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## Relations between France and Malta in the Early Modern period

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# **The Presidency Culture Symposia Series**

**MALTA AND FRANCE  
SHARED HISTORIES, NEW VISIONS**

**Friday, 7th May 2021**

**AN EVENT ORGANISED BY THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT  
AND THE EMBASSY OF FRANCE IN MALTA**

**RELATIONS BETWEEN FRANCE AND MALTA IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD**  
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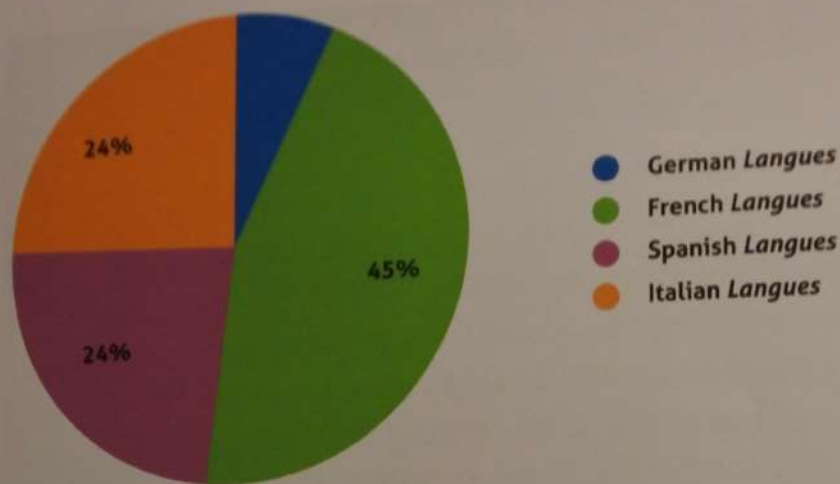
Before the 16th century, Malta was largely outside the Mediterranean trade and shipping routes of the Middle Ages (Bresc: 2004, 127-128) and had virtually no relations with the Kingdom of France. The installation of the Hospitallers in Malta in 1530 created new links between Malta and France, thanks to the important role played by the French *Langués* and the French Knights, whose number continued to grow in the Order and in the Convent from the end of the 16th century onwards. Maritime trade was first used by the Hospitallers for the exclusive supply of their Convent, and thus contributed to gradually link France to Malta through its main Mediterranean port, Marseilles. The opening up of the island to corsairing, trade in goods and the redemption of slaves subsequently strengthened the links between France and Malta: many merchants, corsairs and sailors established themselves on the island and contributed to the development and influence of the Maltese Grand Harbour in the Western Mediterranean. Consular and diplomatic relations through the Order of Malta, led by several French Grand Masters in that period, completed the weaving of a solid and lasting relations between the island and France.

***The key role of the Order of St John***

Relations between France and Malta were mainly due to the presence of the Order of St John. From the beginning, the Order of the Hospitallers of St John of Jerusalem, recognised by the Pope in 1113, was endowed with landed property, called commanderies (Josserand: 2009, 245-246). These commanderies corresponded to the smallest - but rich nonetheless - territorial unit, and were composed of properties consisting of churches, land, woods, vineyards, farms, villages, and several immovable goods (Luttrell, Pressouyre: 2002). Then, at the beginning of the 14th century, the Hospitallers inherited almost all the Templars' property in Europe (except on the Iberian Peninsula), and by the beginning of the Early Modern period, they owned around 700 commanderies grouped in several priories (Sire: 1993, 112-113, 137-138, 158-159, 190-191; Fontenay: 1998, 379). During the Early Modern period, after the English *Langué* was suppressed in 1540 by King Henry VIII, and after the loss of several German commanderies due to the Lutheran Reformation,<sup>1</sup> the three French *Langués* had the largest number of commanderies, with a total of 254 commanderies compared to 135 commanderies in the Spanish *Langués*, 135 in the Italian *Langué*, and only 40 in the German *Langué*. French *Langués* thus represented 45% of the total land of the Order of Malta between the 16th and 18th centuries (Sire: 1993, 112-113).

<sup>1</sup> In February 1560, the French Grand Master Jean de La Valette complained to the Pope about the loss of several German commanderies (AOM 428, f. 259v-262r, 19th February 1560).





Graph 1: Proportion of commanderies by Langues

The Commander, who was responsible for the commandery, deducted from the total income the sums necessary for his personal maintenance and that of the staff of the commandery, and sent the surplus (*responsions*) to his superior, the prior. The *responsions* were used to finance the activities of the Convent and to support war against the Muslims. They were paid in goods or in money, and they were the vital link between the back, that fed the Convent, and the front located overseas, first in the Holy Land, then in Rhodes (1309-1522) and finally in Malta (1530-1798) (Josserand: 2009: 94; 2021, 683-703). In the Middle Ages, the *responsions* usually used to represent a third of the income of the commanderies in the Military Orders (Riley-Smith: 1967, 344-346; 2021: 187-201), but this was not always the case, and Alan Forey has estimated that the Templar *responsions* could have amounted to only one tenth (Forey: 1973, 323).

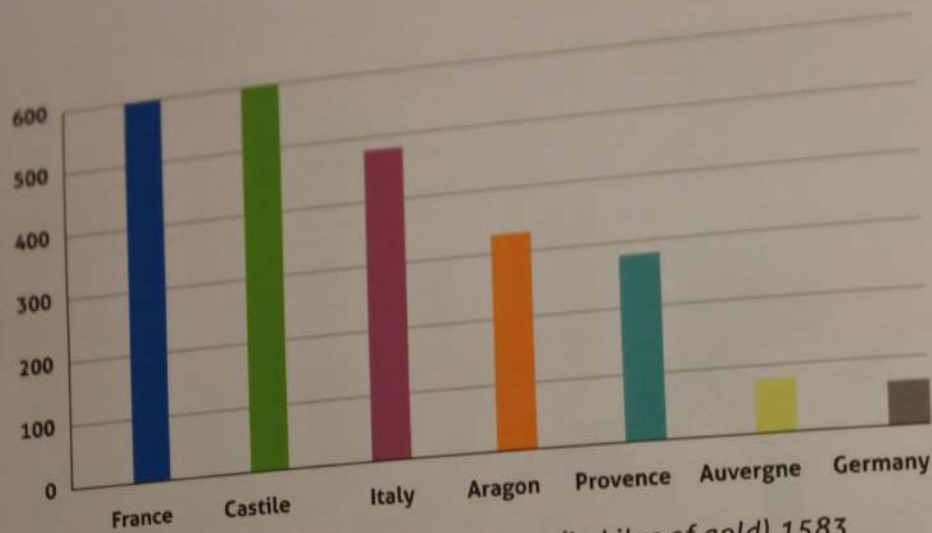
Regarding the Hospitallers, in 1543 the General Chapter fixed the amount of the *responsions* at one third of the revenues of each commanderie, estimated ten years earlier (Brogini: 2006, 78). They were shipped by land to a few European ports. As of the end of the 15th century, knights could become collectors (*Receveurs*) and were in charge of resupplying the Convent with the help of merchants living in these ports: London for the English *Langue* (until it was suppressed in 1540<sup>2</sup> (Freller: 2001, 14); Marseilles for the French *Langues*;<sup>3</sup> Palermo, Messina, Naples, and Venice for the Italian *Langues*;<sup>4</sup> Palamós, Barcelona, Majorca, and Cartagena for the two Spanish *Langues*;<sup>5</sup> Marseilles and Italian ports could also export German *responsions*.

<sup>2</sup> Archives of the Order of Malta [AOM] 415, f.229v, 5th March 1532.

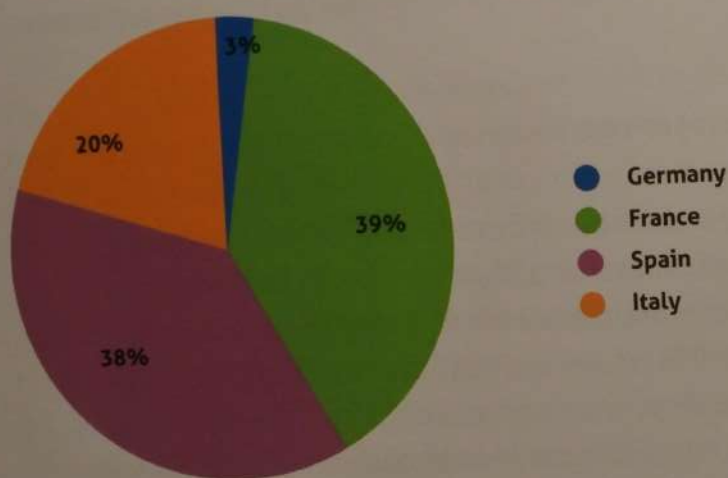
<sup>3</sup> The *Libri Bullarum* give many examples: AOM 415, f.232v, 6th August 1532; AOM 420, f.203r, 28th April 1546; AOM 423, f.207r, 25th January 1552; AOM 428, f.278v, 10th January 1561; AOM 434, f.255v-256r, 15th February 1573; AOM 459, f.322v, 17th May 1616.

<sup>4</sup> AOM 416, f.190v-191r, 22nd December 1534 (Messina); AOM 416, f.193r, 23rd March 1535 (Naples); AOM 419, f.222v-223r, 1 August 1544 (Palermo); AOM 422, f.205v, 26th February 1550 (Venice).

<sup>5</sup> AOM 417, f.277v-278r, 28th September 1540 (Palamós); AOM 421, f.205r, 11th December 1547 (Barcelona); AOM 427, f.260r., décembre 1558 (Cartagena); AOM 433, f.262v, 6th June 1571 (Barcelona); AOM 435, f.267v-268r, 13th January 1575 (Majorca); AOM 446, f.220r-220v, 27th July 1592 (Barcelona); AOM 459, f.322v., 17 mai 1616 (Cartagena).

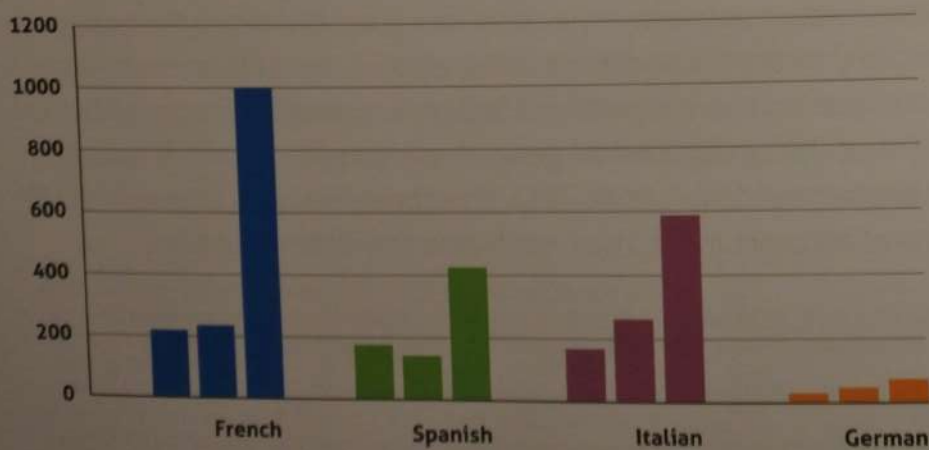


Graph 2a: The income of the seven Langues (in kilos of gold) 1583



Graph 2b: The proportion of the financial income of the seven Langues (1583)

Marseilles was also the principal port of embarkation for all young Frenchmen who were leaving for Malta to become Hospitallers (knights, sergeants, or chaplains). In Graph 3 we observe that the French Hospitallers became more and more numerous in the Order and in the Convent of Malta: their number multiplied fivefold in less than 50 years (1590-1630).



Source: Balbi de Correggio: 1567; Fontenay: 2005 (28).

Graph 3: The evolution of the number of Hospitallers by Langues (1565, 1590, and 1630)



On average, knights represented 70% of Hospitallers for each of the three reference years. The Order of Malta thus attracted many French nobles during the 16th-18th centuries, many more than Italian or Spanish nobles. This was partly due to the lack of competition in France with other Military Orders than that of Malta. In Italy or Spain, young nobles could be admitted to "national" Orders, such as the Order of Santo Stephano (in Tuscany) or the numerous Iberian Orders (Santiago, Alcantara, Avis, Cristo, Montesa) (Brogini: 2017, 30-33). The numerous annual trips of young French knights thus further strengthened the links between Malta and France, always via the Mediterranean port of Marseilles.

### **Malta and Provence: a new partnership**

The supply of the Convent gradually developed into a regular trade between Malta and Provence, especially with the most important port of Provence, Marseilles. At the beginning, relations only concerned the transport of the Order's goods, such as military goods or products for shipbuilding (Williams: 2010, 155). For example, in 1577, Marseilles exported several blocks of stone coal and six bags of logs; in 1583, three galley masts and four antenna trees; in 1589, seven tree trunks and 11 galley antennas; and ten pieces of canvas in 1589.<sup>6</sup> Marseilles exported fabrics (canvas, serge, ship sails, cotton threads) which were useful to the Convent as well as to the island market; these fabrics came from the commanderies or from Provençal productions. Thus, in 1588, Malta received 43 bales of serge from the Priory of Saint-Gilles, as well as 79 bales of serge and 283 pieces of fabric produced by Marseillais companies.<sup>7</sup> All these fabrics were used for the clothing of the Hospitallers and their slaves as well as for the inhabitants of Malta. In 1603, 11 bales of canvas were used to make clothes for convicts while 15 bales of cotton were used for knights' clothing and for ship sails.<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of the 17th century, Marseilles had become an important commercial partner for the Order and for the island: it was the most frequented non-Sicilian port by Hospitallers and Maltese merchants. On 20th June 1602, the Hospitallers created the responsibility of consul of the French "nation" in Malta. The first consul was Mathieu Bonin, from Marseilles, who became a citizen of Malta and lived in Valletta.<sup>9</sup> The second and third French consuls were also from Marseilles: Pierre Drouin was appointed in 1622 and Mathieu Savina in 1660.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the other French consuls, the ones in Malta were appointed by the Grand Master of the Order and had fewer powers than their counterparts. They had to keep track of ships entering Malta, receive reports from ship captains, and supervise the disembarkation of passengers and crews. But they had no diplomatic or police role and were accountable to a more important man, the "King's Man" (Labat Saint-Vincent: 2003, 110-113).

<sup>6</sup> AOM 437, f.261r, 25th November 1577; AOM 440, f.265v, 11th January 1583; AOM 445, f.278v, 8th November 1589.

<sup>7</sup> AOM 443, f.138r, 15th March 1588; AOM 444, f.262r, 15th December 1588.

<sup>8</sup> AOM 454, f.279r, 31st January 1603.

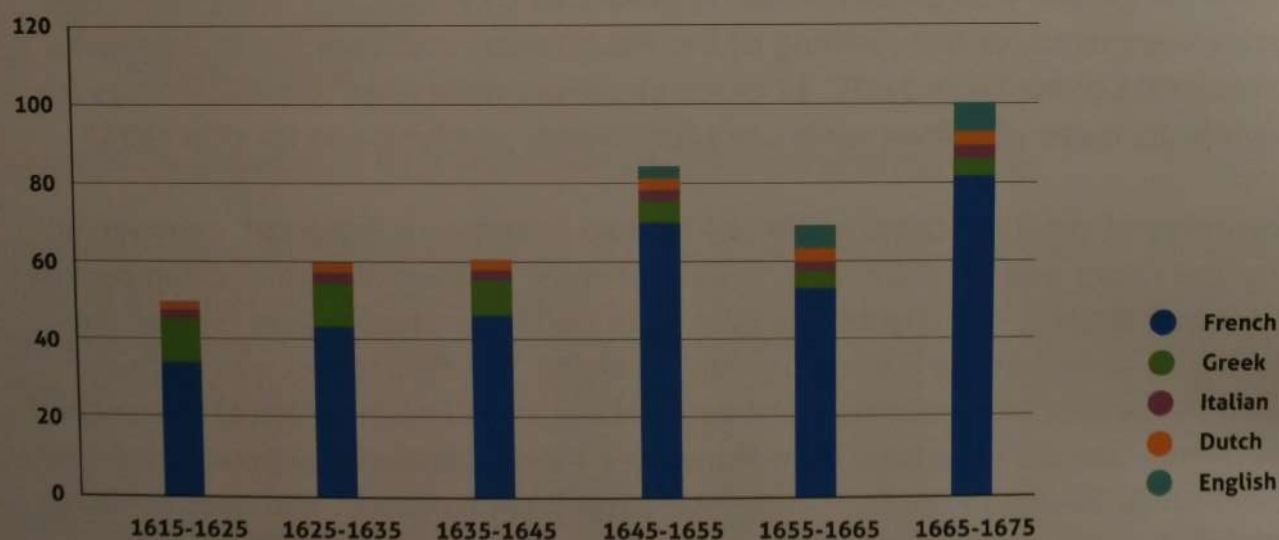
<sup>9</sup> AOM 454, f.263r, 20th June 1602.

<sup>10</sup> AOM 461, f.286r, 30th September 1622; AOM 477, f.210r, 10th June 1660.

Indeed, during the 17th century, the Order created this new trade responsibility: the "King's Man" (*Homme du Roi*) was a Knight who had an economic and a diplomatic role and was more important than the Consul. Finally, in 1744 the charge of "Agent of the Chamber of Commerce of Marseille" (*Agent de la Chambre de Commerce de Marseille*) was created, replacing the consul, because there no longer was a French consul from 1733, but who always remained less important than the King's Man (Labat Saint-Vincent: 2003, 115-120). Through these three economic and diplomatic responsibilities, the island of Malta gradually became a privileged stopover for merchants from Marseilles and Provence, on their way to the Levant to trade in luxury goods, and to Barbary to trade in coral, leather, and wax (Billioud, Collier: 1954, 275-279).

	1615-1625	1625-1635	1635-1645	1645-1655	1655-1665	1665-1675	TOTAL
<b>French</b>	33	44	47	69	52	81	<b>326</b>
<b>Greek</b>	13	12	10	8	5	5	<b>53</b>
<b>Italian</b>	2	2	2	2	2	2	<b>12</b>
<b>Dutch</b>	2	2	2	3	3	3	<b>15</b>
<b>English</b>	-	-	-	3	7	9	<b>19</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	50	60	61	85	69	100	<b>425</b>

Tab. 1: Ships calling at Malta (1615-1675) <sup>11</sup>



Graph 4: The increase in the number of Provençal and Marseillais ships calling at Malta

<sup>11</sup> AOM 465 to AOM 484, *passim*.



Between 1615 and 1675, 425 Christian ships stopped in Malta. The ships from Marseilles made 326 stops (76.7% of the total) (Brogini: 2006, 583-584). To increase frequentation, in 1640 the French Consul in Malta obtained a privilege for merchants from Marseilles from the Knights: from then on, they could freely anchor in Malta to trade or to stock up on food and fresh water on the way to the Muslim shore.<sup>12</sup> This privilege was renewed in 1641 and it established Marseilles' supremacy in Malta and the role of the island as a relay in Provençal commercial networks in the Mediterranean (Brogini: 2016, 158). In addition to this privilege, in 1643<sup>13</sup> the Maltese lazaretto was opened, built on the islet of Marsamxett: very quickly, Marseilles' ships started using the lazaretto as a commercial and health stopover. Indeed, the Maltese lazaretto was less expensive than that of Marseilles and the lazaretto in Marseilles was often congested from the end of the 17th century onwards (Labat Saint-Vincent: 2003, 334). French merchants therefore preferred to call at Malta on the way back from Barbarian or Levantine ports.

Graph 4 shows very clearly the increase in the number of French ships in Malta after the strategic dates of 1640-1643, linked to the maritime privilege offered to the merchants of Marseilles and to the opening of the Maltese lazaretto. After 1645, all French stopovers were above 80 per decade, except during the decade 1655-1665 which coincided with the main Maltese corsair activities related to the War of Candia (1645-1669).

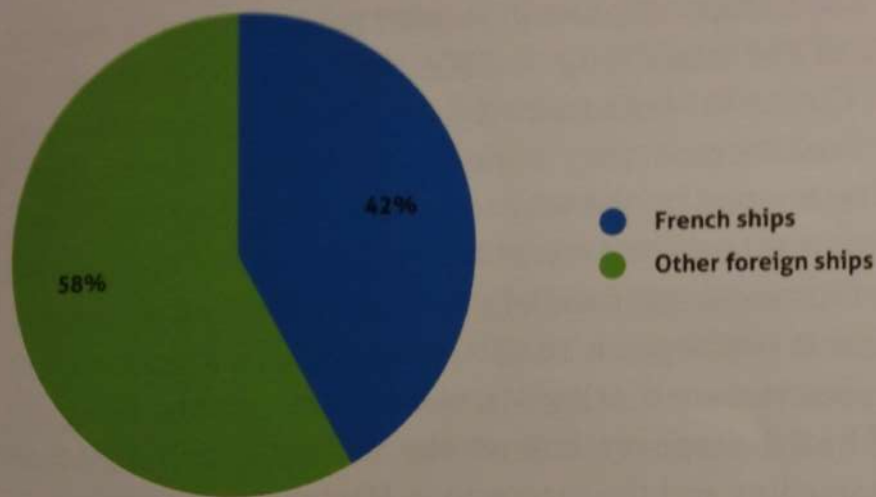
Finally in 1723, Grand Master Vilhena published a « Custom Pragmatic » which further strengthened relations between France and Malta. The taxes on imported goods (which were initially 6.3%) were lowered to 1% for goods which were sold or re-exported within a year in Malta. This new privilege immediately led to an increase in the number of French ships coming to Malta where they stored goods from the Levant (cotton, silk, linen, leather) or from North Africa (grain, dates, figs, olive oil), as well as goods from Europe (wood, wool sheets, weapons, irons, manufactured goods) (Labat Saint-Vincent: 2006, 100-106). During the second half of the 18th century, Malta was one of the major wheat supply areas for Marseilles (Provence itself, Levant, North Africa, Northern Europe, Spain, Italy, and Malta) (Romano: 1956, 63-65, 132). Of course, Malta did not produce wheat itself: the cargoes therefore came from corsairing booties or the transit of wheat cargoes from Northern Europe, or North Africa and the Levant (Debono: 2000, 84-85). Consequently, a sharp increase in French ships occurred from 1723 to 1798: the *Registri degli arrive*<sup>14</sup> count 13,731 ships, of which 5,708 were French (Labat Saint-Vincent: 2003, 127). Forty-two per cent of foreign ships were French in the 18th century (Debono: 2000, 75) and almost half of Malta's foreign trade was therefore dominated by French merchants, especially those from Marseilles.

<sup>12</sup> AOM 257 (*Libri Concilliorum Status*), f. 52v, 26th May 1640.

<sup>13</sup> AOM 257, f. 71v, 18th February 1641.

<sup>14</sup> National Library of Malta [NLM], LIBR 818 I/II, 1763-1798.





Graph 5: Proportion of French ships coming to Malta (1723-1798)

### **French people in the Maltese Grand Harbour**

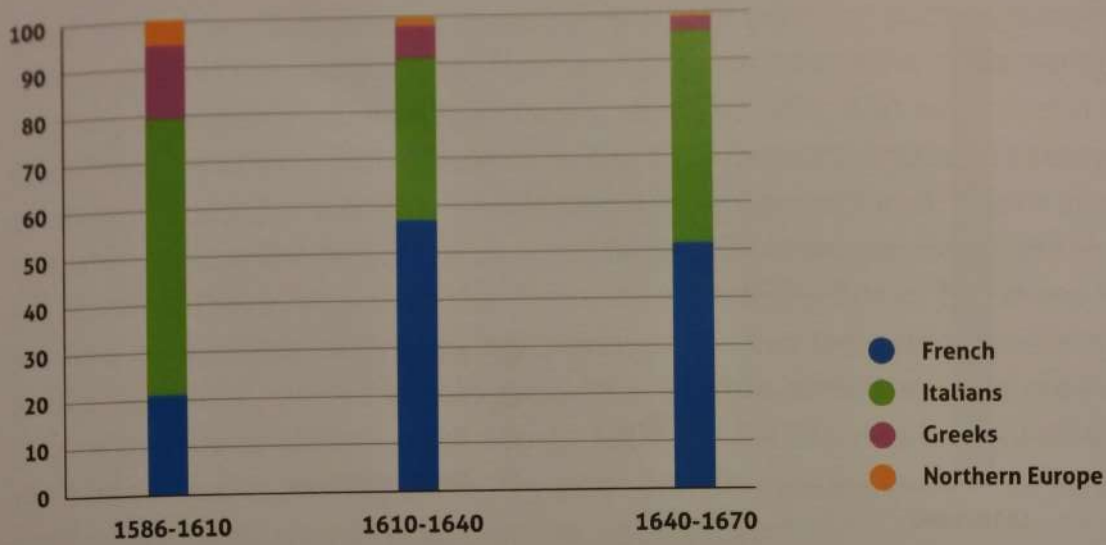
These very close and strong links between Malta and France explained why many French people established themselves and lived in the Grand Harbour area during the Early Modern Period, and especially from the 17th century onwards. Composed of four little towns (Valletta and the Three Cities: Vittoriosa, Senglea, Bormla), the Grand Harbour had a population of 18,000 inhabitants at the beginning of the 17th century and about 22,000 in 1687 (Fiorini: 1993, 304). It is difficult to have a precise count of foreigners, but we can observe the increase of French people through the number of marriages between Maltese women and foreigners (Mercieca: 2010, 166). Certainly, with inhabitants hailing from Marseilles and Provence, French was the most important Catholic nationality in the Maltese Harbour. They represented 20.2% of all foreign weddings at the end of the 16th century,<sup>15</sup> and this proportion reached 39.1% in the years 1610-1640,<sup>16</sup> and 41.3% during the second half of the 17th century.<sup>17</sup> I was able to estimate that the number of French people in the port was 3,000 (Brogini: 2006, 631-632), of which 96% were from Marseilles and some small cities in Provence (Six-Fours, Saint-Tropez, Cassis, Toulon).<sup>18</sup> As was often the case in Mediterranean ports, a large part of these men from the south of France were working in maritime activities as merchants and corsairs, and, for a large part of them, as galley rowers, sailors, fishermen. A few of them were shopkeepers or were unemployed.

<sup>15</sup> Archives of the Cathedral of Mdina [ACM], Archiva Paræcialia [AP], Valletta, Parish of Porto Salvo, Libri Matrimoniorum, Vol. I, II, III, IV [Microfilms 3868, 3869, 3870, 3871]; Parish of St Paul, Libri Matrimoniorum, Vol. I, II, III [Microfilms 1163, 1164, 1165]; Vittoriosa, Liber I Baptizatorum, matrimoniorum, mortuorumque ab anno 1558 usque ad annum 1626 [Microfilm 1152]; Liber II Matrimoniorum (1653-1678) [Microfilm 1154]; Cospicua, Liber I Baptizatorum, matrimoniorum, confirmatorum et mortuorum (1585-1652) [Microfilm 4756]; Liber II Matrimoniorum (1653-1678) [Microfilm 4767]; Liber Matrimoniorum, Volume I (1587-1715) [Microfilm 4652]. At the end of the 16th century, I counted 132 French marriages to Maltese women out of 659 foreign marriages.

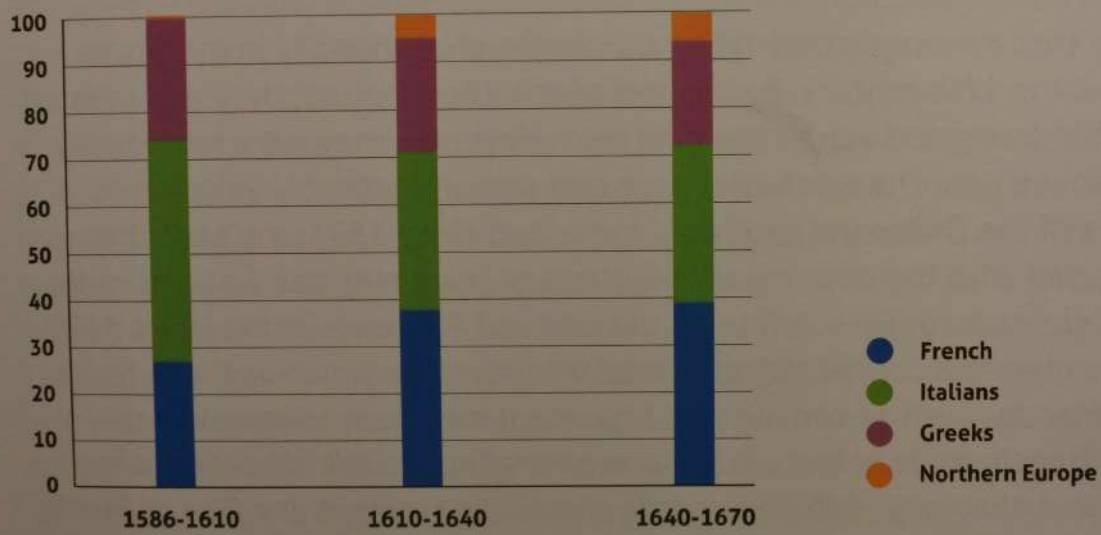
<sup>16</sup> ACM, AP, Libri Matrimoniorum Valletta, Vittoriosa, Senglea, Bormla (689 French marriages out of 1,762 foreign marriages).

<sup>17</sup> ACM, AP, Libri Matrimoniorum Valletta, Vittoriosa, Senglea, Bormla (1,028 French marriages out of 2,486 foreign marriages).

<sup>18</sup> 1,849 marriages out of a total of 1,927 French marriages to Maltese women.



Graph 6: The evolution of foreign marriages in Valletta (1586-1670)

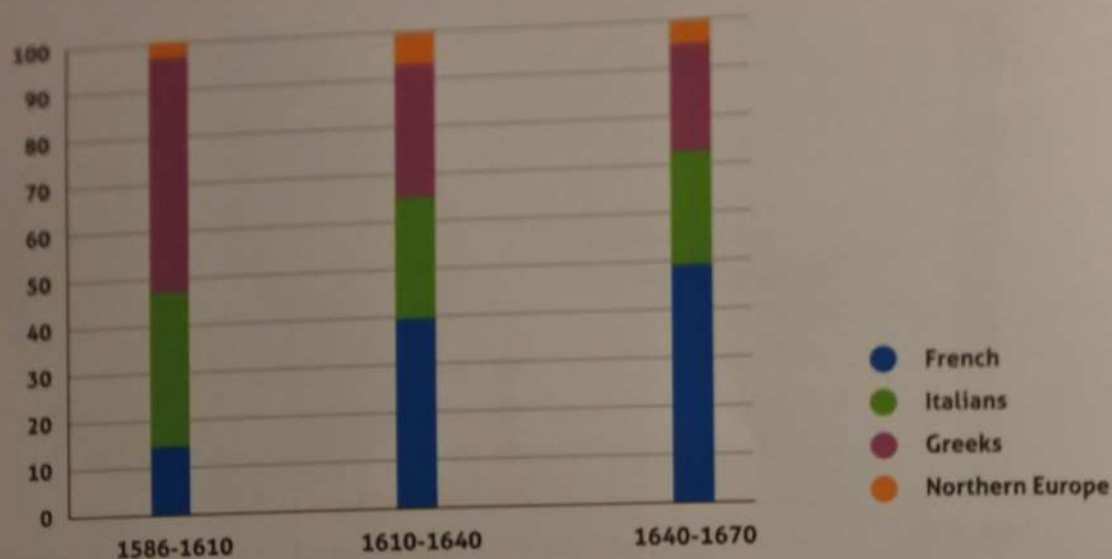


Graph 7: The evolution of foreign marriages in Vittoriosa (1575-1670)



Graph 8: The evolution of foreign marriages in Senglea (1575-1670)

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Graph 9: The evolution of foreign marriages in Bormla (1587-1670)

These graphs show that the proportion of French people grew steadily in the Grand Harbour throughout the 17th century. By the end of the 17th century, they represented more than half of the foreigners across the port area. However, they were not equally distributed in the four cities. The most attractive city was undoubtedly Valletta, seat of the Convent of the Order and capital of the island since 1571; the end of its construction coincided with the opening of the island to corsairing and trade as well as with the arrival of droves of French from Marseilles and Provence in the years 1590-1610. Valletta's prestige as a capital city attracted wealthy Frenchmen or those higher up in the social hierarchy, such as consuls and important merchants. Moreover, the presence of many French noble knights in Valletta strengthened the attraction of the city to the French and encouraged them to settle there. For example, the Olivier family, who first settled in Senglea, helped their son establish himself in Valletta in 1645 to be closer to political power and to develop their trade;<sup>19</sup> the Isnard, who traded with North Africa and the Levant, also lived in Valletta;<sup>20</sup> the Meysonat married their daughters to merchants from Marseilles to strengthen the networks between this port and Malta,<sup>21</sup> while their sons were involved in big business or in other activities (such as supplying medicine to the Hospitallers) designed to consolidate their social position.<sup>22</sup> In the 18th century, French became the official language of the Order, instead of Italian, and French was spoken quite fluently in Valletta as well as understood even by the Maltese people.

The towns of Vittoriosa and Senglea, which had developed simultaneously since the middle of the 16th century, were less populated by the French (about 40-45%) because

<sup>19</sup> ACM, AP Valetta, Porto Salvo, Lib. Mat. II, f.168r, 28th September 1645.

<sup>20</sup> AOM 465, f.297r, 20th July 1635; AOM 468A, f.235r, 26th May 1637; AOM 473, f.247v, 8th June 1650.

<sup>21</sup> ACM, AP La Valette, Porto-Salvo, Lib. Mat. II, f.52r, 30th January 1655.

<sup>22</sup> ACM, AP La Valette, Porto-Salvo, Lib. Mat. II, f.52r, 14th August 1655. Pietro Meysonat was a doctor at the Sacra Infermeria of the Order.

<sup>23</sup> Notarial Archives of Valletta [NAV], R 286/3, Gio Luca Gauci, f.463r, 7th December 1593; NAV, R 867/6, Tommaso Gauci, f.229r, 17th February 1605.



other foreigners had settled there by mid-16th century, such as Italians and Greeks, who remained very important. The two cities attracted the same categories of quite wealthy foreigners, such as merchants, ship captains, and intermediaries of slave trade. Despite competition from Valletta in the 17th century, Vittoriosa retained a certain prestige because it was the former seat of the Convent and, above all, because it was the town where the Inquisitor resided from 1574 onwards. Some great merchants were established there, including the first consul Mathieu Bonin, but many French families worked in maritime activities less prestigious than the great maritime trade (corsairs, soldiers, sailors, arsenal employees, etc.). Bormla, which was the most working-class city of the Grand Harbour (Fontenay: 1994, 104-105), was largely disdained by French merchants and more populated by poor French people, such as sailors, fishermen, small craftsmen, small shopkeepers, or the unemployed.

Throughout the Early Modern period, Malta and France became indeed very close partners. This was primarily due to the Hospitallers, but also to the openness and attraction of Malta as a strategic island in the heart of the Mediterranean. For three centuries, Malta served as a base for the development of the port of Marseilles, and the French contributed, both as knights and as individuals, to the development of Malta. During the 18th century, the strength of the economic, diplomatic, and cultural relations between France and Malta, together with the fact that Malta had become such a strategic point in the Mediterranean, enticed Bonaparte to conquer the island after the departure of the Hospitallers in 1798. Although the French lost Malta to the British in 1800, Malta never really lost its links with France. In recent years, these past relations have been revived thanks to tourism, culture, and cruises. The thirst of French tourists for architectural and artistic heritage is now revitalising the links between Malta and France. Malta has, in fact, been one of the ten favorite tourist destinations of the French since 2016 (APST: 2016). On this island, an emerging stopover for cruises in the Western Mediterranean (Bernardie-Tahir: 2003, 112-124), the French can discover fabulous architectural and artistic heritage, which owes much to several French Grand Masters, knights, and as many anonymous Frenchmen who chose to establish themselves in Malta throughout the Early Modern period.

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