Shipwreck, enslavement and an angry wife: Corsairing in Malta in the late eighteenth century

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Introduction

Exhaustive evidence of a rich maritime past exists for the Maltese islands. The Maltese corso is one such facet which yields intriguing historical clues to Malta’s maritime tradition. The aim of this paper is to glance at a different aspect of corsair’s life from that to which we have been accustomed. Although a corsair’s life was not a world of swashbuckling, treasures and crusades, it was one of hard work, occasional carnage, desertion, and for the lucky few, it offered the prospect of a profitable career. The late eighteenth century is the period in which this study is set. During this era, the corso in Malta was still a highly dynamic and important economic activity. A few first-hand compassionate descriptions of corsair life are still extant; the description afforded to us by the corsair Pietro Stellini (1788-1792) in this present study provides an excellent example.

Contrary to established ideas, the corso at the end of the eighteenth century was not only fully operational but a seemingly flourishing economic activity. By the early 1970s, a revision to the idea of a decline in corsairing ventures during this period and the hypothesis which proposed a resurgence of this activity in Malta in the late eighteenth century was already being put forward. However, this hypothesis has still yet to be fully proven; nevertheless, from evidence available to the scholar today we can start to have a better picture. The corso we have concerned ourselves with in the following study is not in any way part of the official operation of the Order of St John’s galley and ship-of-the-line squadrons. The ship Stellini was sailing on was a privately owned galleot armed for war. It formed part of an all together independent yet essential economic activity to the Order and its Maltese
subjects. Highly regulated, the *corsa* was something the Order had been endorsing since its establishment on the island of Rhodes. They successfully continued this tradition in Malta and local corsairs had become a truly para-military force of the Hospitaller Order. Just like in previous centuries, in the eighteenth century the *corsa* was heavily dependent on investment from the local population. However, it was powered by the Order’s military muscle. Weapons, dockyard facilities and even soldiers belonging to the Order of St John were put at the disposal of Maltese corsairs. Corsairs were not the free booting pirates they are at times portrayed as the Maltese corsairs flying the flag of the Order or more often than not flying the Grand Master’s flag acted as privateers. In fact, privateers – or corsairs when we are referring to a Mediterranean context – were a military force used by various countries as early as the sixteenth century up till the early nineteenth century. It is unfair to label Maltese corsairs as being pirates since pirates were an unlawful group of men who answered to no one, to no prize court and to no sovereign. On the other hand, corsairs answered to both a prize court and a sovereign since they operated under licence. It must be admitted that the *corsa* is tarred, just like privateering in northern waters, with ‘the black brush of piracy’. It must be understood that this commerce raiding, although at times volatile, was well within the maritime laws of the time and was also an important facet of military activity at sea up till the 1850s.

**Adventure and peril at sea**

The loss of a ship in any marine situation is the worst kind of circumstance a mariner could find himself in; however, it was not always armed engagements that annihilated corsair ships. On particular occasions the sea would be the perpetrator of a corsair’s misfortune, since nature at times could easily be the architect of death. In 1792 Captain Benedetto Valentini was on his fourth cruise as a corsair captain. He was not a veteran captain, however, according to Captain Gaetano Cumbi and Captain Pietro Zelalich, he had been an experienced sailor working with the corsair fleet for a number of years. Serving under various captains, Valentini had risen to the position of first lieutenant. His experience at sea was considered enough for him to command a vessel of his own; however he was strongly advised by the *Tribunale degli Armamenti* to embark with him an experienced pilot on his first cruise in 1791. During this same year Captain Valentini was living in Senglea; nonetheless he was not Maltese but a native of Corsica and was around forty years old at the time of this first cruise as Captain. Incidentally, several corsairs of the period hailed from Corsica and the contribution of Corsica to the *corsa* should not be underestimated. In fact, it bore some of the most successful corsair captains of the eighteenth century: Captain Giacamo Di Natale, Captain Francesco Di Natale and Captain Guglielmio Lorenzi.

As a vessel for his corsairing venture Valentini chose to arm one of the smallest crafts employed at the time, a *felucca* of ten benches with a crew of around twenty sailors. Such a craft made use of its great speed and manoeuvrability to pounce on small inshore trading vessels. Many such *feluccas* operated in conserva with other craft and had to return to base after a few days due to their lack of space for victuals and munitions. As for weapons the *felucca* employed by Captain Valentini was too small to afford space for the arming of cannon on its decks, however, for fire power the crew made use of four large blunderbusses on yokes and another fifteen handheld blunderbusses. The arsenal of weapons kept aboard the *felucca* included twelve muskets, eighteen pistols, six spontoons, eighteen half swords, and twelve clay fire grenades. With such an arsenal of weapons on board Captain Valentini took to the sea in May 1791. Out once at sea Captain Valentini never really made any major capture and after his first two cruises his pilot, the seasoned

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9 National Library Malta, *Codice Rohan. Diritto Municipale di Malta*, Book VI.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.
corsair Lorenzo Stafrag, led a mutiny against Valentini and forced the latter to return to Malta. Notwithstanding these failures Valentini was not discouraged and took to the sea once more this time with a different crew but keeping the same ship and equipment. Captain Valentini's run of bad luck soon came to an end. On his third cruise his boat proved to be very profitable since he managed to capture numerous slaves. In fact, he was so successful that his boat could barely take the added burden of the human prize. While sailing back to Malta the heavily laden craft had to hastily sail into Dwejra bay at Gozo as the waves hitting the felucca were perilously pouring water over the sides into the boat. The felucca finally arrived in Malta where the slaves were auctioned off and the profits were split among the investors, captain and the crew. A crew member who benefitted from the newly acquired profits was the felucca's lieutenant Pietro Stellini.

Pietro Stellini

Pietro Stellini, son of Salvadore from Bormla, had been working with the corsair fleet since at least 1788. Pietro was married to Vincenza nee Chetchuti of Bormla and their marriage had taken place at Bormla in 1784. When Pietro went to sea in 1792 he left behind three young children back home. This first campaign he undertook with Valentini yielded various profits and provided much needed money to Stellini's young family. After such success Pietro once more embarked aboard Valentini's felucca. Pietro's second campaign was not to be as rewarding. What follows is a rendering of Pietro Stellini's version of what happened on Captain Valentini's fourth campaign. It should be noted that the text presented here has been formatted — for instance by inserting punctuation — to make it easier for readers to follow. A transcription in the original Italian is reproduced in Appendix I:

Tripoli of Barbary 25 June 1792
Dear Mother,
With this letter I take the occasion to submit my fine and good health, and likewise I do hope in our blessed God that you are fine, I also hope that my sisters and family are fine too. I pray for your blessing and so I must relate to you my terrible perilous voyage and family. I am fine too. I pray for your blessing and so I must relate to you my terrible

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...
It is clear that Vincenza was claiming the money and contemplates upon his lucky escape. Stellini's letter to his mother Rosa is the tempest. He spares a thought for his dead comrades and he laments their tragic and asked each others' forgiveness for any shortcomings. The scene he describes evident when Stellini recounts how all the crew prepared themselves for the worst also describes the feeling of comradeship found aboard in times of danger. This is onto the strong religious beliefs of the corsairs, at least in time of despair. The letter gives a rare insight into the psychological impact of shipwreck and sheds light onto the strong religious beliefs of the corsairs, at least in time of despair. The letter also describes the feeling of comradeship found aboard in times of danger. This is onto the strong religious beliefs of the corsairs, at least in time of despair. The letter also describes the feeling of comradeship found aboard in times of danger. This is onto the strong religious beliefs of the corsairs, at least in time of despair. The letter also describes the feeling of comradeship found aboard in times of danger. This is onto the strong religious beliefs of the corsairs, at least in time of despair.

Dear Wife,

I give you the news you have always wished for me, that is [when you] always cursed that I would fall a slave or perish at sea. You always prayed to God that something bad would befall me. Now I will give you your greatest consolation and also console your friends and sisters who always had a grudge against me. You and your curses that I may drown, I actually drowned and God has saved me. You have wished me a slave and God has conceded you this grace. I am now a poor slave. Console yourself, be happy and have fun as if you had never known me, as if I were your husband. Being the dog I am I have nothing else to tell you, bless my children and if you wish to send me a letter, give it to Signor Lipo di Musu or Giachi [at the] Bariera. He has delivered the letters I have written to you. And if you don't want to write to me, neither will I write to you. If you want to forget me, even I will forget you. You will be fine. I pray to God that he gives me some help, like when he saved me, and in this way I hope he gives me strength to see my country again. I have been sick and for a few days I was exhuming blood. But now I am feeling much better praise be to God. The memory of your words and actions hurt me even more than being a slave. Now you derive happiness from my calamity. I am sorry that I cannot send you anything with this letter, as I have told you I have been sick for a long time and the little money I had I used to buy some necessities. I have nothing else to add. Send my greetings to my family and friends.

Pietro Stellini.

The second letter written by Pietro Stellini is different in nature to the one he addressed to his mother; in fact, it offers us a rare first-hand insight into marital relations and problems in pre-modern Malta. Stellini obviously believes that he has been cursed. He seems to point to the fact that his wife always hinted to the hope that he would either drown or fall into slavery, and he ironically mentions to her that he wishes to console her that now he has become a slave. Notwithstanding that his speech was far from being flowery, he addressed his children in a loving and fatherly way. Furthermore, despite a seemingly troubled marital relationship, Pietro still hoped that Vincenza would find the time to send him a message in Tripoli. Pietro Stellini's letter also makes clear his yearning to return to his country. Both letters written by Pietro Stellini survived at the archives because they were subsequently used as evidence by Rosa, Pietro's mother and Vincenza his wife. The two women were claiming Pietro Stellini's share from his first cruise with Captain Benedetto Valentini. It is clear that Vincenza was claiming the money for herself and refused to share the spoils with her mother-in-law, even if Stellini himself had written that he wanted to give some money to his mother. She argued in her statement at court that hers was a dire situation; alone in the world, she needed to provide for her young children and the only means of subsistence she had was the money and goods owed to her enslaved husband. In order to prove her dire situation, Vincenza turned to the parish priest of Bormla, namely Father Antonio Muscat, who provided a written pledge which confirmed her poor financial situation. The prize court eventually decreed that Vincenza was to get forthy three scudi while Pietro's mother was to get five scudi and a pair of silver shoe buckles which her son had ordered and paid for at a local silversmith.

**Conclusion**

Some questions remain unanswered and hopefully further research will provide us with a better insight into this most intriguing story; who wrote the letter? Was it Pietro or did he get someone to write it for him? The original letters read as a corsair logbook and therefore the terminology used in the letters to describe the shipwreck was very technical and must have been written by someone who was conversant with nautical terminology. Judging from Pietro's position on board the felucca it is possible that he might have written the letter himself. It is not known whether Pietro ever received word from his mother or wife or if he ever managed to return to his home in Bormla. He is not listed in subsequent crew lists of the period and he is not found in the register of redeemed slaves of the Confraternita della Carita of Valletta. While Pietro Stellini was a slave in Tripoli his mother and young wife Vincenza were arguing about who should control his money in Malta.

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27 "spero che mi da saluto a vedere il mio paese".
28 NAV, Verbali: 1791-92 Valentini: Refer to covering statement of Rosa Stellini found before the attached letters.
29 Ibid.
31 NAV, Verbali: 1791-92 Valentini: Refer to third letter by Stellini.
Regardless of all the unanswered questions Pietro Stellini's letter remains one of the few first-hand experiences of a corsair shipwreck. It is a compelling narration of a Maltese man's struggle when faced with overwhelming bleak prospects and his tenacity to pull through.

The letters of Pietro Stellini offer firsthand insights into the daily dangers which a Maltese corsair faced. We know of other ships that sank during the 1790s due to inclement weather. One example is the ship of Captain Michele Borg, who was one of the most active corsairs during this period and was lucky to escape with his life when his ship foundered in the Levant. Facing the elements was usually considered to be more dangerous than facing an enemy ship. Such fears are recorded to have been harboured by sailors serving with other navies such as the Royal Navy and it must be noted that the possibility of shipwreck was a sailor's worst fear no matter how large your ship was or in what sea you sailed, the limited technology of eighteenth-century seafaring made working at sea a dangerous career. A singular letter of a Maltese corsair does not provide sufficient proof for the resurgence or continuation of the Maltese corso in the late eighteenth century, however, it helps us to start questioning the hypothesis that the corso in the eighteenth century was a moribund and economically dead activity. Thus, further investigation in this field of study might lead to a revision in established theories of the history of the Maltese corso. Above all, ambiguities between piracy and legalised piracy must be put aside to provide a better understanding of Mediterranean seafaring.

Appendix I

Tripoli di Barbaria li 25 di giugno de 1792
Cara mia Madre con la presente hochassione vi do notissia de mia ottima e bona salute e chossi spero in Dio benedetto che voi siette il simile assiemi con li miei soreli et coniati e vi prego la vostra santa benedissione e chossi vi faro sapere la mia cattiva sorte e malo distino che doppo la nostra partenza di Malta siamo navicati gorni 5 ali 4 gorni che siamo navicati siamo andati [siamo andati] sopra la ci di gerbi alla sira, la matina siamo salpati per andare in sfraguisi con vento ponenti li bicc temporale nel gorno siamo quattro volte negati sotto aqua e Dio tornato da salvare alla sira di calare il sole eramo gia oni uno prega la sua divina misericordia sipossimo la Madonna fara oni una prega perdono i altri e vicini un colpo di mare pilla la madona con il manto e la Madonna di lampidosa che ci da mandata capitan Michele e batasimo vino, laqua, schioppo, trombone, pistoli, sabaoli, bali, peruchi, remi, robbia de vestire tutto in mare e ricomandasimo l'amisco a Dio e siamo ceri di bona sevua uno ora avant la meza notti vedesimo la terra di Tagurara 12 mila li[?] livanti Tripoli eramo lontani tri ha quart ma la moglie fondino apena de dar fondo ci vienvi de colpi di mare che quanto lo vedissimo siamo stati morti sono avviati da noi ano rivolto la galiotta e tutta la gente grida misericordia in mare, lo muote che e chossi mi volvea montare da cavallo su la schina di la galiotta viene due colpi di mare uno drio i alto mando e fanno di sparire la galiotta non mi sento altro che la voci de li genti miciedutto e chossi mi muotai per la terra e mi sono stato 5 ore in mare mi ibandonai per negarmi in mare quarto volte persero sempre ci avevo viva cuare la Madonna di carmeno all'otta volta che gia mi era ibandonata e senza fiato mi detto ha Madonna del carmeno cara perché mi vuole vedere morire questa ingrate morte, perché mi ibandonai Madonna cara delle cuame e molai per morire venni un colpo di mare e mi botto in terra stato fino la matina fra la sera con la camisa sola morto di friddo. La matina tornai la marina vido la galiotta venuta in terra li anche lo poveri nostra gente morti. Di noi altre siamo solvate sette li altri son morti incora sono persi 5 bastimenti turchi in quella stessa notti e chossi non altro che dirvi vi prego la vostra santa benedissione e saluto caramevmente per il vostri sinire e anche per la signor[a] margarita e per parenti e amici. Spero Dio che pocho tempo saro con voi altri, lo sono la casa di basa non mi battisco e ora amte non pilla gran dispiacere perché melio schiavo ho morto como i altri.
Appendix II

Cara Moglie vi do la nova di come sempre voi mi disiderate ciò mi sempre desiderate di essere schiavo ho di essere anegato nova mala sempre voi Dio pregate adesso vi darò la vostra maior consolazione i anche consolate li vostri amici e li vostri sorelli quelli che vi daranno qualche intendere contra di me voi sempre li vostri bestemiei di essere negato negato sono stato e Dio mi salvato voi mi disideraste schiavo i Dio vi concesso la grassia la povera schiava sono adesso consolativi alegrativi devertite non mi farete ancora di mai mi aver conosciuto come mai sono stato il vostro marito come lo case che sono non ho altro da dirvi benedigo li miei figlioli e si voi mi soi mandarmi qualche lettera datila a Sig[m]or Lipo di musu o giachi la bariera lui mi le ma[?]i quelli che io scrivo per voi lo mando da lui e si voi no mi scrivete ni meno lo voi scriveri i si voi iscordarmi anche scordar da voi io voi sarete bene io pregio i Dio che me da qualche aiuto come me salvo Cosi spero che mi da salute per vederi il mio paese. Son stato malato pochi giorni mi ciai sangue adesso sono bene grassio i Dio. Non mi dispiace perché sono schiavo come mi dispiace quanto ricordera di vostra lingua e di la vostra asione adesso voi dubiate alegria di mia mala disgrazie io ho piacere di dispiace per questa lettera non ti puso mandare niente per che come stato malato sempre mi fa bisonio di comprare qualche cosa pero altra vi ripindo melio non altro da dirvi farete gudissio
Saluto tutti li parenti et Amici
Pietro Stelini

Fig. 1. Pietro Stellini's letter to Rosa (part 1). Reproduced by kind permission of the Notarial Archives, Valletta

Fig. 2. Pietro Stellini's letter to Rosa (part 2). Reproduced by kind permission of the Notarial Archives, Valletta

Fig. 3. Pietro Stellini's letter to Vincenza (part 1). Reproduced by kind permission of the Notarial Archives, Valletta

Fig. 4. Pietro Stellini's letter to Vincenza (part 2). Reproduced by kind permission of the Notarial Archives, Valletta