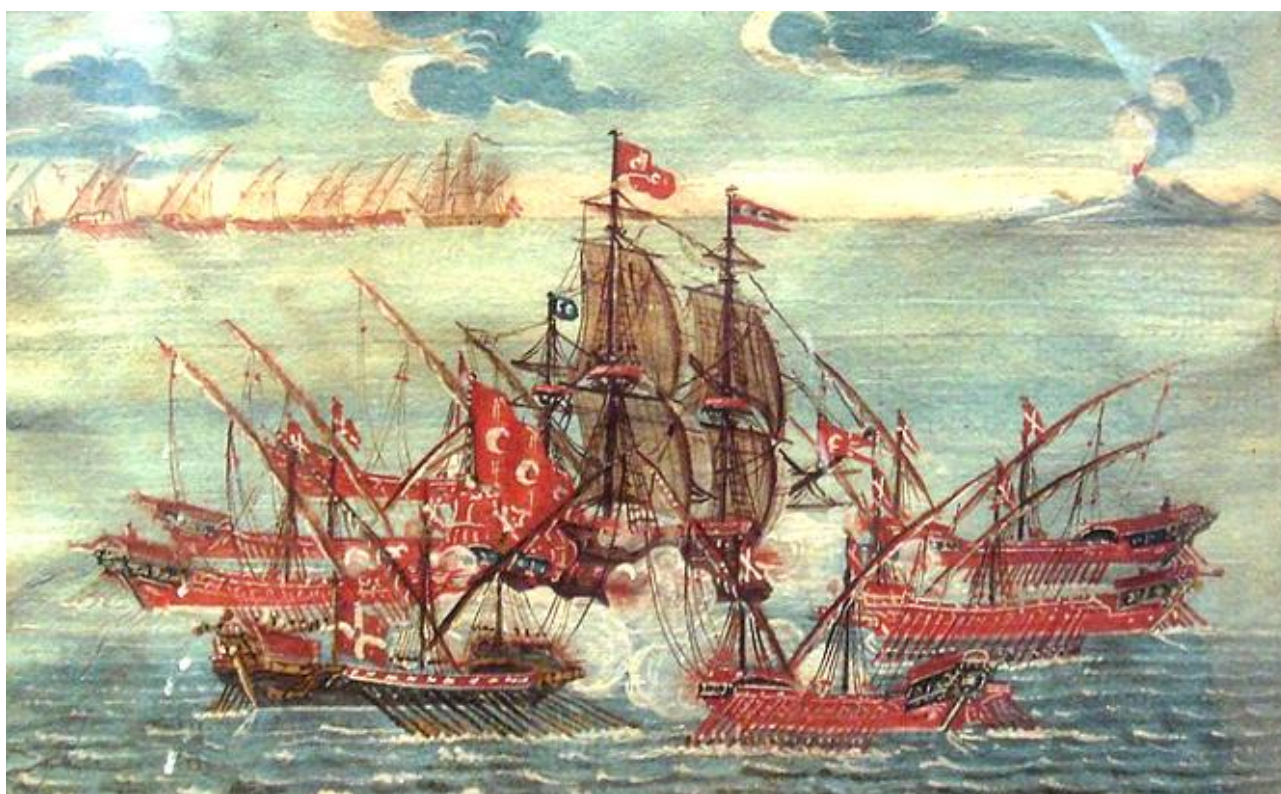


MALTESE HISTORY

LO5 cde - The Order's fleet and organisation of the Corso



Year 9

Third Edition – 2022

For History SEC 2025



Curriculum Centre Annex

L05cde – The Order’s fleet and the arsenal at Birgu

1. The Order’s Navy

The Order’s fleet in the 16th and 17th centuries consisted of some **galleons** (heavy ships using square sails) and **galleys** (smaller ships using oars and lateen sails). The number of galleys in the Order’s fleet varied at different times. From three in 1530 they went up to eight in 1686. The crew and rowing slaves on a typical galley amounted to around 500 men. But from the early 18th century the galleys squadron declined in number because the Order introduced a new type of sailing ship, called the **ship-of-the-line** (*vascello*) in its fleet. These new sailing ships were built in France in 1704 and were paid by Grandmaster **Ramon Perellos**. The largest of them, the *San Giovanni* was made the Order’s flagship and it was armed with 50 guns and had a crew of 453 men.



The carrack galleon Sant’Anna, on which the Knights came to Malta in 1530.

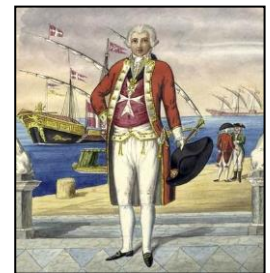


A miniature model (centre) and a painting dated 1680 (right) of a Hospitaller galley.



During its last decade in Malta (1790–1798) the size of the Order’s fleet went down to just one vessel, four galleys and three frigates. This decline resulted from two factors: (1) the revenue which the Order collected from its overseas estates declined because of the French Revolution; (2) the Order was making less profits from the Corso. A cost of a new galley amount to around 7,400 *scudi* and it cost roughly that same amount of money every year for its upkeep.

Some food items that were usually found on the Order’s ships have survived in the archives, such as: biscuits, cheese, sardines, tuna, sugar, dried prunes, pepper, cooking oil, broad beans, bread, almonds, barley, flour, beans, lentils, peas, butter, hens for fresh eggs, hazelnuts, salted cod, sheep, salted meat, and firewood. The crew was entitled to a daily ration of food, each according to his rank. Fresh water on the ships was taken from two large marble waterspouts in Valletta which were connected to the Wignacourt aqueduct.



A Hospitaller Captain-General of the Galleys wearing a uniform of the 1780s.

The two officers in charge of the Order’s navy were the **Admiral** and the **Captain-General of the Galleys**. The Admiral took charge of the whole fleet while the Captain-General took charge of the rowing galleys only. The crew on board was made up of officers, a clerk, a surgeon, a pilot, a slave master (*agozzino*), a master gunner, a handyman, a carpenter, an ors keeper, a caulker (*calafato*), and a number of gunners and soldiers, the *buonavogli* and the captive slaves.



Flags used by the Order on its ships and by Maltese corsairs. The Grand Masters gave permission for his personal flag to be used by Maltese corsairs. The one on the far right was the flag of Grand Master Perellos (1697-1720).

2. How did the Order's navy challenge the Turkish fleet in the Mediterranean?

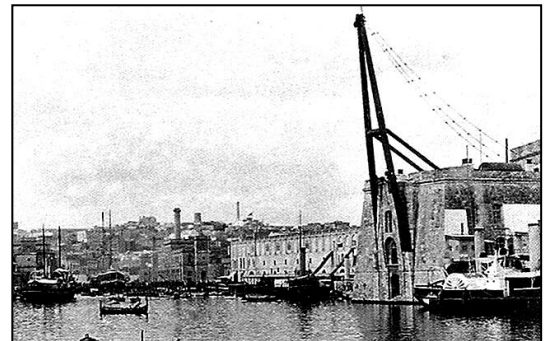
After the Great Siege of 1565, the Turkish fleet was heavily defeated at the **Battle of Lepanto** (1571) by a combined Christian fleet made up of Spanish, Venetian, Papal and Hospitaller galleys. But for most of the 17th century the Ottoman Turks remained powerful enough to besiege and capture the island of **Candia** (Crete) from the Venetians during the so-called **War of Candia** (1645-1669). However, the first signs of decline in Ottoman military and naval power occurred when they failed to win the Siege of Vienna (1683). Following that defeat, the Habsburg went on the offensive, capturing Hungary from the Turks which the latter had conquered in 1526. The last occasions when the Turkish fleet was seen sailing close to the Maltese Islands were in 1708 and in 1722. They noticed that the fortifications were too strong to risk another siege against the islands.



The Battle of Lepanto (7 October 1571) by an anonymous painter.

The Order's fleet was directly involved in notable naval battles against the Ottoman Turks: notably the Battle of Lepanto (1571), the War of Candia (1645-1669) and during the Ottoman-Venetian War (1715-1718). Notwithstanding the decline of Turkish naval power in the 18th century, the Order still managed to win smaller scale naval battles against the Barbary corsairs in North Africa, capturing vessels, provisions and slaves.

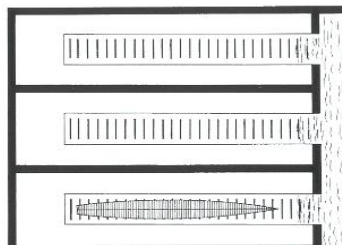
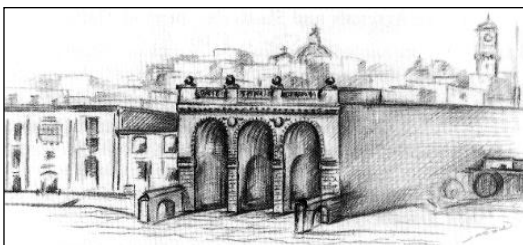
But these spoils were not enough to pay for the upkeep of the Order's navy which at that time consisted of galleys and sailing vessels. As a consequence, the Order had to start borrowing money from foreign bankers to be able to meet the running cost of its fleet. The final death blow to the Order's fleet came in 1792, when deprived of the income from her estates in France by the French Revolutionary Government, the Order had to dispose of most of its vessels and galleys.



The Macina at Senglea where ships were de-masted before escorted to the arsenal for repair works.

3. The Order's arsenal (shipyard or dockyard)

The Order built its first galley **arsenal** or **shipyard** in 1597 at the Cottonera Marina. In 1654, another dock was constructed at the Valletta ditch, just beneath the Upper Barracca Gardens. The Birgu arsenal was enlarged in the 1686 to be able to repair larger galleys while the Valletta yard was closed. The upkeep of the galleys and the arsenal were a constant expense for the Order. The golden age of the Order's dockyard was the period 1600-1740. When the Corso and the fleet of the Order started to decline after 1740, this also effected work in the shipyard. By the late 18th century, the shipyard had to close when there was not enough work. But a new golden age for the Order's shipyard commenced with the British took over the islands in 1800. In one of his dispatches to his superiors in London, Sir Alexander Ball, Malta's first British Civil Commissioner (1802-1809) remarked that Malta possessed 'a small but complete shipyard'.



Left: Galley sheds at the Birgu arsenal (shipyard).

Right: plan of the arsenal galley sheds.

LO5c – The Order’s Fleet and Arsenal at Birgu

Carefully look at the source on the right and then answer all the questions.



1. What is the source about?

_____ (2)

2. Describe **one** main difference between the galley and the sailing ship used by the Knights.

(a) The galley: _____

(b) The sailing ship: _____ (2)

3. A new type of sailing ship called **ship-of-the-line** became part of the Order’s navy in the early _____th century at the time of Grand Master _____ (2)

4. How were the **two** Knights that took charge of the Order’s navy called? _____ (2)

5. Why did the Knights built an arsenal at Birgu and why was it enlarged in the 1680s? _____ (2)

6. Name **two** naval battles or wars against the Turks in which the fleet of the Order took part. _____ (2)

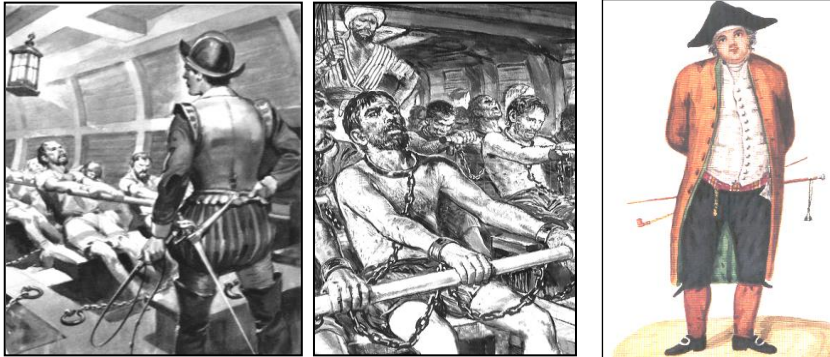
7. How did the Maltese benefit from the Order’s navy and shipyard? _____ (2)

8. Mention **three** types of people who worked on the Order’s ships and state their main duty. _____ (6)

(Total marks = 20)

L05d – The organisation of the Corso by the Knights

The **Corso** was another world for **piracy** between Christians and Muslims in the Mediterranean. It had existed since the early Middle Ages, and it was one of the reasons for the setting up of the *dejma* militia by the Maltese in the early 15th century. When the Knights took over the islands in 1530, they resorted to corsairing as the only way to continue the fight against the Ottoman Turks and the Barbary States of North Africa.



Slave rowers on a Christian (left) and Muslim (centre) corsair galley.

An agozino or slave-master who ensured that all slaves rowed according to the ordered speed and inflicted corporal punishment on misbehaving slaves.

In those times, the *corso* was considered an honourable and profitable trade. But it was also a risky one because corsairs could be captured as slaves, disabled or killed when engaged in battles at sea. For this reason, corsair ships were blessed by a priest and the crew received the Holy Communion before leaving Grand Harbour. Everyone in Malta could take part in the *corso*: knights, Maltese and even foreigners residing in Malta.

Maltese corsairs used ships locally built and often big enough to carry as many as 22 guns. The Grand Master could give one of two flags: the flag of the Order or his own Magistral flag against payment of a small license fee. This gave corsairs legal protection to sail and raid Muslim ships anywhere in the Mediterranean. In turn the Order collected a 10% tax on all the goods that were stolen and brought to Malta.

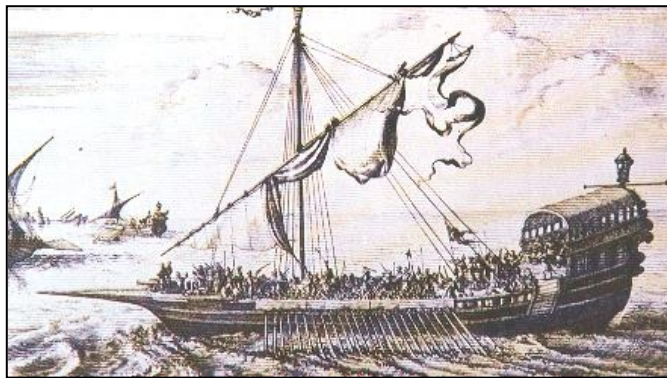


Paintings showing Christian and Muslim corsairs engaged in battle.

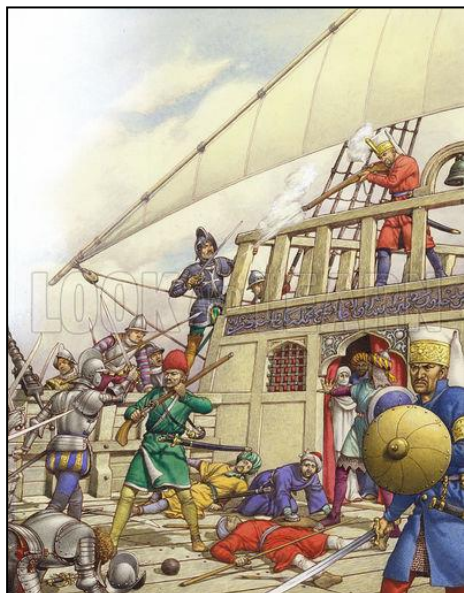
Right: The speronara (Maltese: xprunara) was a locally built small galley used by many Maltese

Since the *Corso* provided the Order with a considerable amount of profit, it took care to organize, and encourage it among the Maltese. The Knights also sought to promote Malta as a centre for Mediterranean Christian corsairs. In 1608, Grand Master Aloff de Wignacourt set up a prize court called the **Magistrato degli Armamenti** to hear cases of disputes between Maltese corsairs and merchants whose ships were unlawfully plundered. In 1697, Grand Master Ramon Perellos set up a second tribunal known as the **Consolato del Mare** to deal with matters related to cargoes, wage disputes, breach of contract and debts involving Maltese and foreign merchants based on Malta. Grand Master set up this court in his capacity as sovereign prince of the island and with no appeal to the Pope in Rome. But the Holy See refused to accept this decision.

In 1733, Grand Master Vilhena, under pressure by Rome, declared that all Maltese corsairs were to use the Order's flag and that foreign corsairs based on Malta to be subject to the *Tribunale degli Armamenti*. This served as a virtual death blow to the *Consolato*: henceforth all cases in court could be appealed to Rome, resulting in cases dragging for many years and incurring heavy financial loss.



A large galley type used by the Barbary corsairs in the 17th century.



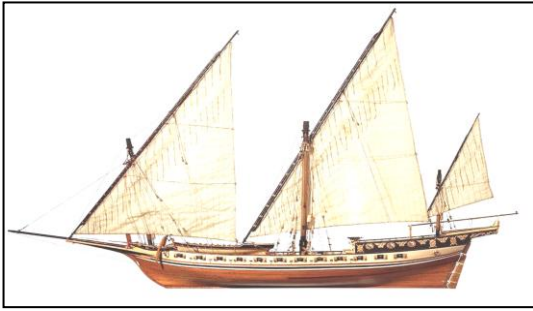
Hospitaller galleys performing their Corso activities in the Mediterranean.

Malta was not the only port in the Mediterranean engaged in corsairing. The main Muslim corsair centres were the North African towns of Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers, collectively known as the **Barbary States**. The main Christian corsair centres that had frequent contact with Malta were the towns of Marseilles and Toulon (in France), Messina, Naples and Leghorn (in Italy). Private corsairs used several types of ships to carry out their trade. In fact, the quarantine registers kept by the Order mention the *brigantino*, the *galeotto*, the *tartana*, and the *speronara* as the most common vessels used.



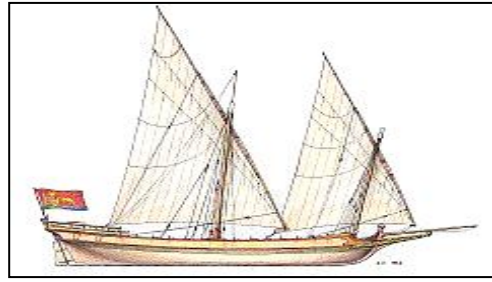
Artefacts found on ships of the Knights and of Maltese corsairs exhibited at the National Maritime Museum, Birgu. From left to right: carpenter's tools; types of ropes used on board ships; hand cannon with round shots; an iron treasure casket.

The most common types of ships used by Maltese corsairs



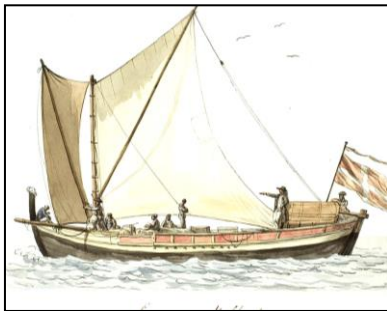
1. Xebec or Chebec:

Used in the Mediterranean between 1650 – 1820. Evolved from the galley. Popular among Barbary corsairs. The oars gave way to cannons on both sides.



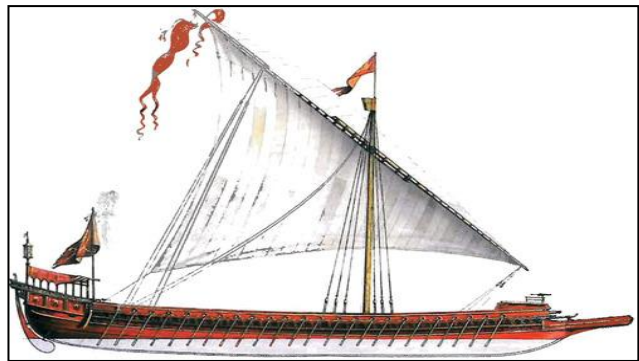
2. Galiote (Demi-Galley):

Used in the Mediterranean for short voyages involving corsairing or to carry light merchandise. It was a single-masted smaller version of the standard galley. It was equipped with 20 oars.



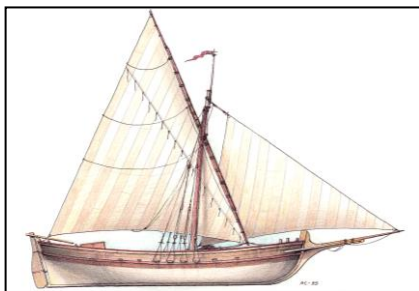
5. Speronara:

It was about 8 metres in length; had 1 single mast; 4–6 crew. It used both oars and sails; It was of Maltese origin and used between the 16th and early 20th century for trade, smuggling, corsairing, fishing and for guard duties in the Grand Harbour.



4. Galley

55 metres in length; carried up to 500 crew; used between the 16th and 18th century. It made use of lanten sails and oars. The main vessel by the Knights for the Corso.



3. Tartana

It was a small sailing boat with square and lanten sails. Used to carry small merchandise and used by Maltese corsairs to attack small enemy ships.



6. Brigantine

110 ft in length; 16 cannons; between 100–120 crew. Use extensively in the Mediterranean both as a merchant and a warship.

LO5d – The Order’s organisation of the Corso

1. Explain the main difference between **corsairing** and **piracy** as these existed in the Early Modern Age (*i.e.* 16th to the 18th century).

_____ (2)

2. How did the Order regulate the Corso industry in Malta?

_____ (4)

3. How did the Order:

(a) Protect the Maltese corsairs?

_____ (1)

(b) Profit from the Corso?

_____ (1)

4. Continue by filling this matrix table about the court tribunals of the Corso in Malta: (6)

	Name of Tribunal	The year when it set up	The Grand Master who set it up	Its main function
(a)	Tribunale degli Armamenti			
(b)		1697		

5. Mention **four** things that were usually stolen from Muslim ships by Maltese corsairs?

_____ (2)

6. Mention **one** good thing and **one** bad thing that resulted from the Corso.

Positive thing: _____ (1)

Negative thing: _____ (1)

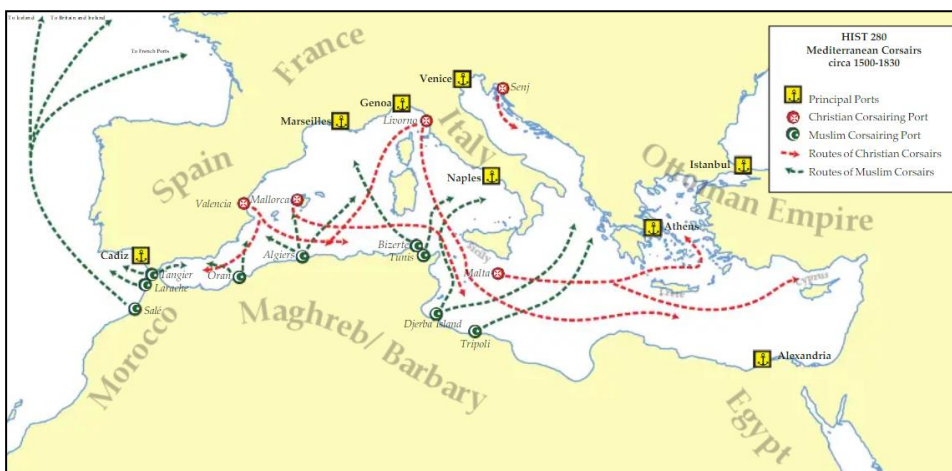
7. Who were the two adversaries of the Knights and the Maltese corsairs in the Mediterranean.

_____ (2)

(Total: 20 marks)

L05e – The Decline of the *Corso* in the 18th century

The *Corso* centred in Malta's harbours kept flourishing for most of the 17th century. In about 1640 there were some thirty corsair vessels based in Malta's harbour. In 1647, the Maltese corsairs started facing the first restrictions imposed on their corsairing activities. The Council of the Order issued an order for Maltese corsairs to stay 10 miles away from the coast of Palestine. In 1697, this restriction was increased to 50 miles. By that time France, Holland, England and the Venetian Republic were engaged in a lucrative trade with the Ottoman Turks. Since French trade increased in the Levant, the French government became touchy over Maltese corsair raids in the Levant. So King Louis XIV put pressure upon the Knights to stop Maltese corsairs from attacking Turkish ships. Even the Pope, as the supreme spiritual head of the Order, prohibited attacks of Christian corsairs on Greek merchant ships on the grounds that the Greeks were Christians too. When the Turks came to know about this restriction, they began to put all their goods on ships owned by the Greeks to avoid being attacked by Maltese corsairs. It was as if the Greeks would achieve what the whole force of the Ottoman Empire had failed to do – they were destroying the Maltese *corso*. In 1724 there were only seven Maltese corsairs at sea – a sad reduction from the thirty of some seventy years earlier.



Map credits academia.edu:
https://www.academia.edu/32054823/Mediterranean_Corsairs_circa_1500_1830_Map

All these restrictions resulted in a consistent and increasing drop in the number of Maltese corsair ships operating in the **Levant** (Eastern Mediterranean). Maltese corsairs risked having their ships confiscated or put in prison as outlawed pirates if caught breaking these restrictions. In the end, by the mid-18th century, both Knights and Maltese corsairs per only permitted to raid Muslim ships between Sicily and the Barbary States of North Africa. Her the captured booty was less valuable and profitable than in the Levant with the result that revenue collected by the Order in the form of taxes and licenses was considerably less than in previous times.

In 1733, Grand Master de Vilhena said that 'If our squadrons cannot put an appearance and make prizes in all the waters of the Levant, we shall be just like ships of other nations. We do not recognize prohibition of this kind; they would lead directly to the destruction of the Order; whose institutions consists in part in an open war against the Turks in whatever place they may be found.'



Four Gran Masters who gave special attention to the Order's fleet and the *Corso*. From left to right:
 Alof de Wignacourt (160–1622); Ramon Perellos (1697–1720);
 Manoel de Vilhena (1722–1736); Mannoel Pinto (1741–1773)

In 1740, there were seven ships sailing with the flag of the Order in the Levant. When in 1750 the King of Naples and Sicily ordered Neapolitan corsairs not to attack Greek ships, this order had to be followed by Grand Master too. In 1765, Pinto, writing to his ambassador in Venice, stated 'the Turks now trading under any flag but their own, our *corso* is reduced to attacking Barbary pirates, where as you know, ships are of no value; such little profit is made from them that it is insufficient for the maintenance of the wounded sailors.'

The decline of the *corso* had one other important effect – it meant that a substitute to this staple industry had to be found. And this was found in trade. After 1740, and during the long reign of Grand Master Pinto (1741–1773), there was a rapid growth in the number of trading concerns and Maltese commercial vessels. The ships that once gone out to raid were now sailing out to trade. It was a change for the better and more in the spirit of the Enlightenment and in an age where the 'holy war' against the Muslim powers was receding. Corsairing continued right up to the last years of the Order, but its instances were less and less frequent. In 1807, it received its final death blow when corsairing, like piracy, was declared to be illegal by the new British masters of the islands and punishable with the death penalty.



Two examples of ex voto paintings about Maltese corsair vessels:

Left: The oldest dates ex voto painting in Malta at Our Lady of Graces Parish Church Museum Żabbar, dated 1631.

Right: A speronara flying the flag of the Order caught in a storm off the coast of Stromboli, Sicily, dated 1789, located at Our Lady of Tal-Herba Chapel, Birkirkara.

The popular legacy of corsairing as depicted in Maltese paintings

The term *ex voto* comes from Latin, meaning 'in pursuance of a vow'. It refers to paintings or plaques placed in a church or chapel to commemorate a vow or to express thanks for a grace (favour) received. Malta's unwritten religious history is archived in many churches, by means of *ex voto* paintings representing graces granted and devotions. These paintings record the mediation of the Madonna, which outnumber those offered to other saints and the souls in Purgatory. These offerings show the deep trust the Maltese have in the Blessed Virgin, especially in times of crisis, such as when caught in heavy storms or attacks by Muslim corsairs. Some of these paintings are very rudimentary since they were done by amature painters. Nonetheless, they form part of the legacy of the Marian devotion of the Maltese throughout the centuries. Most of *ex voto* paintings are found in various parish churches and chapels in Malta and Gozo.

LO5e – The Decline of the Corso in the 18th century

1. What restriction were imposed on Maltese corsairs:
 - (a) In 1647? _____ (1)
 - (b) In 1697? _____ (1)
2. Mention **two** European powers wanted these restrictions and for what reason?

_____ (3)
3. How did the Turks manage to avoid their ships from being attacked by Maltese corsairs?

_____ (2)
4. Study carefully the source map in page 7 and answer these questions.
 - (a) List **four** Mediterranean ports used as bases for Christian corsairs.
_____ (2)
 - (b) List **four** Mediterranean ports used as bases for Barbary corsairs.
_____ (2)
5. Using the evidence from the map, what advantageous position did Malta's main harbour possess under the Knights possess during the golden days of the Corso in the Mediterranean?

_____ (2)
6. Identify the area referred in those times as 'The Levant' by writing the word on the map to show its geographical location. (1)
7. (a) Underline **two** areas in the Mediterranean were frequently raided by Maltese corsairs. (1)
 - (i) The Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey
 - (ii) The sea around Cyprus;
 - (iii) The sea between Malta and North Africa;
 - (iv) The coast of North Africa;
 - (v) The coast of Palestine.

(b) Give **two** reasons why these areas were preferred by the Knights and the Maltese corsairs.

_____ (2)
8. (a) Mention **two** consequences of the decline of the Maltese Corso by the late 18th century.

_____ (2)
- (b) How did the Maltese adapt to this decline?
_____ (1)

(Total: 20 marks)

LO5cde – The Order of St John as a seafaring force

Source Question

Carefully study the following sources and then answer the questions below.

'At the dawn of the 18th century the Order's navy underwent a structural change for the better. The project of instituting a squadron of ships-of-the-line, already attempted in 1655 by Grandmaster Lascaris but abandoned due to his death, was taken up again. On the strength of the recommendations made on 17 January 1701 by a special seven-men commission, appointed the year before by Grandmaster Ramon Perellos, the new vessel squadron was instituted. It was approved by a Papal brief, which authorized its financing through new imposts [taxes] on the Order's European estates. At the same time, it was decided to reduce the galley squadron from eight to six. Two ships-of-the-line were constructed at Toulon [in France], another two at Malta. The four of them were already serviceable on 1 April 1705. The following year they were joined by a fifth one, the Order having restructured a Tunisian vessel seized in the waters of the Levant.'

Source A taken from S. Bono, 'Naval Exploits and Privateering' in *Hospitaller Malta*, editor V. Mallia-Milanes, Malta, 1993.



Source B

1. On Source B draw a circle around one of the Order's new ships-of-the-line referred to in Source A. (1)
2. When was it the first time that the Order intend to make the ships-of-the-line part of its fleet? Why was this initial project abandoned? (2)
3. When and by whom was this project taken up again? (2)
4. Mention **two** advantages which the ship-of-the-line had over the galley. (2)
5. How was the Order to finance this new type of vessel? (2)
6. Suggest a reason why did the introduction of the vessel squadron need the approval of the Pope? (2)
7. From source A mention **two** differences between the galley and the vessel. (2)
8. Why only two out of the four new ships-of-the-line were constructed in Malta? (2)
9. Do you agree with the author of Source A that the Order's navy underwent a structural change for the better? Give a reason for your answer. (3)
10. How was the fifth vessel added to the Order's new ships-of-the-line squadron? (2)

(Total marks = 20)

LO5cde – The Order of St John as a seafaring force

Carefully read these essay titles and answer ONE using the following word count guide (350–400 words for MQF 2-3 and 200–250 for MQF 1-2).

PAPER MQF 2-3

1. 'The Order's naval squadron was renowned for its many exploits in the Mediterranean. It was also important for creating a wide array of jobs for the Maltese.' Enlarge and comment upon this statement. (20)
2. How did the Knights regulate the *Corso* and what caused its decline in the 18th century? (20)
3. 'The Knights of St John were basically a maritime and seafaring Order.' Say how this affected the livelihood of the Maltese.

PAPER MQF 1-2

1. (a) Why did the Order keep a squadron of galleys and an arsenal at Birgu? (4)
(b) When and how was the Order involved in naval battles between the Christian powers and the Ottoman Turks? (6)
(b) How and why did the Order's fleet of ships change over time? (6)
(d) What caused the decline of the Order's fleet in the late 18th century? (4)
2. 'Corsairing was an important industry for the Maltese Islands as these lacked natural Resources.'
(a) Say what is meant by 'corsairing'? (4)
(b) Explain **two** reasons why it became an important industry. (4)
(c) Show how it was regulated. (6)
(d) Explain why it declined during the 18th century. (6)

