

GEORGE DE LA TOUR: *The Card Sharp*VALENTIN DE BOULOGNE: *The Card Sharps*

Gambling in Malta

The second of a three-part series
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GAMBLING cut right through all the social levels: "It held an important place not only in the life of the nobility ... but also in that of merchants. Any subject was a pretext for a wager, the number of cardinals to be promoted, the death or survival of famous men, the sex of unborn children".²⁰

Gambling varied depending on the class and condition of the players; distinct patterns emerge for knights, slaves, corsairs, ordinary townsfolk and seamen. A glance at some would be rewarding.

Take gambling on corsair ships, where boredom constituted a more urgent problem than risk. "Gambling appears to have been the major occupation of the Maltese corsair".²¹ Whether at cards or dice, the author adds, gambling is a constant theme in almost every court case which left descriptions of life aboard ship. From the captain to the cabin boy, there seem to have been few corsairs who bothered to resist the temptation to add to their earnings from the *corso* some trifle won on the turn of a card in the card school that would almost certainly develop on some part of the ship.²²

A 1660 court case following a corsair expedition from Malta neatly illustrates this. With the ship about to sail, the *agozzino* (in charge of discipline over rowers) somehow stocked his cabin with an ample supply of tobacco leaves, a barrel of aquavit and many packs of playing cards. During the voyage the *agozzino*, together with Publio Pullicino and the quartermaster, did little but peddle tobacco and brandy; with the playing-cards they earned a great deal of money.

The game of *zecchinetta*

The three entrepreneurs retailed the packs of playing cards to the others, not neglecting to impound commissions on the winnings too. More and more of the same revolving gambling fund ended in the *agozzino*'s pocket. A crew member, Salvo Borg from Siggiewi, lamented in evidence "the game of cards...

lasted about two months continuously, but afterwards the crew began to lack money and did not play every day, but every now and then." When the Maltese ship crossed another on the high seas, the crew invited the others to join the game – Maltese vessels had become "the most renowned card school in the Levant."²³

What games of chance were played on board Maltese corsair ships? One authority gives an impressive list: *zecchinetta*, *cartella*, *quaranta*, *primiera*, *tre sette*, *scoperta* (*scopetta*?), *maniglia* and *paria* (*pariglia*?). One of the most popular, the *zecchinetta*, "a vicious game" banned in Italy, traces its name to the Landsknechts (*Lanzichenecchi*), the horrid German mercenaries of Charles V, who in 1527 sacked Rome; they introduced this pleasant amusement to Italy, in between a gang rape and a pillage.

Zecchinetta owed its popularity to the idiot-proof simplicity of its rules, guaranteed to seduce anyone certifiably brain-dead. The banker states what he is betting, and any player can offer to match the sum. The banker then deals a card to himself and one to his opponent. He then continues dealing one card to himself, one to the other player. The first to receive a card of the same value as the first card dealt, wins.²⁴

The corsair captain Aloisio Gamarra faced charges of obsessive gambling on his own ship; "he never lost a chance... of going on board other vessels continuously to play cards, eat and drink". So unrelenting had his addiction become, it led to ill-treatment of his men. "He kept the crew of his skiff alongside the vessel for days and nights at a time in the cold, making them suffer through hunger, while he was playing cards and drinking."²⁵

In court over a wager

Later, in 1742, another Maltese pirate found himself facing charges of compulsive gambling. It all began with a silly wager. Giovanni Rossi, pilot of a corsair ship, bet its captain, Francesco di Natale, that he (the

DUTCH PAINTER: *The Card Game*, 17th century

captain) would already be gambling *di resto* before his ship cleared Malta. Francesco took up the wager: if he started playing before leaving harbour, he owed Rossi two overcoats worth 80 scudi each; if not, Rossi lost and would forfeit in Natale's favour a coat worth as much.

Rossi claims he won the wager, as Di Natale had rushed to gamble before his ship cleared port. He sued for the two coats. Francesco defended himself, denying the wager. Come on, he scoffed, as if Rossi ever had a coat worth anything like 80 scudi! Rossi sighed sadly – he previously counted as a man of substance, and had even worn coats *del beuf*, worth 125 scudi. The court wasted plenty of precious time to define what gaming *di resto* actually implied. Apparently it referred to betting for cash, as opposed to friendly wagers for small prizes, like a round of drinks, called games *di passatempo*.²⁶

Alonso de Contreras, one of the better known corsairs who operated from Malta, admits to compulsive gambling from early youth. Just before he took refuge in Malta at the end of the 16th century, his pauper mother had fitted him out with new clothes and gave him four *reales* and her blessing. The very first day on his own he lost – money, clothes, everything.

"I found a toffee seller with some playing cards. Like a hardened gambler (he must have been all of 15 by then) I unlaced my shirt, brought out my four *reales* from the pocket inside and challenged him to a game."

Throwing dice overboard

Almost invariably Contreras proves as frank about his defeats as about his success. "Soon I lost my four *reales*, and after that I lost my new shirt. Then, with a run of ill luck, I lost the new shoes I had kept safely tucked in my belt. I asked the

merchant if he wanted to play me for my old hood, and in a moment he had that too. There I was, destitute, which is what I suppose I wanted to be."

Then a human touch. "A man standing nearby, who had been watching the game, asked the merchant to give me a *real*. The merchant good-humouredly did so, and gave me a stick of toffee for luck. I was so delighted that I felt as though I were the winner after all".²⁷

On one of Contreras's early corsairing expeditions from Malta, a plentiful booty rewarded the pirates, and the guileless captain resolved that all the crew would return to Malta loaded with money. "Until we reach Malta," he decreed, "there is to be no gambling aboard". And to make certain that we kept our money to ourselves, he ordered us to throw all our playing cards and dice overboard, and published severe penalties for anyone he caught gaming."²⁸

An extraordinary find in Dockyard Creek, Grand Harbour, recently confirmed how frequently seamen threw dice overboard to prevent detection of illegal gambling. An archaeological sampling of the bottom, in anticipation of a new yacht marina, yielded an impressive number of finds – 1,083 in a relatively small test area. The divers also retrieved 38 antique gambling dice, mostly bone, but a few carved in stone.

The team similarly recovered animal bones in the process of being shaped and cut into gambling cubes. These do-it-yourself dice constitute "a relatively important archaeological discovery, in itself physical evidence confirming the presence of widespread gambling amongst seafarers".²⁹

Betting with lice

The strict precautions ordered by Contreras's captain to prevent gambling elbowed out of the equation the addict's determination to surmount all obstacles. Deprived of cards and dice, Contreras and his friends honed their ingenuity to contrive a – literally lousy – game of chance.

"We drew a circle about the size of the palm of your hand on a table

PIETRO LONGHI (1702-1756): *Gambling in a Club*

under the Order – 2

and in the centre we drew a circle the size of a silver dollar. Then every player put in the little circle the louse of his choice and bet heavily on it. Each player would follow his own louse carefully, and the first louse to get outside the larger circle, won all. And I swear that there was often as much as 80 gold *zecchini* in the pool."

Lice remained very central to Maltese life till the introduction of DDT. A part of Grand Harbour, *Porto Pidocchio*, took its name from this endearing bug. The captain, concludes Contreras "caught us at this, but he realised that, whatever new order he gave, he had no hope of stopping gambling. The vice was too deeply engrained in soldiers".³⁰

A very cursory look at the legislation of the Order on gambling, both relating to knights and to ordinary citizens, appears to me to be in order. The Chapter General of 1661, held under Grand Master Rafael Cotoner, decreed penalties against any knight *tam impudens et temerarius* to gamble away his weapons and clothes. He forfeited the arms in favour of the Common Treasury and lost one year's seniority. This, in effect, only repeated a 1552 enactment by Grand Master d'Homedes punishing knights who gambled away their weapons "by games of chance or similar games".³¹

Winner cannot sue

The Chapter General also renewed its ban (*non si possa giuocare a giochi proibiti a religiosi*) on board the Order's ships.³²

These enactments referred to knights. Grand Master Vilhena in his *Leggi e Costituzioni* of 1724 targeted the citizenry. A first prohibition hit inn- and tavern-keepers: they were to prevent on their premises any gambling by means of playing cards, dice or other *giochi di ventura*, even if the stakes were only items of food or drink. The dire penalties also applied to anyone who played, assisted or was merely present. If the culprit was unable to come up with the fine, he "paid with his person" by rowing in the galleys. Vilhena prohibited games of fortune, and also of *parata* with excessive stakes (defined as two scudi in



ANTIQUE DICE and bones being carved into dice found at the bottom of Dockyard Creek, Grand Harbour (courtesy of Mr Timmy Gambin)

every session) held in public, with an absolute ban on the playing of *bassetta* and *zlicchinetta* (*zecchinetta*) under a penalty of three years' rowing on the galleys.³³

The *Codice Gerosolimitano*, which periodically repeated and updated the internal laws of the Order, went through another edition in 1782. It reiterated the ban by Grand Master Raymond Berengarius (1365-1374) against any gambling and wagering under a penalty of six months' detention in the castle for the first offence, increased to one year's *guva* (dungeon) and five years in the castle for the third. Those who placed their homes at the disposal of gamblers "and are therefore the promoters of vice" and those who hold the bank, could look forward to a double penalty.

That applied to *giochi di resto* (pure chance). For *giochi di commercio* (where an element of skill prevailed), the sums staked had to be moderate, under similarly heavy penalties in default. The *Codice* here repeated the fundamental rule, still present in today's civil code: no legal action lies in favour of the winner for the recovery of sums won at gambling.³⁴

Gambling among slaves

The *Codice Municipale*, published two years after the *Codice Gerosolimitano*, prohibited all public and

private gaming, with the exception of pall-mall, football, billiards or mallet and similar games *di pasatempo*, provided the sums wagered in the permitted games remained very moderate (*tenui*).³⁵

As widespread as betting reigned among corsairs who normally had access to considerable supplies in cash, so it was with slaves, whose reserves of coin could be extremely meagre.

One hundred years after the Great Siege, a slave of Don Pasquale d'Amico testified, after a mass escape of slaves from Malta, that "on the night preceding the flight of the slaves... I was at the prison (of the slaves) from three to four in the afternoon, during which time I played backgammon (*tavola reale*) with the slave named Rimeyli of the *Galera Capitana*. Then, as I said, towards four I left and the said Rimeyli, having won eight tari from me, went on his own affairs. I returned home to serve my master."

The slave Saverio Bingemma's conversion to Christianity had little effect on his addiction to gambling. On a Sunday in 1713 he lost at cards virtually everything he had in the public gambling house situated just outside the slaves' prison in Valletta. In despair he regressed to his roots: he implored the Muslim saint Sidi bin Habbes Septi to improve his luck.



SIGNS of infamy hung round the neck of gamblers and smokers

Lo and behold, his fortune did change dramatically and by the end his balance sheet showed considerable gains. To celebrate his windfall he purchased five rotoli of figs. He distributed these among the new slaves from Algiers, refusing to share any with the Christians. Wasn't it a Muslim saint who had performed the grace, after all? Bingemma also gave some coins to the keeper of the mosque to light a lamp in honour of Sidi bin Habbes Septi.

The Inquisitor, learning of such disgraceful behaviour by a Christian convert, looked suitably appalled.³⁶ And Bingemma predictably denied everything. "In all my life I have never gambled at any other game (of chance) except that sometimes I go to the tavern to drink a little wine."³⁷ (To be concluded)

Notes and references

20. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, Collins, 1972, p. 439.
21. Peter Earle, *Corsairs of Malta and Barbary*, London, 1970, p. 186.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 211.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
27. *The Adventures of Captain Alonso de Contreras*, trans. Philip Dallas, Paragon, 1989, p. 5.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 23-24.
29. Timmy Gambin, "A window on history from the seabed" in *Treasures of Malta*, Christmas 2003, No. 28, Vol. X, No. 1, p. 76.
30. Contreras, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
31. AOM 88, f. 107v.
32. *Ordinazioni 1661*, Borgonovo, 1674, pp. 147, 179.
33. *Leggi e Costituzioni*, Malta, 1724, pp. 133-134.
34. *Codice Gerosolimitano*, Malta, 1782, p. 403.
35. *Codice Municipale*, Malta, 1784, p. 189.
36. Godfrey Wettinger, *Slavery in the Islands of Malta and Gozo*, 2002, p. 550-551.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 480.