

Gambling in Malta under t

IF GAMBLING and losing prompted a Muslim-turned-Christian to return to his Koran saints, it also made the more or less Christian Contreras actively contemplate "turning Turk". The Inquisitor kept a detailed report in his secret records against him: how he lost his cool when he lost his money. "The said Alonso twice or three times, when angry after gambling and losing, used to start swearing and uttering blasphemies, especially that he reneged God; other times he repeated he wanted to denounce the Christian faith and turn Turk".³⁸

The public gambling den close to the slaves' prison does not seem to have been the only meeting place for slaves to bet in. Evidence survives that the tavern of Fort St Elmo equally attracted Muslim slaves and Christians alike to drink and gamble.³⁹ "Not all baptised slaves," Wettinger observes, "were particularly pious." In fact, gambling, drinking and swearing prevailed, "though kept under some sort of control by mutual spying and tale-telling to the confessors or the Inquisitor".⁴⁰

The rules wanted betting and gaming strictly forbidden on board the Order's ships – the official navy, as distinct from the corsairing fleet. How forbidden they really were appears from the narrative, c. 1660, of a naïve sucker who recounts how naval recruiting officers used gambling as a decoy to satisfy in part the never-ending demand for more, and then still more, brawny rowers on the Maltese galleys.

Martinotto, a young man from Ferrara suffering from St Vitus dance (tarantism), in Candia came across the crew of a Maltese galley; they feigned friendship and invited him on board, laid out a nice dinner and plied him with wine. Then, when lushly intoxicated, they

GIOVANNI BONELLO concludes his three-part series

offered him a loan of six scudi to play at cards. He lost them before he could say jolly.

A surgeon ruined

Immediately the hulk of a rascal materialised and snapped a chain round his ankle: you will row, he beamed at the tipsy Martinotto, until you pay back your debt, discounting 18 tari a month – an equivalent of four months slaving at the oars.⁴¹

Solid careers collapsed under the baneful impact of gambling. The renowned physician Dr Antonio Creni, surgeon-in-chief on the Order's vessels, deserted from his post and fled to Spain after losing heavily at gambling. His financial embarrassment drove him to *autres désordres*. The architect of his downfall: a certain Giovanni Antonio, formerly a cabinet-maker and a "rogue by profession". Following the Creni scandal, the criminal court slapped an injunction on the crooked carpenter never to touch a playing card again under a penalty of 500 scudi.

Creni's brother Giuseppe, also a physician, sued Giovanni Antonio in the criminal court, but the rascal, to escape due retribution for his cheating, paid 400 scudi to the Inquisition to become its patentee and thus immune from the ordinary criminal jurisdiction. When the Inquisitor discovered the imbroglio, he withdrew the patent, notwithstanding the ardent defence of the delinquent put up by the Auditor.⁴²

Various enactments prohibited or regulated gambling on board the Order's fleet. The first I found only goes back to 1651, when Grand Master Lascaris outlawed every

gioco da parata et anche gioco illecito in somma grossa. He introduced the civil law rule, still current today, that the loser in gambling cannot be forced to pay, nor did the winner have any right over the gains. This rule was also enforceable on land, and reiterated in 1664 by Nicholas Cottoner who specified that the ban extended to that *gioco che chiamano d'invito o parata*.⁴³

Flogging against gambling

Grand Master Carafa seems to have modified this ban in 1685. He outlawed any game on board the galleys unless for cash present on the table, probably to avoid the baneful effects of gambling on credit with counters instead of coin. And, should any *querela o disgusto* arise during the game, instant expulsion from the Order awaited the culprits.⁴⁴

The Chapter-General of the Order convened in 1776 at the beginning of De Rohan's rule gave special attention to discipline on board the Order's ships. Its deliberations repeated references to the ban on gambling on board. The new regulations forbade knights to play any game of chance, and enjoined the Captain-General, the captains and the naval conventual chaplains to report all abuses to the Council.⁴⁵

The Council confirmed this prohibition.⁴⁶ It ordered the Captain-General of the Order to ensure that no knights gambled on board the galleys. Priors and conventual chaplains again received instructions to report any knight who disregarded the ban. This applied to the knights on board the Order's navy. The crew faced similar prohibitions against betting; in terms of the 1709 *Ordinazioni per il buon governo dei vascelli* flogging attended anyone gambling or blaspheming (almost invariably coupled), injuring others or challenging them to fight.⁴⁷

It may not be all that well known that the authorities ran official gambling through public lotteries which in Malta started at least in the 17th century. An ingenious way for the Order to raise cash and at the same time dispose of surplus jewellery from the estates of deceased knights was to put up valuables as prizes in public lotteries.

Lotteries in Malta

In 1652 Grand Master Lascaris contemplated gloomily (but then, nothing around him ever strayed far from abysmal gloom) an accumulation of gold rings "in the old fashion", diamonds, emeralds and other items of jewellery, eight-pointed crosses, clocks, watches and similar valuables stored in the *Conservatoria*, with little hope of ever disposing of them profitably, as time had proved.

The Council instructed Fra Pompeo Rospigliosi and Fra François Pol de Beon Cassan to proceed to organise a public lottery with these objects as prizes. They had to proceed, the Council insisted, with such fair directives, sincerity and faithfulness as the matter demanded.⁴⁸

Actually, in Malta lotteries appear rather late, compared to elsewhere in Europe. The first example of a public lottery possibly goes back to Florence in 1530, the



ANTONIO DE PEREDA: *Allegory of Transience, with playing cards*

year the Order took over the islands. The year following the Great Siege, Queen Elizabeth had one to finance harbour repairs, and James I another to pay for the settlement of Virginia in the New World. "They were certainly an easy way of raising large quantities of money – though at the same time they were open to abuse on the part of the organizers".⁴⁹ Hence the sanctimonious instructions issued by Lascaris to the managers of the Maltese lottery.

Not everyone agreed as to the expediency of lotteries. The financial wizard John Law of Lawriston, in desperate demand all over Europe as the top economic virtuoso of all times, in 1710 talked Victor Amadeus of Savoy out of

introducing them in his kingdom. "Public lotteries are less bad than private ones, but they are injurious to the state. They do harm to the people, take the paltry sums they earn by their labour, make them dissatisfied with their lot and give them a desire to grow rich by gambling and luck. Servants lacking money are tempted to steal from their masters to obtain means to play in the lottery".⁵⁰

Bankrupting the Order

Law earned the friendship and trust of the knights of Malta. In 1720 he almost bankrupted the Order when his absolutely impregnable French investment scheme (pronounced scam) in which Grand



CHARLES FREDERICK BROCKTORFF: *Gambling in a Maltese Tavern, early 19th century*



MICHELE BELLANTI: *Maltese Boys Gambling (morra), late 19th century*

The Order – 3



Master Zondadari lost 200,000 livres, collapsed.

The lottery notion seems to have caught on in Malta; only two years after the first one, the Council again decided *che si faccia un lotto per smaltire alcune cose di quelle che si trovano nella torre* (in the Palace, the strong room of the Order) e *Conservatoria*.⁵¹

As we have seen, much gambling went on in taverns and private homes; but were there official casinos for legal gaming at the time of the knights? Impenitent oldies like myself remember the graceful *Casa del Gioco* abutting on St James Cavalier, with a marble inscription on the façade, built in 1735 and demolished during the reconstruction of Kingsgate in the 1960s.

Contrary to popular belief, it was not a gambling house at all. The tenant held the exclusivity for bowling games on the bastions between the post of Italy and that of France.⁵² Bowling, however, received a mortal blow when the new fashionable game of billiards took the island by storm in the 1740s.

Casino in Valletta

I believe that Valletta housed an 'official' gambling casino at the time of the knights, though evidence of it proves quite elusive. A building in the main street, opposite (diagonally) the Auberge d'Auvergne (today the Law Courts

occupy this site) was called the *Forfantone*. References to the *Forfantone* abound, but what its function was, has been difficult to trace. I am now sure it served as an aristocratic club for the knights, where card playing and gambling could go on discreetly.

This results from an entry in 1726 relating to two shops under this building: *sotto la casa del gioco in fronte alla Veneranda Lingua d'Alvernia*.⁵³ And this is further confirmed by the first petition of the card manufacturers Inferrera and Crisafulli in 1699 in which they assert that most of their production of playing-cards was purchased by the *Forfantone*.⁵⁴

So far no evidence has emerged in Malta about other more barbarous forms of gambling and betting – cock combats and bull fights, hound or horse racing, bear baiting or gory boxing for wagers. That hardly means gamblers in Malta did not indulge in primitive pastimes, but only that no records have yet turned up.

The contests of *Mnarja* are recorded since the early 1500s⁵⁵ and "horse races, performed without either saddle, bridle, whip or spur" says Frans Ciappara "were the most popular sport. It was held on special occasions, like the birth of the French king's son, but it was also organised regularly during the year, on St John's, St Roque's and at *Mnarja*".⁵⁶ No betting is, howev-



MARQUETRY top of 17th century chest of drawers, inlaid with ivory playing cards

er, known associated with these races.

Witchcraft against gambling

And, to close, a gambling happening which shows how relentlessly the luck of the game, witchcraft and divination could mesh. It was the year 1607 (with Caravaggio present in Malta) and Fra Antoine Ghion hovered glumly on the bleaker side of despair. The more he played Fra La Lea (Fra Martin Larrea?) the more he lost. When 900 scudi in the red, he reckoned Satan prowled behind La Lea's run of inexhaustible, one-way fortune.

In such dire circumstances, only one person could really help: the architect Vittorio Cassar, son of the renowned Girolamo, in Malta magic consultant in chief. Ghion pleaded earnestly with him, and Fra Vittorio agreed to use his secret powers to reverse the trend. He met Ghion in the house of Lucretia the Greek (probably Amelis) next to the

Carmelite church (many Greek more-or-less ladies lived there).

As usual, Cassar worked through young virgin girls whose fingernails he smeared with his secret oil and across whose palms he wrote unintelligible scrawls in ink. The nine-year-old girl then recounted seeing a person richly dressed, a crown on his head, leading a group of people. The apparition confirmed that La Lea won at gambling with the aid of diabolical arts, as he carried a dark spirit imprisoned uncomfortably in a ring he wore on the little finger of his right hand.⁵⁷

Gambling has, through the ages, left an indelible imprint on the Maltese language. Metaphors, idioms and turn of phrases relating

to games of cards and gambling, abound. *Il-karti* or *il-mazz f'idejh*, *kixef il-karti*, *il-karti fuq il-mejda*, *waqa' l-ass*; or phrases relating to gaming: *il-loghob gidmu*, or *nefahlu*, *ghandu il-loghob* or *min hu bil-loghob*? Or that point to wagering: *bl-imhatra bejniethom* and the proverb *l-imhatra ta' Gahan dejjem rebbieha* (the stupid always win) or *ghamlu lotterija* (he publicised someone's failings).

Not to forget that delightful word *čippitatu*, the spinning top with numbered sides used in gambling instead of dice. A corruption of Latin (maybe mediated through Sicilian) *accipere totum*: winner takes all.

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Notes and references

38. AIM Crim. Vol. 20A, Case 97, ff. 390-390v.
39. Wettinger, *op. cit.*, p. 543.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 478.
41. Cagliola, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
42. Blondy, *op. cit.*, pp. 82, 98.
43. AOM 223, f. 35.
44. *Ibid.*
45. AOM 309.
46. AOM 1611, ff. 102-142.
47. AOM 1761, f. 189.
48. AOM 259, f. 35v.
49. Derek Parker, *Casanova*, Sutton,

2002, p. 101.

50. Janet Gleeson, *Millionaire*, Simon & Schuster, 1999, p. 45.

51. AOM 259, f. 89.

52. Victor F. Denaro, *The Houses of Valletta*, Malta, 1967, p. 120.

53. AOM 649, f. 60.

54. NAM, *Gran Corte Castellania*, Vol. 1, ff. 14v-15v.

55. Fiorini, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

56. Frans Ciappara, *Society and the Inquisition*, Malta, 2001, p. 28.

57. Carmel Cassar, *Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition in Malta*, Malta, 1996, p. 78.



LAUBIN BAUGIN: *The Five Senses*, with playing cards



JACQUES LINARD: *The Five Senses*, with playing cards and dice, 1638

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