

Gambling in Malt

The first of a three-part series
by GIOVANNI BONELLO

IT WAS the year 1670 and the rulers of Malta just could not stop wracking their brains how best to make their subjects happier. Till they hit on a novel idea: why not a tax on playing-cards? The Order, says its historian with ne'er a trace of tongue-in-cheek, was always committed to show itself a *clementissima Madre dei suoi Sudditi*, and, to prove it, the Grand Master slapped a tax on "things less than necessary for human beings" – such as tobacco, spirits, coffee, playing-cards and leather goods. In the list of luxuries considered remarkable for their superfluous Grand Master Nicholas Cottoner included soap.¹ Sorry, anything more futile than soap?

The spin doctors of the 17th century originally marketed these benevolent levies as temporary measures for financing a run of new fortifications. But then the good citizens must have grown tenaciously fond of them, and, in time, many turned indefinitely provisional.² Most of them are still with us today.

In Malta, evidence of gambling, games of chance, lotteries, betting, dice and other amusements in which risk and luck play a greater part than skill, goes back quite some time. In 1478 the authorities prohibited the game of *rullu* or *rucellu* in Lija, and the following year in Mosta and its outskirts.

Mdina proved less repressive. In 1477 the town council, one solitary member dissenting, decided gaming not to be a punishable offence according to customary law. The only spoilsport to vote against, Notary Pietro Caxaro, then trudged home, had a couple of other illegitimate kids and wrote his lugubrious *Cantilena*.³

Gambling by priests

The Church too, looked down severely on gambling by the clergy and clerics.

During the interminable dispute for the bishopric of Malta that stretched from 1530 till 1539, Canon Luca Bartali acted as Vicar-General. In 1535 he issued a circular that contained four tedious injunctions targeted against all ecclesiastics.

Firstly, not to eat or drink in taverns and other *locis dishonestis*; nor to gamble with playing-cards, or play games of dice or of chance (*nec ludet ad cartas et aleas vel azardos*); to officiate routinely their allotted functions by day and night; and, perhaps the most tiresome, to live chastely and continently, dismissing from their homes by the end of the current month all female lodgers, those suspected of cohabitation and any concubine (*ut mandent canones sive contubernia suspectarum feminarum seu concubinarum*). Perhaps the very first explicit mention of playing-cards in Malta.⁴

When Mgr Pietro Dusina, in 1575, homed in on this island to effect his thorough apostolic scrutiny of the diocese of Malta, the parish priest of Naxxar, Don Giuliano Borgia, reported Luqa Camilleri, an engaging reprobate. One – though hardly his sole – failing: gambling.

Camilleri had reneged on the Christian faith (probably in captivity) but then, sort of, limped back to the fold. All the same he frequented neither church nor sacraments, except when threatened with excommunication. "*È homo di mala fama, giocatore, biastimatore, et lho sentito biastemare San Luca* (his patron saint) *et è mala fama universale che non sia christiano lui per le sue male opere*".⁵

Verdalle accused of gambling

Domenico Haxixa ran a tavern at Luqa. One day early in 1600, after sunset, three men, including the officer of



MATTIA PRETI: Tavern scene, with gambling and self-portrait

the Inquisition in charge of the village, raided his tavern. Some customers still lagged behind, diligently playing cards. Haxixa, obviously alarmed at losing his licence, ordered the gamblers to stop, calling them endearing names. A brawl broke out and Haxixa using a knife, wounded one of the players in the arm.⁶

Gambling, however, hardly identified exclusively with the frailer end of the social scale. It seems to have been rampant with the knights too; nor did it spare Grand Masters, either. Rome received a damning secret (though not anonymous) report from Malta that Grand Master Cardinal Verdalle (1582-1595) indulged in scandalous gambling at cards – besides breaking the laws of fasting and abstinence, not receiving Communion on feast days and treating holy relics with some callousness.

Leading knights, the sneaks recounted, deserted Mass, vespers and processions to play cards and gamble with the Grand Master at the Palace – losing substantial sums in the bargain.

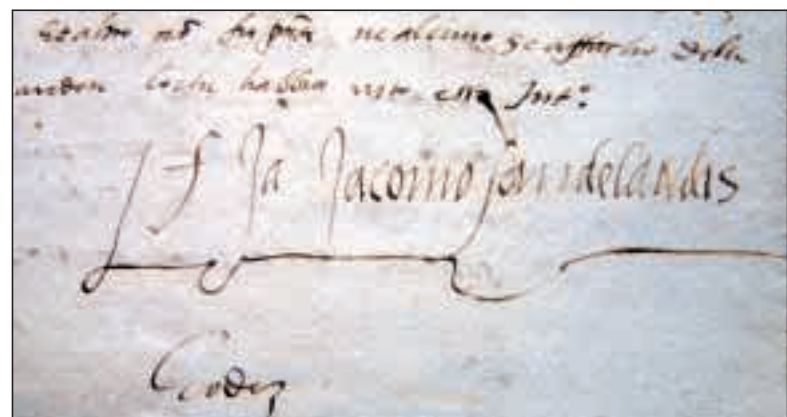
Verdalle parried with dignity and some pathos too. He suffered terribly from gout, he said truthfully, and, on the advice of his physician, took his mind off the wrenching pains by some innocent games of cards – and this outside office hours. He played only behind closed doors in his private quarters. He had never once touched dice, let alone gambled with any.

He picked his playing partners exclusively among upright knights, and never could one mention an instance of "scandal, blasphemy, loud laughter or dishonest greed". And not once had he played on religious feasts or during the hours of church services. He branded the less than veracious charges against him as not even becoming of the most barbarous infidel in the world.⁷

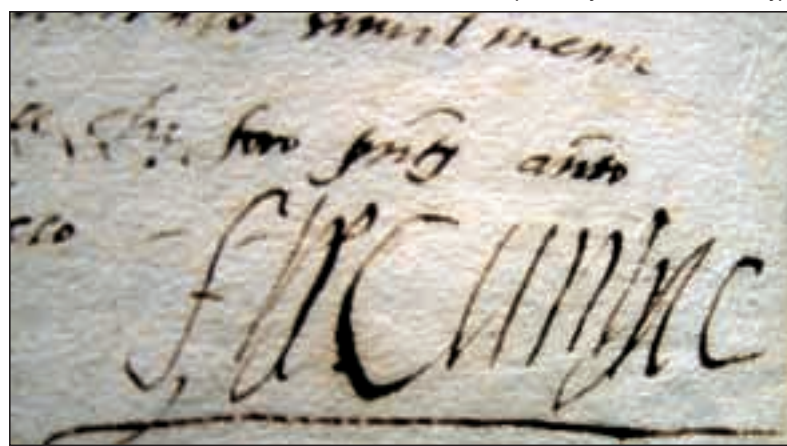
Duels over gambling

A wounding on November 22, 1558, had as a backdrop clandestine gambling in the house of the Prior of St Gilles, Fra François de Puget. Betting on *tre sette* had gone on till two in the morning, and would have gone on later, had not an altercation spoil the fun.

Exceptionally, few files of the criminal investigations and trials of the early period of the Order have survived – as distinct from the all-too-concise minutes of the trials by the Council, which are still preserved virtually complete. As one of the very few *processi* still existing in its entirety relates to this mighty brawl following an all night gambling spree, I believe it useful to transcribe the goings-on in some detail.



SIGNATURE of Fra John James Sandelands at the end of his evidence in the trial for a duel following a night of gambling. Sandelands was later executed for another offence. (Courtesy the National Library)



SIGNATURE of fra Elias Cungac in the same trial (Courtesy the National Library)

Sir John James Sandelands, a Scotsman, partnered the knight Humiliers in various games of *tre sette*, against the knights De Terzenale and Vengenilha, known as *Floiria*. At some point Sandelands played, or was about to play, the six of clubs (*sei bastoni*); this dismayed his partner Humiliers – definitely the wrong card to play. Sandelands, who had already "raised" the wretched card, hesitated, as if to rethink, but Terzenale insisted the card had been played and there was no going back. An argument ensued, with Terzenale refusing to go on with the game. Sandelands got up in a huff, grabbed his mantle and left for home.

Blasphemy in English

Terzenale too walked away with Fra Elias Cungac (or Cognac), Commander del Granier, and a servant. Arriving in front of the house of Don Pedro de Mendoza, the two groups crossed and

Sandelands taunted Terzenale: had he meant to insult him?

Terzenale denied, Cungac lost his composure and showed it by punching Sandelands in the head. The Scotsman retaliated by hitting back and slicing a *pontilla* from the ear of Cungac, who then hit Sandelands (obviously with a sword, though not mentioned in the evidence) ripping Sandelands' jacket, lining and sleeve, while Sandelands defended himself. The fracas lasted until Terzenale and the servant pulled them apart. That, at least, according to Sandelands' evidence.

Cungac volunteered a slightly different version. He agreed the argument started about a card that had been *scoperta* and whether it had been played or not. Sandelands never stopped swearing *corpo di dio*. In the street they crossed Sandelands again, who, amid more blasphemy, accused Terzenale of outraging his honour. Cungac, seeing Sandelands' uncontrollable wrath, invited him to leave. But the Scotsman,



PUBLIC TORTURE of a gambler and smoker

a under the Order



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

intensifying the flow of swearwords, put a hand to his sword. They hit each other until Terzenale somehow dragged them apart.⁸

The records do not specify what language Sandelands chose for his swearing extravaganza, though very likely he resorted to English. The oath *corpo di dio* is virtually unknown in Italian, while ‘God’s body’ (or ‘s body’) stood high on the top ten list of swearwords in England, even if, curiously, first documented only in 1601, in Ben Jonson’s play *The Poetaster*.⁹ Sandelands banded it about in Malta over 40 years earlier.

The Council took note of the findings and condemned both Sandelands and Cungac.¹⁰ Those bouts of *tre sette* cost them pretty dearly. Cungac spent three months in the tower and Sandelands locked up under house arrest during the Grand Master’s pleasure. Sadly, within a few years at least two of the hotheads suffered violent death: Puget in the Great Siege of 1565 and Sandelands strangled and drowned in execution of a court sentence for theft with sacrilege.

Defrocked for gambling

Sometime later, Inquisitor Leonetto della Corbara investigated an old *commendatore*, Fra Francesco Lanfreducci, for blasphemy. Fra Gregorio Fortuni confessed that in 1595 Lanfreducci had turned his home into a gambling den, in which endemic swearing embellished bouts of cards and dice.¹¹

One solitary moralist among the knights wrote a hopeful handbook for aspiring members of the Order. He warned them what diversions to expect in Malta: scandal-mongering, gambling and duelling.¹² Shortly later, Ovide Doublet, Grand Master de Rohan’s personal secretary, shared comparable scepticism: “What do these young men do during the caravans (the compulsory naval training expeditions on the Order’s ships) but fritter their time in the squares and cafes, playing billiard or gambling, chasing prostitutes with whom to squander their health and their money?”¹³

A prohibition promulgated in 1587 by the Council of the Order, shrouded in ambiguous terms, refers to games – but leaves open whether it targets games of chance or physical sports: “No member of the Order, of whatever rank or condition, should dare to play (*giocare*) in the *corpo di guardia* (main guard) or in other public places, under penalty of expulsion.”¹⁴

If this ban did not target gambling, subsequent ones surely did. On January

21, 1754, Grand Master Pinto issued a blanket prohibition against gambling, with hefty penalties for those tempted to defy the ban. Knights would suffer defrocking and prison; laymen and foreigners, less privileged, faced flogging and exile.¹⁵

Women compulsive gamblers

Pinto’s first sally against gambling does not seem to have achieved anything like its mission statement. Fourteen years later, considering “that the habit of gambling is daily on the increase” Pinto again prohibited all forms of wagering for money, in private or in public. And what an impressive array of deterrents he fortified the ban with! Men faced three years’ exile, women the same term caged in one of the female *conservatori*. Converts served three years rowing in the galleys, and I wonder who was better off. Unsentimentally, the Treasury appropriated all the stakes. The law however left some discretion with the judge



CARAVAGGIO: *The Card Sharps*

whether to commute exile into massive fines.

Anyone who in any way aided or abetted gambling (and mere presence at the game amounted to that) became an accomplice, unless he revealed all he knew to the authorities. The law rewarded outside informers with a prize of 25 scudi, payable from the estate of the gambler or the accomplice. Pinto only countenanced one exception: betting for small sums on games of skill (not of chance) like *palle*, *pallone*, *bigliardo e maglio* – to a maximum of two scudi for each session.¹⁶

How effective Pinto’s outright ban on gambling turned out to be can be seen from a knight’s description of a typical Maltese bourgeois household. Writing in 1764, he comments: “Frequently and

especially upon feast days, several families gather together in one home for an assembly which they name *sentuta*. On entering the room you would be aware of a great silence, and see four or six gaming tables surrounded by both men and women, only a few of whom take any notice of a knight’s entry or departure, holding the Maltese in greater esteem.”¹⁷

That women could turn into compulsive gamblers is also documented elsewhere. At the beginning of his rule Grand Master de Rohan had to admonish formally some Maltese ladies as their substantial losses in gambling and in games ‘of commerce’ had come to his notice.¹⁸

The austere Grand Master Ximenes had to cope somehow with the gambling

endemic in Malta. Sadly he came to acknowledge that the boisterous carnival festivities encouraged gaming – huge losses in the 1775 carnival from the popular game of *la pariglia*. He had already given strict orders to the General of the vessels to enforce discipline and prohibit gambling on board. In despair at the futility of his exhortations and threats against gambling, *ayant su qu’on jouait aussi de jeux de hazard a la Ville*, he made it clear that if these clandestine gambling parties ended in disorder or complaints, the culprits would incur the fullness of his wrath.¹⁹

(To be continued)

Notes and references

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VALENTIN DE BOULOGNE: *Cheating at Cards*