THE MALTESE CORSO IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY*

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The Maltese islands, located in the narrow channel that separates Sicily from Tunisia, served as a base for corsairs and privateers well before the arrival of the Order of St. John in the sixteenth century. In the early thirteenth century, the Genoese count of Malta, Enrico Pescatore, used the island to attack Pisan and Venetian interests in the central and eastern Mediterranean, while an intervention in Malta by Frederick IV of Sicily in 1372 was possibly provoked by piratical activities against Genoese ships by the captain of the island.1 The archipelago, part of the kingdom of Sicily since the Norman conquest in 1127, was drawn into the Aragonese orbit from the late thirteenth century.2 Late medieval Malta and Gozo were peripheral, but by no means isolated, outposts of the crown of Aragon, largely cut off from the main trade routes that traversed the Mediterranean, and exposed to attacks from the crown’s enemies. The intention of this paper is to describe the political, social and economic context that made the Maltese islands a fertile ground for corsair activity in the central Mediterranean during the fifteenth century. I will begin by describing the process whereby the crown’s policy of delegating the defense of the archipelago to its galley-captains led to the establishment of a military aristocracy on Malta who were also financiers and organizers of corsairing ventures. Secondly, I will look at the links that existed between corsairing and trade on the islands, and show that here, as elsewhere in the Mediterranean, corsairing was often an economic enterprise. I will then conclude with a brief discussion of the impact of corsairing on Maltese society in the fifteenth century as

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2 A. T. Luttrell, “Approaches to Medieval Malta” in Luttrell, Medieval Malta.
indicated through the records of the universitas or municipal government of Malta.

Corsairing was a legalized form of piracy, undertaken with the official or implicit sanction of the authorities in return for a share of the spoils. At the same time, it was also an important aspect of naval warfare in the Mediterranean, and the Aragonese rulers were particularly adept in the use of the guerra di corso to promote their political interests. A substantial part of the Aragonese fleet during military campaigns was made up of privately owned vessels belonging to Catalan, Castilian, and Valencian galley-captains. When not in the direct service of the king, these individuals were permitted to act as armatori or organizers of the corso, attacking ships and merchandise belonging to the crown’s enemies and launching swift raids into enemy territory, known as razzias, to destroy crops and animals, and take the inhabitants captive as slaves. Their actions could be directed towards a number of goals, including that of wearing down an adversary, hindering maritime trade or of obtaining concessions or commercial treaties. In other instances, these galley-captains-cum-corsairs were assigned to defend territories, which the Aragonese rulers lacked the financial and material resources to protect, especially small, relatively isolated islands, such as Malta and Pantelleria, and exposed coastal towns, such as Augusta and Sciacca in Sicily. It was in the context of this policy that a small military aristocracy established itself on Malta during the fifteenth century and rapidly assumed a prominent role in local political and economic affairs.

The military campaigns undertaken by Alfonso V during his long reign as king of Aragon, Naples and Sicily drew Malta and Gozo into the war at sea and the guerra di corso. The islands served as staging points for attacks by corsairs and the royal fleet against the Hafsid rulers of Tunis, which in turn exposed them to destructive counter-incursions.

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2 I. Schiappoli, La marina degli aragonesi di Napoli (Naples, 1940), 50.

3 H. Bresc, ‘La course méditerranéenne au miroir sicilien (XIIe-XVe siècles)’ in H. Bresc, Politique et société en Sicile, XIIe-XVe siècles (Aldershot, 1990), 94-6.