

MOLLY GREENE

CATHOLIC PIRATES AND GREEK MERCHANTS

A Maritime History of the Mediterranean



Catholic Pirates and Greek Merchants



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Catholic Pirates and
Greek Merchants



A Maritime History of the Mediterranean

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To Hannah and Henry, my two diamonds



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Preface



This project had its origins in an article published many years ago by a man with the delightful name of Roderic Cavaliero. In 1959, his “The Decline of the Maltese Corso in the 18th Century: A Study in Maritime History” appeared in *Melita Historica*, the journal of the Maltese Historical Society. “Melita” is the Latin name for this tiny island in the very center of the Mediterranean.

Nearly forty years after its publication, I read his account one summer morning in the New York Public Library, and my pulse began to race. Unlike many who come to the study of Malta, I was not so interested in the knights. But Cavaliero’s account of the knights’ quarrels with the pope and with the French kings, among others, revealed a seventeenth-century sea swarming with Greek ships. Even better, the article hinted that these ships would show up not only as dry numbers on some sort of port registry; the likelihood was that we would hear their stories as well. They entered the historical record because they were the subject of fierce disputes between the Grand Master of the Order and various powers in and around the Mediterranean. The question at the center of all of these disputes was the same: were the Greeks, or were they not, legitimate targets in the Maltese pursuit of the *corso*, as the war against the Muslim infidel was known? It was the Greeks themselves who raised this question, because they complained to all and sundry in their ongoing battle to protect their shipping from Maltese attacks. Cavaliero’s article confirmed for me what I had begun to suspect during the course of writing my first book, namely, that the history of Greek shipping extended much farther back, and was more complicated, than the limited story of the eighteenth-century story that is usually told. On the other hand, I was very surprised to learn that the Greeks had gone all the way to the pope in their pursuit of justice. Trained as an Ottoman historian, I was familiar with the narrative that it was the Phanariots, the Orthodox Christian *Noblesse de Robe*, who were the protectors of Greek maritime endeavor. The connection to Rome suggested the existence of another world.

It makes sense that it was Cavaliero, a historian not of the Greeks or of the Ottoman Empire but of the knights and Malta, who opened up this vista for me. Often it takes outsiders to a field to reveal to us what we have missed because of the power of our own received narratives. At the same time, Cavaliero did not share my interest in the Greeks, and his article only hinted at their stories. But it was enough. Through him, I was able to follow the trail to the records of a court in Malta known as the Tribunale degli Armamenti. And the Tribunale has not disappointed. It has provided a wealth of stories that give a voice to the otherwise anonymous Greek captains, sailors, and merchants who sailed the seas of the eastern and central Mediterranean in the seventeenth century. Their accounts, in turn, are a beginning step in the reconstruction of the maritime world of the early modern Mediterranean.

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I have received help and support from many quarters in the writing of this book. The staff at the National Archives of Malta has been unfailingly helpful and responsive. During several trips to Malta I was able to photocopy whatever I needed and, once back in Princeton, further inquiries were always answered promptly. I would particularly like to thank Charles Farrugia, who met me at the Banca Giuratale, or Municipal Palace, in Mdina on my first trip to the archives in the summer of 1999. He gave me a tour of that beautiful building, built in 1730, then introduced me to the Banca Giuratale's holdings. These include the records of the law court known as the Tribunale degli Armamenti, which is at the center of my book. While in Malta I benefited from the counsel of Professor Victor Mallia-Milanes of the University of Malta. His own work has been a source of inspiration for me, and he was kind enough to meet with me on several occasions to discuss my project. I spent several very productive and delightful weeks at the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. The Malta Study Center in the Hill Manuscript Library possesses an unrivaled collection of documents from the island and is without doubt the premier center for the study of Malta in the United States. Dr. Theresa Vann was very generous with her time while I was there. I am particularly grateful for her guidance in understanding some of the intricacies of the legal procedures and conventions that surface in the documents, and she too has graciously answered numerous email inquiries. Another archival trip took me to Rome to work at the Vatican Library. The library is an outstanding resource for the history of the Eastern Christians. Its riches, I believe, have only begun to be explored. While in Rome I had the pleasure of staying at the American Academy of Rome, and I thank Professor Anthony Grafton for helping to make that happen. I thank the Academy for its gracious hospitality, which included candlelit dinners every evening. Archival work can be a lonely endeavor, and it was wonderful to return to the Academy at the end of every day. I have also been the recipient of generous financial support

during the course of this project. The Program in Hellenic Studies at Princeton University and the University Committee on Research in the Humanities and the Social Sciences supported my initial foray into the archives in Malta. A National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship allowed a year of leave during the 2003–4 academic year and further archival research. More recently, the Society of Fellows at Princeton awarded me an Old Dominion Fellowship, which gave me the time to finish writing the book during the 2007–8 academic year.

I have benefited from the intellectual input of many individuals, as well as from responses at academic gatherings where I have presented my research in progress. I would like to thank the Davis Center at Princeton University, the Yale Legal History Forum at Yale University, Aaron Rodrigue and the Mediterranean Studies Forum at Stanford University, Christine Philiou and the Society of Fellows at Columbia University, Jessica Goldberg and the Economic History Forum at the University of Pennsylvania, and the Institute for Economic Research on Civilizations at the University of Southern California. The discussions that followed my presentations at these various venues were all valuable in refining my thinking on the Greeks and their confrontation with the Knights of Malta. More informal exchanges have been just as important. I thank Roxani Margariti, Maria Fusaro, William Chester Jordan, Jeremy Adelman, Linda Colley, John Paul Ghobrial, Will Hanley, Lauren Benton, Eyal Ginio, Francesca Trivellato, and Yaacob Dweck for reading the manuscript and discussing my work with me. A series of conversations with Gerasimos Pangratis on the C Floor of Firestone Library during the summer of 2008 were, quite frankly, amazing. Very special thanks go to Alan Stahl, curator of numismatics at Firestone Library at Princeton, and to Pietro Frascica, professor of French and Italian at Princeton. Both provided invaluable assistance with some of the stranger twists and turns of the Italian language in the documents. Jebro Lit and Alexander Bevilacqua kindly read over my French and Italian translations, respectively, to check for errors. So many people have assisted me that I fear I will inadvertently fail to mention them all. If this is the case, please know that you have my thanks and appreciation. As always, I thank the director of the Program in Hellenic Studies, Dimitri Gondicas, and the chair of Princeton's History Department, William Chester Jordan, for continuing to provide me with a very happy home. I am indeed a fortunate soul.

Introduction



In 1634 the English traveler Henry Blunt left the Egyptian port city of Alexandria on a French ship. Not more than twenty miles from shore he witnessed the following attack:

we saw a spectacle of a straine beyond the Spirit of these times; it was thus: a Maltese vessel gave chase to a Greek vessel in search of Turkes or Turkish goods; the Greeks laded with Turkish goods, made up to us, who carry no Flag, he judged Turkes; but when at hand, we appeared as Christians, and from us no help to be had, He yeeld: upon the Vessell were foure Turkes; three suffered themselves to be taken prisoners; the fourth (we all looking on) ran up to the Sterne, where taking a peece of cord, he tyed his feet, and one of his hands together; then threw himself head-long into the sea; in which resolute end, he showed by what a short passage, many a years misery may be prevented.¹

Just a few years earlier, in 1627, a Greek Orthodox metropolitan on the island of Mytilene in the eastern Aegean sat down and penned a letter to the grand master of the Order of the Knights of St. John on Malta. In it he complained that two Maltese galleons had attacked a vessel captained by one Iacomes reis while it was returning to the port of Rosetta, also on the Egyptian coast.² The Maltese beat them, tortured them, stole all their goods, stripped them of their clothing, and took the ship as well, even though it belonged to Christians. The vessel was co-owned, the cleric continued, with half belonging to this Iacomes, while a certain Kyritze Avvagiano, also of Mytilene, owned the other half. The stolen goods belonged to a merchant named Xatzitriandafylo and consisted of sixteen sacks of linen, six hundred okkas of legumes, some textiles, some

belts, and some spices. They also made off with the merchant's personal goods.³

A few of the knights themselves have left accounts of their forays into the Greek world. Alonso de Contreras, whose picaresque account of his exploits with the knights is one of the most famous, recounts the following from the Aegean archipelago: "I came across a little brigantine, which was careened on one side for cleaning its hull. There were ten Greeks aboard, and I had them come aboard my frigate."⁴ He then began pressing them to reveal the presence of Turks on board, and when they denied there were any, "I started to torture them and not lightly, either. All stood it, even a boy of fifteen whom I had stripped naked and trussed up."⁵



These three accounts—from an English traveler, from an Orthodox cleric, and from a knight himself—could be multiplied hundreds of times over and they still would account for only a small fraction of the assaults on Greek shipping and Greek commerce in the seventeenth century. Yet the setting, the victims, and the protagonists are almost entirely unknown in the annals of piracy. For North Americans, the word "pirate" immediately conjures up images of the Caribbean. Even more informed, scholarly surveys of piracy during the golden age of piracy, as the seventeenth century is known, dip into the Mediterranean only to mention the Barbary Corsairs. This was the name given to the crews operating out of the flourishing North African cities of Tripoli, Tunis, and above all Algiers. At the height of their powers in the early seventeenth century they were able to reach as far as the Canary Islands and the coasts of the British Isles, and captured North African pirates languished in the jails of the sea towns in southwestern England.⁶ Although the Barbary Coast attracted adventurers from across Mediterranean Europe, as well as many Englishmen, they have been remembered as Muslim pirates. Thus, within the already tiny space that is allotted to the Mediterranean in studies of early modern piracy, there is no mention of anything other than Muslim violence, and it is a western Mediterranean story.

Further east, there is another story to be told. In the eastern Mediterranean, some of the more fearsome pirates—and, from the point of view of local merchants, the most fearsome—were Christian, Catholics from

the impoverished coastlines and islands of southern Europe, particularly places in Spanish-held Italy such as Naples, but also the many ports of the French Mediterranean coastline.⁷ But the capital *par excellence* of Catholic piracy was the island of Malta. Whereas the Jolly Roger is instantly recognizable as a pirate flag—as *the* pirate flag, actually, to North American audiences—the flag of the Knights of Malta, a white cross on a red background, is likely to summon up vague associations of Christian crusaders, but not much more than that. Yet this flag struck fear into the hearts of Ottoman merchants—Muslim, Jewish, and Orthodox Christian—when it appeared in Ottoman waters, as it did with great frequency beginning in the 1570s and continuing on for the next two centuries.

This rather laconic report, sent to the Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1597, is entirely typical of the attacks carried out during the course of a Maltese “cruise,” as these forays into the eastern Mediterranean were known. In this case the cruise was carried out with the Knights of St. Stephen, who operated out of the port of Livorno:

On the 10th in the said Gulf of Macri, they captured two vessels—the first a caramoussal laded with corn, manned by forty Turks, who dragged the boat onto land and fled, and the Tuscans found on it fifteen Jews, seven female, the rest male; whilst the other was a small vessel with a cargo of timber, manned by seven Greeks. The Tuscans found four Turks aboard, took the Greeks on board the galley, and sank both the said ships.⁸

The Knights of Malta were the latest reincarnation of the Knights Hospitaller of Jerusalem, whose origins lay in the First Crusade. Pushed out of Jerusalem when it was retaken by the Muslim armies of Saladin, the Catholic military order eventually reestablished itself on the island of Rhodes in the early fourteenth century. It was on Rhodes that the knights developed a navy and began maritime attacks on Muslim power, both commercial and military.⁹ In 1522 they once again lost their base to a Muslim sovereign when the Ottoman sultan Süleyman wrested the island from them. After eight years of wandering the Mediterranean, the Hapsburg emperor Charles V granted them the islands of Malta and Gozo, as well as the fortress of Tripoli on the North African coast (soon lost), and they would remain there, as the Knights of Malta, until 1798.

Along with the Knights of St. Stephen, another Catholic military order that operated out of Livorno, and assorted groups from Spanish Italy, these self-identified Catholic crusaders wreaked havoc in Ottoman waters in the seventeenth century and, to a lesser extent, in the eighteenth.

The protagonists, then, were Catholics operating in the context of the eternal struggle, as they saw it, against Islam. Given this exalted mission, it is not surprising that they did not see themselves as mere pirates. Instead they called themselves corsairs, a term specific to the Mediterranean.¹⁰ In this particular phase the battlefield was the eastern Mediterranean. The consolidation of Ottoman power in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries rendered the eastern Mediterranean relatively safe for Ottoman shipping during this period, and maritime activity flourished along the shores of the Aegean and on the main sea-lane connecting Egypt (conquered by the Ottomans in 1517) and the imperial capital. After the Ottoman defeat at Lepanto in 1571 and the relative weakening of the empire's naval power, Catholic pirates switched their main area of activity from the western to the eastern basin of the inland sea.¹¹

Having established the protagonists and their venue, it remains to discuss the victims. First we must resolve an apparent contradiction. Although Catholic piracy justified itself in terms of Christian-Muslim enmity, Greek Orthodox Christians were attacked in all three cases described above. The three stories are indicative of an essential truth about Catholic piracy in the early modern eastern Mediterranean, which is that it claimed Orthodox Christian victims as often as it did Muslims, although the treatment was not identical. It was rare for the former to be enslaved and taken to Malta or Livorno; more usually they lost their goods and their ships, but not their personal freedom.¹² The Greek Orthodox were the most prominent Christian victims of the Knights of Malta and other Catholic marauders, for two reasons: first, most of the islands and coastlines favored by the pirates—the Aegean, Crete, Cyprus, and the coastal areas of the Balkan Peninsula—coincided with Greek population centers. Second, the Greek Orthodox were the principal maritime carriers of the Ottoman Empire. After the conquest of Syria (1516) and Egypt (1517), the empire spanned the southern and northern shores of the eastern Mediterranean, and the Greeks played a vital role in connecting the two. When the Maltese attacked an Ottoman

vessel coming from Egypt, as was the case in the first two of our stories, the captain of the ship was most likely to be a Greek.



The rise of Catholic piracy in the seventeenth century can only be understood in the context of the fundamental changes that took place in the Mediterranean arena toward the end of the sixteenth century. More than anything else, it was the retreat of the state that allowed piracy to flourish in both the eastern and the western halves of the sea. From the first decades of the sixteenth century to the spectacular clash at Lepanto in 1571, Ottoman sultans and Spanish monarchs battled each other for supremacy in the inland sea.¹³ Somewhat paradoxically, perhaps, the wars held piracy in check, for a time. The forces that would come to be so powerful in the seventeenth century—the North African *beyliks* and the knights on Malta—were already taking up their positions, but in the sixteenth century they functioned largely as auxiliary forces in the wars being fought between the two empires, the Hapsburg and the Ottoman.¹⁴ But after 1571, or at the latest 1581 (historians have debated just how consequential the loss at Lepanto was for the Ottomans), both the Spanish and the Ottomans turned their back on the Mediterranean and focused their energies elsewhere, the former on the New World and the latter on their various land borders. This was the signal for the pirates, both Muslim and Christian, to head out to sea on their account.¹⁵ The shift has been described most poetically by Fernand Braudel in a section of his *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* entitled “One War Replaces Another”:

So when we say that war in the Mediterranean came to an end in 1574, we should make it clear which kind of war we mean. Regular war, maintained at great expense by the authoritarian expansion of major states, yes, that certainly came to an end. But the living materials of that war, the men who could no longer be kept in the war fleets by what had become inadequate rewards and wages were driven to a life of roving by the liquidation of international war.¹⁶

But piracy never exists in a vacuum, and this held true for the Mediterranean as well. North African piracy was sustained in part by the

ability of its practitioners to play one European power off against another. Despite later colonialist rhetoric about “lawless” Muslim piracy, the reality is that the North Africans and the Europeans had sustained diplomatic relations for two centuries prior to the French invasion of Algeria in 1830.

The relationship between the central Ottoman state and the *beyliks* of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli is harder to discern. This is not a coincidence. An essential dynamic of the piracy game on both sides was a willingness on the part of states to use the pirates for their own benefit, while at the same time denying any connection to them.

Similarly, it is difficult to point to a clear relationship of alliance between the Maltese and any one European power, not even the Vatican. What can be said is that a certain constellation of power facilitated the ability of the Knights of St. John and other Catholic powers to operate in the eastern Mediterranean. This constellation consisted of the decline of Venice and the rise of France as the strongest Catholic power in the Ottoman Empire. Venice, as we shall see, had a long-standing hostile relationship with the knights, and as long as it was a force to be reckoned with in the eastern Mediterranean, it stood in the way of the Catholic powers. But over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Venetians steadily lost territory to the Ottomans.¹⁷ With territorial losses came a decline in influence. One must add to this Venice’s inability to hold on to maritime and commercial supremacy in the Mediterranean at large.

France stepped into the breach. Here we should issue several caveats before going any further. First, there is a tendency in certain quarters to usher the French (and the Dutch and the English) into the Mediterranean before the Venetians have fully closed the door. In this way of telling the history of the early modern period, the French took over from the Venetians. This is problematic for many reasons, one of which is that it denies agency to local actors. It is also inaccurate in that it skips over the entire seventeenth century when no one, whether France, the Ottoman Empire, or anyone else, was strong enough to provide security in the Mediterranean. This is one of the principal reasons why the seventeenth century is the age of piracy.¹⁸ When discussing the French, we must bear in mind that the century was “an interregnum of the lesser powers,” not the age of European dominance, which would come later,

in the eighteenth century.¹⁹ Second, there is a tendency to speak of “the French,” as if France were a coherent entity with a clearly identifiable policy in the eastern Mediterranean. This was not at all the case.

Keeping these things in mind, we must nevertheless admit that the French were far more conciliatory than the Venetians toward the knights, and toward piracy in general. Many of the knights were French, whereas Venice forbade its citizens and subjects from joining the order.²⁰ France’s subjects from the French Mediterranean coastline were some of the most active pirates in the eastern Mediterranean. French officials in the Ottoman Empire occasionally scandalized and outraged the Ottomans by their willingness to consort with the pirates. All of this worked to the advantage of the knights.



The Knights of Malta and their Greek victims are at the center of the story this book tells. In the specialized field of Mediterranean studies, Catholic piracy has received a fair amount of attention. This book aspires to depart from the existing narrative in two ways. First, I would like to talk about piracy in a new way, and second, I would like to tie it to a larger narrative. Since these two goals are intertwined, I discuss them simultaneously.

Mediterranean piracy still stands apart from the general story of the global piracy that flourished in the seventeenth century. No doubt part of this isolation is because historians of piracy are almost always concerned with the new vistas opened up by the European journeys of exploration. The Mediterranean is the world left behind; if it is mentioned at all, it is as the point of origin for practices the Europeans took with them as they sailed into new oceans and seas.²¹ Historians of the Mediterranean, for their part, have overwhelmingly treated piracy, Muslim and, especially, Catholic, as the last remnant of a dying religious worldview, the hold of pseudo-Crusaders whose days were numbered by an emerging secular international order. Indian or Atlantic Ocean piracy, by contrast, can seem much more consequential, as it was part and parcel of an emerging European world system.

This view of Catholic piracy is part of a larger narrative concerning the Mediterranean as an international space in the early modern period.

Briefly, the story runs as follows. By a rather extraordinary coincidence, both the Spanish Hapsburgs and the Ottoman sultans emerged as world powers at opposite ends of the Mediterranean at roughly the same time. In 1453 Mehmet the Conqueror shocked Christian Europe with his conquest of Constantinople, capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. In 1492 the Spanish crown extinguished the last Muslim state on the Iberian Peninsula with the conquest of Granada. As a result, the sixteenth century saw the spectacular revival of the age-old conflict between Christianity and Islam, and new battles were fought in the Mediterranean, the traditional battleground for the dueling civilizations since the seventh century. Then the Spanish and the Ottomans turned away from the Mediterranean, newcomers from northern Europe arrived, and gradually the international relations of the region normalized. The Maltese, the Tuscans, and other Catholic pirates were no more than ineffectual anachronisms. It is important to note here that in this narrative view, the European newcomers play the role of modernizers; through their arrival they brought an end to the ancient antagonism between Christianity and Islam.²²

This book tells a different story. First, it takes the word “maritime” in the title seriously. Despite a tremendous amount of writing about Mediterranean commerce in the early modern period, surprisingly little has been written about the realities of traveling across the sea and the norms and customs that structured such crossings, aside from the overly schematic meta-narrative of a transition from a religiously defined to a more secular order. Second, I am inspired by new trends in global history. Global history has directly set itself against an older tradition of scholarship which imagines that the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans were the smooth surfaces over which European laws, norms, and ultimately European-derived international relations were inexorably extended. Instead, global historians suggest a more conflictual and chaotic process deriving as much from the anonymous workings of countless numbers of international sojourners, be they sailors, merchants, diplomats, pirates, or soldiers, as from the imperializing projects of the European maritime powers.²³ This is one of the major reasons (there are others) why I focus on the Greek Orthodox victims of piracy rather than on the pirates themselves. I am interested in how they navigated their way across a sea infested by countless pirates of greater or lesser stature. This moves us away from the traditional story told about Mediterranean

piracy in the early modern period, which usually considers it from the point of view of the state and its struggle for hegemony.

The story I tell is not one of a transition from a religiously defined international order to a more secular order. It is the story of an enduring ambiguity that certainly lasted through the early modern period and arguably is still with us today. This ambiguity revolved around two competing visions of the Mediterranean, one territorial, the other religious. Did individuals move across the inland sea as the subjects of various sovereigns? Or was this a world of Muslims, Christians, and Jews? The answer has always been, a little bit of both.

Given the narrative outlined above, I, too, start in the sixteenth century. I argue that despite high levels of religious antagonism, the Ottomans and the Venetians both found it in their respective interest to organize the space they shared—from Venice in the west to Istanbul in the east and Alexandria in the south—on the basis of agreements drawn up between the two states. Together they created a regime of subjects and sovereigns, of Ottoman and Venetian subjects, that competed robustly with a Mediterranean divided into religious blocs. In other words, despite being representatives of the “old” Mediterranean, supposedly driven by religious passion, they actually created an international order that was more secular than what would follow in the seventeenth century.²⁴

Moving into the seventeenth century, I argue that it was certain new European forces, not the old antagonists of a previous age, that gave religious affiliation a new importance in the organization of Mediterranean life. In this discussion I take strong exception to the view that the Knights of Malta were an anachronism, a throwback to the days of the Crusades. Instead, they were part of a revival of Catholic power in the eastern Mediterranean. In addition to the knights themselves, this revival rested on two pillars of strength. The first was France, which showed itself to be far more willing than Venice had ever been to defend and advance the interests of Catholicism in the eastern Mediterranean. The second pillar, equally important, was the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Beginning with the founding of the Greek College of Rome in 1576, the Vatican revitalized its presence in the eastern Mediterranean as it sought to bring the Greek Orthodox back into communion with Rome.

These three forces combined, sometimes in unexpected ways. For reasons I explore in the course of this book, one of the results was to create

a sort of unintentional experiment (if a rather bitter one) whereby Ottoman merchants—and particularly the Greek Orthodox—could test the efficacy of religious affiliation as a way of resolving commercial problems and, more broadly, as a way of moving across Mediterranean space.

This experiment, which is the primary focus of this study, is an important one to follow, for it changes the story of the early modern Mediterranean. What we shall see is that the protagonists in our story—the French, the Vatican, the Ottomans, Ottoman merchants, and Catholic pirates—do not line up along some hypothetical dividing line, with some wedded to an emerging secular order while others cling to a Mediterranean divided into religious blocs. Instead, all of our actors reveal ambiguity, confusion, and contradictory thinking in terms of how the Mediterranean was and should be organized.

A study of this seventeenth-century experiment reveals something else as well. Despite the modernizing thesis of an increasingly “normalized” Mediterranean in the seventeenth and, especially, the eighteenth centuries, historians of the region still tend to fall back on religious affiliation—Muslims, Christians, and Jews—as a useful way of thinking about the organization of this maritime world, particularly in commercial matters (this division itself is a reflection of that same ambiguity I have been discussing).²⁵ If we look carefully, however, it becomes clear that these terms were highly contested, in respect to both their actual content and the significance they should be accorded. S. D. Goitein, the famed historian of the medieval Mediterranean, called it “a friendly sea,” despite its division between Christianity and Islam.²⁶ A key factor in ensuring the unity of the sea, he wrote, was that the law was personal rather than territorial. This study revisits Goitein’s argument, but for the early modern rather than the medieval Mediterranean. By early modern times the situation had changed, but not beyond all recognition. An increasing emphasis on territorial identity—that is, the claims of sovereigns over their subjects—had come to coexist uneasily with an older tradition of personal law that followed an individual across the sea.



In conclusion, let us return to the stories with which we began this introduction. Now it is time to explain why the conflicts that erupted

between the Greek merchants and the Knights of Malta in the seventeenth century are the ideal venue for our exploration of the contested international order in the Mediterranean.

At the most general level, the Greeks, and Greek merchants in particular, dragged the ambiguity of the Mediterranean in their wake. The Greeks were enduringly liminal. They were Christians but of a rather dubious kind from the Catholic point of view, and many were also Ottoman subjects. Not surprisingly, then, issues of identity and representation followed Greek merchants around the ports of the Mediterranean, including Malta, and we will be considering these questions throughout this study.

Their particular difficulties with the Knights of Malta also represent a great opportunity for the historian. To understand why, we must return briefly to Alonso de Contreras, the Knight of Malta who bragged of torturing the Greeks he encountered in the archipelago. In another attack, he recounts how he was busy robbing a “Turk” whom he had captured at sea when two Frenchmen came up and shouted that the spoils should be divided three ways.²⁷ An argument ensued, and they eventually took it to the captain in charge of the expedition, who decided that the best course of action would be to put the matter to the “Senores del Tribunal del Armamento” in Malta for a decision.²⁸ A few pages later Contreras gives us the tribunal’s decision. The four hundred sequins gained from the sale of the slave (the unfortunate victim had evidently been taken back to Malta and sold) was to go into a common pool, but Contreras was given an extra financial bonus.²⁹

What was this tribunal? The Tribunale degli Armamenti, as it was known in Italian, the language most in use by the knights in Malta, was a tribunal set up by the grand master of the order, Alofius de Wignacourt, in 1605. The pirates, in other words, had a court. As we can see from its appearance in the Contreras story, one of its primary purposes was to resolve disputes among the pirates themselves. But it performed another function as well. Victims of the Maltese who felt they had been unfairly attacked by the knights could appear before the court. Muslims and Jews were uncontestedly the enemy, and thus it is not surprising that they never show up in court documents. But the Greeks, who occupied a more ambiguous position, did make the long trip to Malta to plead their case.

Historians are not unaware of the Tribunale's existence. Yet no study of the court exists, despite scattered references to it in the literature. This reflects two assumptions, one specific to the knights, the other a more general view of piracy.

"Corrupt," "arbitrary," "lawless"—these terms are routinely deployed in discussions of the knights. Why, then, study their court, which was, it must be admitted, not a model of probity? This view fits in with common historical treatments of piracy. Pirates, it is asserted, are outside the law.³⁰ In fact, as global historians are now arguing, the dense historical record left behind by the English pirates as they moved out across the globe at this time—including but not limited to famous men such as William Kidd and Blackbeard (Edward Teach)—shows that pirates strived mightily to present their behavior as lawful, whether in prize proceedings or in criminal trials. Pirates, like other mariners, were important actors in the continuous negotiations that went into the construction of legality and illegality. And, like everyone else, they took full advantage of the legal ambiguity that characterized most encounters at sea.³¹

When viewed this way, the Greek encounter with the Tribunale is an ideal way to uncover the norms, laws, and conventions that structured encounters at sea. In addition to the Tribunale, recent work by historians has brought to light several seventeenth-century court cases from other venues, stretching from Turin to Istanbul, and these too are included in the discussion.³² By putting these legal encounters at the center of the story, my intent is to take these battles seriously as a place where new international norms were being tested in the Mediterranean. All participants in the commercial and political life of the sea, not just the expanding powers of Europe, played a role in this process. One of the great advantages of privileging these court cases is that they show us the role played by ordinary people, as opposed to states, in the construction of international order.



This study aims to locate the particular quarrel between the Greeks and the knights in the larger context of the Mediterranean as an international maritime space. To that end, the book is divided into seven chapters that cover, roughly, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The

first two chapters are devoted to the period up until 1570, while the other five consider the seventeenth century. The sixteenth century, while not receiving as much space as the later years, does figure prominently in the historical arguments that are being made.

Chapter one describes the maritime order that the Ottomans and the Venetians constructed together in the sixteenth century. Despite high levels of hostility and numerous wars, both sides found it to be in their best interest to facilitate trade between themselves. And because together they controlled all of the territory stretching from Venice to the shores of Anatolia, the net effect was to create a wide-ranging commercial zone that was organized around agreements between the two states. I call what they created a world of subjects and sovereigns.

Chapter two examines the Maltese challenge to the Veneto-Ottoman order. Unlike previous studies of the Knights of Malta, which tend to dismiss their self-justifications even as they acknowledge their formidable maritime power, this chapter takes the knights' objections to Venetian commerce with the Ottomans seriously. The knights' view of the proper balance of commerce and war in the early modern Mediterranean drew on plausible and time-honored conventions in international maritime relations, and their view of the Mediterranean was grounded in the imperatives of religion. Thus, the chapter also includes a general consideration of the place of religion in this sixteenth-century commercial zone that was a joint Veneto-Ottoman creation, with particular attention paid to the situation of the Greeks as Christian Orthodox.

The seventeenth century was the golden age of piracy, across the globe and in the Mediterranean as well. Chapter three lays out the piratical landscape of the Mediterranean at this time, then tightens its focus on the Catholic pirates operating in Ottoman waters after 1571. Unlike in other parts of the globe, piracy in the Mediterranean was most enduringly the preserve of indigenous groups, and this was true on both the Muslim side and the Christian side. The North Africans were the most formidable Muslim pirates, while the Maltese were the most fearsome on the Christian side. For this reason the pirates of the Mediterranean have often been considered an anachronism, the dying embers of a fading religious conflict, in comparison to the English, Spanish, and other European pirates, who sailed to the four corners of the globe and thus helped forge a new global order. This chapter takes issue with that

assessment when it comes to the Catholic pirates. Instead, it puts the pirates in the larger context of the renewal of Catholic power in the eastern Mediterranean. When viewed this way it is clear that the pirates were part of a coincidence of forces that all worked together to increase the importance of religion and religiously based networks in facilitating both mobility and security in the eastern Mediterranean.

Chapters four through seven constitute the heart of the book. Together, they form a detailed study of one group of Ottoman merchants and their confrontation with Catholic power—principally but not exclusively the Knights of Malta—in all its manifestations in the seventeenth century. That group, for reasons I discuss at length, is the Greek merchants, some Catholic but most Orthodox, of the Ottoman Empire. Alone among Ottoman merchants, the Greeks challenged Maltese attacks on their shipping in court. This challenge produced an extensive archival record that is in Malta today. Chapter four describes the archival material and the world of Ottoman commerce it reveals. Chapters five and six concentrate on the legal challenge itself. In chapter five we consider the local institutions in the eastern Mediterranean that the Greeks turned to in order to prepare their claim for presentation in Malta. Chapter six looks at the content of the lawsuits themselves, both those in Malta as well as several others that have surfaced in the historical record. I outline the conflicting maritime conventions and traditions that are revealed through the presentation of arguments. Chapter seven follows the Greeks as they take their complaints against the Maltese all the way to Rome. This brings us to a consideration of the Counter-Reformation and the larger world of Catholic power that must be grasped if one is to understand the realities of the seventeenth-century Mediterranean.

CHAPTER 1

Subjects and Sovereigns



A chronicler of the Order of the Knights of St. John, Abbé de Vertot, recorded the following conversation in 1671 between the Ottoman sultan Mehmet IV and the notorious Knight of the Order known as Chevalier de Téméricourt.¹ Téméricourt had been captured by the Barbary corsairs and taken to Mehmet at Edirne. Mehmet asked him if it was indeed he who had battled with a single vessel five large vessels from Tripoli.

“Twas myself,” replied the knight.

“What countryman are you” said the Sultan

“A Frenchman” replied Téméricourt.

“You are a deserter then” said Mehmet, “for I am in strict peace with the king of France.”

“I am a Frenchman,” Téméricourt replied, “but besides that quality I am likewise a knight of Malta, a profession which obliges me to expose my life against all the enemies of the Christian faith.”

This exchange perfectly underlines a question that has dogged the Mediterranean since the Muslim armies seized the southern shores of the Roman sea in the seventh century A.D. What is the Mediterranean? Is it a collection of states bound by freely concluded treaty obligations to one another? Or is it a cultural or even a civilizational frontier where two hostile religions face each other in perpetual enmity? The answer has always been an awkward mix of both.

Several factors have combined to ensure that this ambiguity has been a permanent fixture of Mediterranean life. There is the settled topography of a (mostly) Christian northern shore and a (mostly) Muslim southern rim. Given that ideological and political warfare between Christianity and Islam was a central feature of European and Near Eastern history

for many centuries (and is still with us today), it was inevitable that the Mediterranean border between the two civilizations would be a zone of permanent hostility. Téméricourt explained his actions within the context of this tradition.

But next to that we must place the long history of states that faced each other, from positions of relatively equal strength, across the inland sea. Recognizing the impossibility of conquering, definitively at least, the other side, political leaders chose to treat with the enemy.² It was in the Mediterranean that European sovereigns first routinely signed treaties with non-Christian states, stretching all the way back to the twelfth century.³ Mehmet IV considered Téméricourt not first and foremost a Christian but a subject of France. The long history of Muslim-Christian diplomacy in the Mediterranean was seriously challenged, and in some cases rather skillfully forgotten, by European colonialism. Whereas the Ottoman Empire had been a full participant in European diplomacy in the sixteenth century, by the nineteenth century it was repeatedly frustrated in its attempts to join the Concert of Europe. But for many centuries before that, treaties between Christian and Muslim states had played a fundamental role in organizing Mediterranean life.

Finally, certain features of the Mediterranean environment—a sea that was relatively easy to navigate, the mountain chains and the deserts that cut off Mediterranean cities from their hinterlands, the large cities with their thirst for grain—pushed the two shores together for many centuries, despite their religious differences.

The conversation between Mehmet IV and Téméricourt involved a sultan and a corsair.⁴ As such, it nicely reflects the historiography on corsairing in the Mediterranean. The problem has been considered exclusively from the point of view of the relationship between the corsairs, whether of Malta or Barbary, and authorities, whether the doge of Venice or the Ottoman sultan. Some studies, such as those on the Medici princes of Livorno and the Knights of St. Stephen, the order they founded, emphasize cooperation between the state and its corsairing allies. Others, such as a recent study on the relationship between Venice and the Knights of St. John on Malta, emphasize the animosity between the two parties. In either case, the relationship between states and corsairs is at the center of the story.

But this is not a book about politics, or at least not a book about state actors. Rather, this book investigates the consequences of that ambiguity for the conduct of business, and the strategies that merchants adopted to deal with an uncertain world. More specifically, it considers the position of Greek Orthodox merchants in the Mediterranean world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Why this particular moment, and why these particular merchants? The sixteenth century is a century of paradox. It was marked by almost continuous religious and political conflict at the highest levels. From their respective corners of the inland sea, the Ottomans and the Hapsburgs clashed repeatedly in their struggle to gain the upper hand in the Mediterranean. The Ottomans and the Venetians also fought three wars in the sixteenth century alone as Venice steadily lost ground in the eastern Mediterranean to the ascendent empire. Despite this, a complex partnership between the Ottoman Empire and the Venetian Republic created a world of subjects and sovereigns, an interimperial space within which merchants could move with relative ease, transparency, and confidence. The terms *subject* and *sovereign* are chosen deliberately, to emphasize that the commercial world rested on interstate agreements buttressed by intensive diplomacy.⁵

In light of the frequent wars between the two states and the emphasis in the literature on the supposed commitment of Muslim states—the Ottomans included—to the relentless pursuit of jihad and their unwillingness to accept permanent borders, it may be surprising to see the Ottomans described as partners with a Christian power in the creation of an international commercial order. But this is indeed what they were. It is worth pointing out that in the exchange between Mehmet and Téméricourt, it is the Muslim sultan who insists on obligations stemming from a treaty concluded between two states.

The transition from the sixteenth century to the seventeenth saw a sharp deterioration in the ability of both the Ottomans and the Venetians to police the eastern Mediterranean and thus to regulate maritime commercial life in the way they had earlier. It is fair to say that no one was in charge for much of the seventeenth century. This transition offers an excellent opportunity to look at the adjustment of merchant strategies as the power of the state receded.