captain General of the Order, wrote about the joy ‘of having found myself once more in the position to serve my Religion.’ General di Giovanni, in 1693, upon leaving Malta referred to the islands as the Grand Master’s own ‘dominion’.

The development of this narrative was neither smooth nor clear-cut. Some generals had a more pronounced sense of the nation than others, but it was only in the last twenty years of the seventeenth century that the concept became clearer and constant. The Order adopted the narrative of the nation at the same time that it was spreading on the continent; belying any suggestion that the Order fossilised into some kind of inert relic from the past unresponsive to what was happening in the rest of Europe. Evidence suggests that this sense of nation not only permeated the minds of the top echelons of the Order, but also into that of its Maltese subjects; so much so that a certain Carlo Magri from Valletta, in 1667 was writing to defend the valour of ‘la nation Maltese’ against Venetian polemics.

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20 Examples of such complaints sent to the Grand Master by the Generals abound. For example see: AOM 1771, f.64v. (General di Giovanni asking leave from the Allied Christian fleet after weeks without action); AOM 1771, f.69f. (General Count Thun, making a similar complaint, also asking for leave from the Christian Armada to pursue the ‘infidel’ with his galley).
21 AOM 1771, f.130v-131. ‘speranza di glorioso successo’.
22 A. Pagden, Worlds at War, Oxford 2008, 238.
24 AOM 1770, f.1v.
25 AOM 1771, f.1.
26 AOM 1771, f.61. ‘Mi distaccai dalle acque del suo Dominio’.
those who only motivated by honour and chivalry employ themselves in the service of the common cause. 28

It is of particular interest to understand well all the implications that emerge from the General's carefully chosen words. First of all, Spinola asserts what one might describe as the traditional understanding of the Order of St John's identity as Christianity's own militia. The underlying understanding that Spinola had of Europe was that it was synonymous with Christianity, which in turn equated 'civilisation', and its defence from barbarity (i.e. Islam) was what he claimed to be 'the common cause'. By the time he was writing this, the idea of Cristianità as a universalising concept that went beyond the realm of belief, encompassing a political, geographical, cultural and military unity identified with Europe, had largely become a discredited fiction, particularly in the great nations of Europe. 29 A mix of confessional and national hatred had torn the continent throughout the seventeenth century; the enemy of faith was no longer beyond the borders of 'civilised' Christianity, but the neighbouring 'heretic' (be he Protestant or Catholic) whose violence threatened the very preservation of the territory that God entrusted to the monarch to protect. 30 For the Order, however, this idea of Cristianità was the foundation stone of its military raison d'être. The very idea of a militia whose mission was to be of service for the preservation of Christianity would have found itself redundant had the concept of Cristianità seized to exist. By 1700, to keep alive the idea of Cristianità, Spinola could still rely on the memory of numerous Christian leagues formed to rebut Ottoman expansionism westwards; in 1686, one such league - that saw the participation of Austria, Poland-Lithuania, Venice and Tuscany alongside the Order - had made the significant conquest of Buda from the Ottomans. 31 In fact, Spinola laid his emphasis on 'conquests' rather than defence, transmitting also that sense of energetic expansionism common in late seventeenth-century Europe. Spinola was well aware that a narrative inspired by a Christian ideal of unity and preservation might strike a chord in a Christian republic wary of its powerful Muslim neighbour constantly hungry for more territory. For Venice, as well as for other small European maritime cities that did not enjoy the protection of the powerful navies of the North, the concept of Cristianità could still have held some practical significance, if anything to serve as a common platform upon which to form useful alliances to protect themselves from Muslim incursions. 32

28 AOM 1771, 1134v 'Purmi superfluo suggerirle come il non far niente in si fatto congitti e si fatto infinito di male, chi offendendo tutta l'Europa, quanto più in far cosa contraria a quanto dimanda l'indigenza d'une repubblica religiosa, qual le nostra, tanto bene merita della benissima Repubblica che non può riguardare le conquiste fatte senza scorgere i bracci e il sangue di coloro che per solo motivo di onore e cavalleria si impegnano in servizio della causa comune'.
29 Tenenti 1997, 15.
32 Venice called for such alliances during the War of Candia (1645-1669), the War of the Morea (1684-1699) and the...

A Religious Republic

Another aspect worth noting is that Spinola described the particular identity of the Order as that of a 'religious republic', equating the Order with a nation in its own right, even if one of a religious stamp; a nation that shed its blood in the service of a cause greater than itself, the preservation and expansion of Europe/Christendom. That explains why Spinola hammered in the message that the indifference displayed by the Proveditor towards the Order’s plight ‘will offend all of Europe’.

Whilst the Order was a republic, a sovereign nation, it was no ordinary nation; it belonged to all of Europe and as such all of Europe had a vested interest in its well-being. Drawing members from all across the European aristocracy, the Order was indeed a pan-European organisation and truly, at the time, European princes treated it with deference in a multitude of ways, not least by enrolling their sons as members, and respecting its sovereignty on the estates that the Order held within their territories. 33 Equally revealing is another extract taken from the report that Spinola wrote to the Grand Master the following year, soon after the deed at La Goletta. He wrote: ‘I have taken for myself the honour of notifying you, hopefully agrandising Your Eminence and your Holy Council, because it was followed with special applause from foreign Flags that were spectators’. 34 Here Spinola linked the glory that followed his unequalled feat with the ‘special applause’ that ‘foreign Flags’ would give to what they were meant to interpret as the Order’s unrivalled courage and prowess. As it stands out from the text, Spinola strongly emphasised the causal nexus between foreign acclaim and the aggrandisement of the Order. Spinola’s choice of words is revealing of an important reality. ‘Special applause’ was not simply a symbol of acclaim and recognition of glory. Someone like Louis XIV could afford to shun ‘special applause’, especially when the whole of Europe was appalled by the brutality shown at the ‘devastation of the Palatinate’ (1688). Such disdain and hatred from his neighbours did not diminish his greatness or his prowess; so much so, that they formed alliances to fight back what they feared to be his expansionistic ambitions. For the Order, however, such ‘special applause’ was a much needed guarantee for the safeguarding of its lifeline with Europe, its continental estates, or commende.

The commende were estates and holdings given to the Order throughout the ages, to sustain it financially as a token for its perennial mission of fighting the enemies of Christianity. These holdings held a privileged status over which the Order held sovereignty and appointed ‘commanders’ to administer them with the obligation of sending back to the Common Treasury a third of the income generated every year from every commenda. It was a feudal creation, reflecting feudal ties of...
the kind that by the late seventeenth century were becoming increasingly loose, even though it must be said that in different countries throughout Europe vestiges of feudal ties remained in existence for almost two centuries later. As European sovereigns were becoming increasingly powerful, with the state centralising power within the hands of an expanding bureaucracy directly answering to its monarch, allowing pockets of territory in the hands of a foreign nation (even if it was, strictly speaking, a privileged order of the Church, like the Order of St John) started raising eyebrows, if not eliciting subdued resistance altogether, especially among that class of state administrators that rose to power from the mercantile middle-class that with feudal mentality shared very little. The Order's holdings in countries that had turned protestant – such as England during the reign of Henry VIII – were quickly confiscated when that country severed relations with the Pope. Venice was quick to freeze the Order's assets on its territory whenever it wanted to impose sanctions for some transgression incurred by corsairs flying the flag of the Order. The Order was aware of the delicate situation its European holdings were in. It was in its interest, therefore, to show European princes that such concessions yielded return. Acclaim of the kind that Spinola boasted about when writing back to Valletta meant that the Order was still looked upon favourably, guaranteeing the safeguarding of its holdings on the continent.

A Delicate Situation

By the end of the seventeenth century the Order was facing a delicate situation. The Ottoman threat to Western Europe had abated; by the Treaty of Carlowitz, in 1699, the Ottoman Sultan was for the first time forced into a treaty that yielded territory to his Christian enemies. The once mighty Ottoman Armada found itself in serious trouble to counter the fleets of Christian alliances that engaged with it in Levantine waters. During the War of the Morea the Ottomans found themselves caught in a deadlock against the much reduced power of the Venetian fleet. As the Ottoman Armada withdrew permanently to the Levantine side of the Mediterranean, at the gates of Vienna its landward expansion was halted and soon would start to be reversed. Court intrigues, civil turmoil and the strain of administering an already over-stretched empire led to the gradual deflation of Ottoman power. It was also during the seventeenth century that France took over from Venice the primacy of Christian power in the Levant. The French settled in Constantinople, forging alliances with the Porte, acting as the interlocutors of Europe with the Ottoman Empire. In the process, they started granting protection to Ottoman merchants and shipping, subtly channelling the carrying market towards an increasing dependency on French shipping. The Order's disruptive presence in the Levant through the activities of its navy, as well as by corsairs flying the Order's flag, became increasingly annoying to French interests and mounting pressure on successive Grand Masters, combined with further pressures from the Papacy, eventually led the Order to abandon its Levantine corsa.

If the Ottoman threat had subsided, it had not died. Even if they considered each other heretics and enemies, Europeans still shared a deep resentment of Islam and remained distrustful of the Ottomans. Muslims were still viewed as barbarous peoples with a particularly treacherous character. In the Western Mediterranean, the Ottoman threat was kept alive largely through the constant aggression of the Barbary regencies of North Africa. These regencies, which in practice operated as pirate states, were technically Ottoman satellites and their forays of pillaging and looting on Christian soil, particularly of small undefended towns on the northern coastline of the Mediterranean, still held those populations in fear.

The threat had become increasingly ineffectual in significant terms to the large European powers that dominated the sea. These engaged their powerful navies to subdue the Muslim fury. Both the English and the French were involved in a series of heavy bombardments on North African cities, eventually forcing the Barbary States into a series of treaties and concessions. France had even further ambitions. It wanted to protect its merchant shipping based in Marseille from the threat of competition by the Barbary States. Salvatore Bono holds that by directing the Christian corsa against the merchant shipping from Barbary, Europeans – particularly the French – managed to hold a monopoly in the commerce and transport of Maghrebine products. Gregory Hanlon agrees that corsair activity stimulated the whole maritime economy, aided in coastal defence and prevented the development of a Muslim merchant marine simultaneously. The Order of St John was forced to change not just the theatre of its perennial war against Islam, but also the rationale behind its warring activities. The Generals' reports bear testimony to the shift that the Order was forced to make, redirecting its corsairing activities towards the Western Mediterranean, largely occupying itself with the policing of the seas against the aggression of Barbary corsairs over European merchant shipping. By the end of the seventeenth century that was the main occupation of the Order's fleet. From defenders of Christian civilisation they pretty much ended up as security guards to its commerce. The reports left by Generals d'Escarnuille and Ferrace, who between them ran four cruises with the
Order's galleys in 1699, show that the fleet was taking a programmed route along the main channels frequented by Christian merchant shipping so that it 'always assured of the free passage that those sailing for those coasts enjoyed.' Members of the Order found it very difficult to accept this new role; indeed, many considered it degrading and that the institution was not living up to its glorious history. In reality, the Order did not have room for manoeuvre; it could not ignore French pressure. France was the Order's most generous patron; the largest proportion of its holdings was, in fact, on French territory. France, therefore, was in a position to dictate.

Even though these policing missions might have had their use, it seems that with time there was always less action at sea and the crews of the galleys often found ample time to go on land and enjoy themselves in the courts of princes and grandees. In the diary left by Frà Antonio Mansi of his carovane during the years 1728-1729 there are numerous references about occasions when the knights were invited for dinner or some other entertainment by the local grandees, including an evening at the Opera and a sightseeing tour of Naples. The vocation of waging holy war, even if still part of the core narrative of the Order, had transformed itself into something far removed from the crusading ideals that the Order continued to project itself as embodying.

For Victor Mallia-Milanes the Order managed to keep its relevance even within the context of such changes. Even though Mallia-Milanes makes ample use of sources to sustain his argument, one has to qualify up to which point the Order still held such relevance. Even such a sceptic about the Order's ability to maintain its relevance and adapt to change as the French historian Michel Fontenay concedes that the Order was still viewed during the eighteenth century as a valid academy for the sons of the aristocracy. The Order certainly retained its identity as a very exclusive club, whose members - particularly those destined for knighthood - had to prove their nobility of blood through careful examination of their aristocratic pedigree. However, it was a different matter altogether when it came to the military relevance of the Order; the armies and navies of European states had grown to such dimensions that rendered the idea of a protective knighthood for Europe an obsolete - almost risible - idea. The very idea of Europe as a single unity was soon disintegrating as various European states vied for supremacy, engaging each other into the protracted conflicts that characterised the seventeenth century and that brought turmoil to the whole continent.

The Order of St John, however, remained a very useful ally to other small Mediterranean seafaring states in order to form alliances to protect them against incursions from the Barbary corsairs. In a letter dated 26 January 1764, the Grand Master felt confident to write to the Receiver of the Order in Venice, Ricci Zenobio, to encourage the representatives of a number of European princes to invest in the Order's military machine so that a 'project' could be launched that would 'eradicate from the roots this ill-born race of pirates.' The Grand Master was writing in response to the idea nurtured by the court of Naples to call for a grand coalition against the Barbary States. He listed those nations that were currently at war with Barbary: the Papal States, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, the Austrians, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the Kingdom of Sardinia and the Republic of Genoa. The Grand Master emphasised the point that since its inception the Order had made its mission to wage war against the infidel and protect Christian commerce. One cannot fail to note once more the discursive shift, from the protection of Christian civilisation to the protection of its commerce. Whilst one hundred years earlier the Order had been at war with the Ottoman Porte, in 1764 the Grand Master was claiming that the Ottomans would not make reprisals in the event of a large scale confrontation with the Barbary States since the Order had always 'been moderate in its operations' and 'never undertook to molest [Ottoman] commerce in the Levant but to fight the corsairs of Barbary.' Literally, the Grand Master was rewriting history for the occasion.

The transition of operations from Levantine waters to the West had important economic repercussions on the Order. The prizes yielded by the corso against Barbary were much leaner than those brought from the Levant, especially when contrary to the claim made by the Grand Master in 1764 - the target had been the Alexandria-Constantinople commercial route. Submitting to external pressures and confining its operations within the Western Mediterranean, the Order had lost considerable incomes. Mallia-Milanes argues that the corso had previously provided the Order with an opportunity to raise enough income to make it economically viable, independently from the revenues yielded by its European holdings. Such economic autonomy also meant relative political freedom from its European patrons. However, by the end of the seventeenth century, due to the loss of strong incomes from the corso, the Order was forced to rely again on its landed properties...
on the continent for its economic subsistence; to borrow Braudelian terminology, the Order was forced into a process of ‘re-feudalisation’, at a time when feudalism was increasingly becoming out of fashion.

Once more this leads to General Spinola’s eagerness for the ‘special applause’ accorded to the Order by what he refers to as ‘foreign flags’. The discussion above contextualises Spinola’s frame of mind and shows that in the face of change the Order was caught in what Immanuel Wallerstein would today call ‘a historically uneasy compromise’ between its striving towards ascendency amongst nations and its chronic dependence on the generosity of its patrons to maintain its economic subsistence and lifestyle. Whilst its patrons aspired towards greatness through expansion and conquest, the Order could only aspire towards greatness if it retained the favour of such patrons to guarantee its centuries-long privileges. The Order’s sovereignty and ascendency, in order words, became increasingly dependent on the perceived usefulness it retained in the eyes of its patrons at a time when such usefulness was becoming questionable. The Order’s logic of national ascendency ran counter to that which ascertained the sovereignty of nations across Europe, that at the time were consolidating their territorial autonomy not least by giving demonstration of the monarch’s ability to summon enough forces to defend and expand his borders and keep control and order within them. The Order could keep the autonomy of its territories and holdings only through the generosity and will of other monarchs who perceived in the Order’s existence some kind of advantage to their own cause. As long as the Order managed to keep up such a perception throughout Europe, the Order as a nation could continue to flourish.

General Spinola understood this delicate balance very well. He was not just a soldier but also a public relations man, taking good care to publish pamphlets called Relazioni – largely based on his reports sent to the Grand Master and Council in Valletta – describing in ornate language the successes of his (and, by inference, the Order’s) adventures. It was a practice already established within the Order, as was common throughout Europe at the time. However, Spinola knew his audience well. He knew that episodes of swashbuckling and adventure would attract lots of interest. He made sure to give his audience what it lusted for. It was not just glory that Spinola was after; he was materially investing his own resources to maintain a reputation that would bring the Order the special applause it needed in order to keep the approval of its patrons. 

Facing the Challenges of Change

By the closing decades of the seventeenth century what would be the major challenges for the Order during the following century had already emerged. At the end it was but one single decision by the revolutionary National Assembly in France that brought the Order to its knees: the confiscation of the Order’s property in that country. The long chapter, lasting over a hundred years, of historically uneasy compromises described above came to an end with a single blow: what Mallia-Milanes described as ‘radical forces outside the institution’s competence to contain or control’.

Circumstance certainly played an important part in the closing of that long chapter in the way it did. However, one must go beyond the forces of circumstance; if circumstance was able to mark so powerfully the institution it was only because the institution itself had been unable to generate enough resistance against circumstance. By 1700 it was evident that the Order had different levels of adaptation to change, belying any partisan assertion by historians that proposes a categorical answer on any side of the divide between whether the Order managed to change or not. The Order had a complex ‘uneasy’ relationship with change: on the most obvious, ‘natural’ level, there was the change brought by ‘neophytes’, that were joining the Order fresh from the European courts they were raised in, already well versed in the latest fashions of European aristocracy. As they fitted within the hierarchical and rigid structures of the Order their ‘changing’ influence might not have been great, but significant nonetheless, as Buttigieg shows in his recent study. As Spinola’s example shows, when professed, the knights still kept very active contact with princely courts on the continent keeping the Grand Master’s court up-to-date with the latest mores in Europe. The Order was responsive to such ‘imported’ changes which, having left their mark on its perception and attitudes – as amply portrayed by the example of the discourse of ‘glory’ – did not challenge the core narrative of its identity. On another level, the Order adapted to change when it was externally forced upon it by its own patrons, as in the case of France that pressured the Order to redirect its operations at sea westwards. As already shown, the Order tried to adapt by reconstructing its self-narrative to suit the circumstances. Whilst retaining the narrative of being Christianity’s own militia, the Order reconstructed such a narrative to accommodate an economic rather than an ideological war. Its mission was recast into the safeguarding of Christian commerce rather than Christian civilisation.

Underlying all this, however, there was a resilient resistance from the Order to modify the core narrative of its identity. Till that fateful day when Napoleon’s fleet was first seen on the horizon from Valletta, the Order never failed to see itself as it had since the twelfth century: a product of the crusades, as a militia set up to

58 Anon., Relazione della Vittoria Ottenuta dalle Quattro Galere della Santa Regione Gerosolomitana, d’una Soltana Nomina Bighere, Comandata dal Famoso Rois Solimano ne’ Mari di Barbaria Seguita a di 8 Ottobre 1700, Rome, 1700.
59 Mallia-Milanes 2006, 98
defend Christianity against the Infidel, as an aristocratic organisation bound to serve by the sword a cause greater than itself. As long as change did not challenge that narrative, the Order was able to adapt in some way or another. The Order was able to metamorphose itself into a ‘religious republic’ in order to meet the challenges of the narrative of the ‘nation’, yet without doing away with the feudal structure that had marked its identity so much. Circumstances even forced it to ‘re-feudalise’ itself and after a period of relative autonomy from its estates and holdings, the Order had to submit to external pressure and fall back to its dependency on the incomes generated by the commende, revealing that the Order suffered not only ideological constraints to propel itself towards a redefinition of its own identity according to the changing times, but even material. The reality of a small-scale island economy certainly had its impact on the possibilities that lay ahead for the Order of St John in Malta. The commende, on the other hand, not only provided the only stable and safe economic income for the Order, but were also a safeguard to guarantee joining members from the European aristocracy; the commende being so lucrative to the knights that a certain Fra Amor had to be reprimanded by the Inquisition for declaring that: ‘he’d rather enjoy a good commandery for twenty years, than enjoy heaven for three years’.

Regardless of this complex relationship with change, even after the 1789 revolution in France, the most ardent critics of the Order, of which ‘Carasi’ would be one, did not understand the Order to be anachronistic but rather as an organisation that had gone astray from its original mission, implying that such a mission was still felt to be somewhat relevant even during the heyday of Enlightenment. And this brings one to Mallia-Milanes’ strong objection to the idea that the Order had become irrelevant by the time of the French Revolution. Although one might not share Mallia-Milanes’ enthusiasm for the idea, his case that one cannot rule out the Order’s relevance even in the late eighteenth century stands on solid ground. However, the complexities of multiple levels of adaptation to change and the ‘historically uneasy compromises’ that these gave rise to, certainly point to the fact that, even if somewhat still relevant, the Order had major issues with the times that needed to be sorted out. The circumstances mentioned by Mallia-Milanes found an Order with major identity issues that concerned its very core narrative as a military order, which crisis reverberated throughout the whole of its structure. As history turned out, the Order did not have time to sort out such issues, or rather it did not have time to redirect its own future but like a paper boat left to the current its destiny was set by the flow.

60 Buttigieg 2011, 83
61 Carasi, (trans. T. Frelle), The Order of Malta Exposed, Malta, 2010, 143. Original was in French, published in 1790. “Today the knights hardly fight the Muslims or threaten Ottoman coasts anymore but they have secretly established a status quo of ‘laissez-faire’ and armistice. How can one then say that this Order still follows its old dedication and ‘raison d’être’?”