

MARRIAGE PROSPECTS IN EARLY MODERN MALTA: THE INTEGRATION OF VENETIAN SUBJECTS IN AN ALIEN COUNTRY

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The present study intends to analyse the marriage prospects of Venetian migrants in Malta during the epoch of the Hospitaller Knights. The main source for the study is the *Status Liberi* documents. These documents are linked to the fact that each and every foreigner intending to marry in Malta was asked by the local Church authorities to undergo a court procedure where he/she had to furnish proofs of his/her free status. This meant that the individual had to provide confirmation that he/she was not married, or else prove that he/she was a widower or widow. It was this procedure that earned these documents the Latin name *Status Liberi*. The *raison d'être* for this procedure was to avoid polygamous relationships, especially by seamen, whose job mobility and travels made it proverbially easier for them to have a woman in every port.

The Church's documents cover the period from the late 1580s to date. This study will focus on the time span 1580s to 1798: i.e., a substantial part of the Hospitaller rule over the Maltese islands. This was a time of great transformation. The Hospitaller's rule had changed the landscape of Malta both physically and socially. New cities were created and a new social class came into being – the bourgeoisie. In Venice, meanwhile, this was also a period of change. The Republic passed from a major Levantine trading enterprise, whose politics and economic policies were determined by seafaring, to a predominantly inward looking state, in which land became the most valid investment. The historical record brings to light parallels in the way both states experienced their decline. Both states met a similar destiny at the hands of the same general – Napoleon Bonaparte - and this happened in the same timeframe. Venice fell in 1797, whereas the Hospitallers surrendered to the French forces a year later. For both, the old status and former glories would never again be restored.

The documentation in question is not immune from bias. The late sixteenth-century *Status Liberi* have registration errors resulting from loss of documents. It was only after 1600 that these records started to be more assiduously kept, but registration flaws continued throughout the Early Modern period. There were years where no

cases were held, and in some instances only a handful of records have survived. Despite such errors in registration, no serious effect on the general calculations attempted in this study arose. The errors that could have affected the study were the coverage and causal errors, resulting from the systematic non-representation of people on the basis of ethnicity or religion and a few incidental oversights in the keeping of the records. The first type of error, that is the coverage error mainly impinged on the baptism and death registers, as Muslims and Jews risked not being recorded. This element of bias diminished in the marriage records, as only those professing Catholicism (the only exception were the Jews, but they were practically a non-existent community after 1492 in Malta) were allowed to marry in a Catholic realm.¹ In spite of the fact that the overwhelming majority of Venetians, including those coming from the colonies, were Catholics, they could not marry in Malta unless they obtained special permission. The situation arose from the fact that they would have lacked a stable residence in the hosting diocese. This meant that all the Venetians had to apply to the Curia for the herein mentioned marriage permissions. The resulting documents (*Status Liberi*) were preserved together, usually in the same building where court proceedings were taking place. The documents were normally organised according to year, without any systematic sorting on the basis of origins or profession. Thus, any loss in documentation could never have been restricted to one particular ethnicity, but only to a specific timeframe. Therefore, losses would have had a negligible influence on the analysis of the demographic trends of the Venetian community in Malta in relation to the patterns pertaining to other ethnic communities.

The second relevant aspect of this demographic analysis concerns the structure of these documents. The plaintiff was requested by the court to produce witnesses to attest on his behalf. In most cases, the witnesses were fellow countrymen who either knew the plaintiff back home or were fellow travellers. The summoning of witnesses conditioned the way the court procedures were held. Until the 1630s, the court did not ask the plaintiff to testify at all. Only the witnesses gave testimony. After 1630, it became customary for the plaintiff to appear also in person and his testimony was recorded in writing. Both plaintiffs and witnesses were expected to recount their life from the moment they left their homeland until they reached Malta, highlighting in their account their activities in foreign ports. The witnesses were also expected to tell the court how they came to know the plaintiff, who had asked them to appear in court, for how long they knew him/her, and, most importantly, to vouch for his/her single status. In case of the plaintiff being a widow or widower, the witnesses were expected to give information on the previous marriage and the

death of the spouse. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the witnesses were no longer considered as an essential requisite. In the case of widows and widowers, the death certificate of their partner was considered to be enough proof of their renewed single status. In the case of unmarried plaintiffs a sworn attestation issued on their behalf by the Curia of their hometown began to be considered sufficient for the granting of the necessary permission.

The next aspect concerns the type of information gathered by the ecclesiastical judges. The aforementioned procedure, whereby each plaintiff was asked to furnish details about his life history, yields on its own only limited information on the understanding of the human dynamics of any community. On the other hand, if all these accounts were to be analysed in quantitative terms, they would furnish some revealing insights into the life of a community. For instance, the ecclesiastical judges kept a record of the professions of most of the plaintiffs and witnesses, besides asking all the parties concerned to counter-sign their testimony. The latter offers one of the few instances where the level of literacy can be evaluated, as unlike some of the European countries, this information is lacking in the Maltese marriage registers, while no records on the educational level of the Maltese in general and the migrants in particular were kept throughout Early Modern Malta.

In an attempt to verify if there was any evolution in the migratory trends of the Venetian community, the study was divided into a number of periods. Between 1587 and 1796, 233 cases of Venetian plaintiffs were found, apart from a number of Venetian witnesses who, between 1641 and 1796, amounted to 231. If one considers the number of foreign plaintiffs in the *Status Liberi* as a mirror image of the migrational flow witnessed in Malta in Early Modern Times, this would mean that the Venetians constituted 3 per cent of the migrant community. A comparative study undertaken on different time cohorts shows no great variations from this general percentage. The period of study was divided in four time lags of fifty years each, and with the exception of the period 1600-1649, the Venetian community was always slightly higher than 3 per cent.

Table 1

The Percentage of Venetian plaintiffs relative to the total number of Foreigners seeking marriage in Malta

	Foreigners	Venetians	Percentage
1580-1599	98	3	3%
1600-1649	2305	62	2.6%
1650-1699	1308	43	3.2%
1700-1749	2337	83	3.5%
1750-1799	1011	39	3.8%
1580-1799	7059	230	3.2%

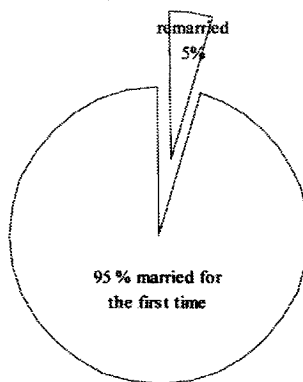
Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

1. S. Mercieca, 'Amicitia Extenditur ad Extraneos Marriage Law and the Concept of Citizenship (1563-1789)', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, Vol.10, Numbers 1 & 2, 2002, 151-71.

At this point, two important considerations can be made. Throughout the period of study, the overwhelming majority of the plaintiffs were single and males. This means that most of the grooms were marrying for the first time. Only 5 per cent of the males seeking marriage were already married at the time they settled in Malta. Far less were the cases of Venetian women seeking marriage in the Maltese islands. Only five cases were encountered or 2.17 per cent of all the cases studied. One of the brides came to the island with her brother² and this explains why she wanted to marry locally. Another was from Verona, and after the death of her husband, she went to live on the island of Mado where she married a Maltese, Giuseppe Muscat. A few years after the marriage, her husband brought her to Malta and after his death she sought permission to remarry.³ The second widow, Marietta, lost her husband after he fell into slavery during a corsairing expedition in the Levant. Her husband, Nicola was held in captivity in the slave bagna of Constantinople where he died around 1648.⁴ The rest were ex-female slaves who were transported at a very young age from the Levant to Istria by Venetian merchants, and after a stay in Istria of some years, they were bought by Maltese seafarers and transhipped to Malta.⁵

Graph 1

The percentage of the Venetian marrying for the first time and the Venetians who remarried



Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

2. C[uria] E[piscopalis] M[elitensis] A[cta] O[riginaria] 288B (1738) f.161.
3. CEM AO 768, (1742-3), f.197.
4. A[rchivum] A[rciepiscopalis] M[elitensis] *Status Liberi* Box 1649, case 57.
5. CEM AO 741 (1717) f.187; CEM AO 737 (1715) f. 125.

In his book, *Venice and Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798: Aspects of a Relationship*, V. Mallia-Milanes dealt extensively with the uneasy partnership that existed between these two Christian states. Being of the same faith, they might have been expected to forge a partnership in the face of a common enemy. But reality was different. Their diplomatic language was often hostile and expressed a mutual distrust between them. It was only after some decades from the end of the war of Candia that relations started to improve.⁶ The Knights' traditional policy, which dated back to the Middle Ages, was one of a privileged alliance with Genoa – Venice's perennial rival. Even their perception of the Ottoman Empire varied. For the Venetians, the infidel Turks represented a commercial partner, whereas the Knights regarded them as their eternal enemies. Thus, mutual distrust affected the Venetians' presence in Malta. The Hospitallers preferred to host Genoese migrants on the island. At least, they were a bigger ethnic community than that of the Venetians. It was only during the long war of Candia that the number of Venetians exceeded that of the Genoese.⁷

This affirmation was upheld by a separate study undertaken on the frequency of the 'Veneziano' and 'Genoese' surname in Malta. The sources for this study were the parish records: in particular the marriage, birth and death registers. The parameters of these documents are wider than those of the *Status Liberi* as the former represent a cross-sectional study of a community without necessarily taking into consideration the boundaries of kinship ties and the framework of marriage. Hence, though both documents deal with migrants, the results expressed different trends. The *Status Liberi* are mainly related to cases of single spouses. The study of proper names based on the perusal of the parish records, focused both on the marrying and the already married couples. The latter were established through the reconstitution of families from the baptismal and mortuary records, besides the perusal of the marriage acts.

The 3 per cent average mentioned above (from the *Status Liberi*) shows that practically all those seeking marriage were not being affected by the alterations in the Hospitallers' relationship with Venice. Thus during the entire period leading to the fall of Candia, 1648-1699, their average remained on the same footing as the one of the previous decades. This means that the increase in the registered Veneziano surname during the Cretian crisis was due to the arrival of already married Venetian couples in Malta from the Levant. These Venetian settlers belong to a bigger group of families escaping from the Turkish onslaught.⁸

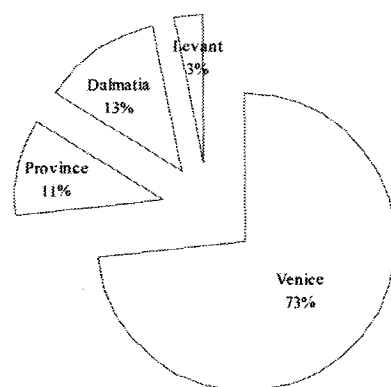
6. V. Mallia-Milanes, *Venice and Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798 Aspects of a Relationship*, Malta 1992.
7. S. Mercieca, *Community Life in the Central Mediterranean. A Socio-demographic Study of the Maltese Harbour Towns in Early Modern Times. Bormla 1587-1815*. (Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University Paris IV-Sorbonne), Academic year 2001-2002. Vol. 2, 571-572.
8. Ibid.

The study of the *Status Liberi* reveals against all expectations that 73 per cent of the Venetians came from the city of Venice itself. The geographical position of Malta, and the love and hate relations that the island held with the Levant throughout early modern times, would have, presupposedly, made it attractive to the Venetians living in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, this was not the case, at least with men holding a single status. A few were from the Levant (3 per cent), 11 per cent from the Venetian Terraferma and 13 per cent from Dalmatia. This shows that the Venetians living in the East were the least interested in marrying in Malta. Thus, this supplies another confirmation to the above explanation for the sharp increase in the Veneziano surname after 1648.

Graph 2 exemplifies the above mentioned facts and illustrates that the primary reason for migrants settling down in Malta was connected to a hectic port activity. In fact, after Venice, the highest percentages were from the Venetian territory of Dalmatia. Those coming from the Venetian hinterland, represented in the pie chart by the word *provinces*, featured less prominently. A further analysis has shown that the number of those coming from non coastal cities among this category was less. As has been demonstrated by E.G. Ravenstein,⁹ people living in port-cities were more likely to move and their natural inclination was to migrate to another port-city. At least, living in harbour towns made it considerably easier for them to be better informed on the environment of distant lands than those living in the hinterland.

Graph 2

The Hometowns of the Venetian Residents in Malta 1583-1799

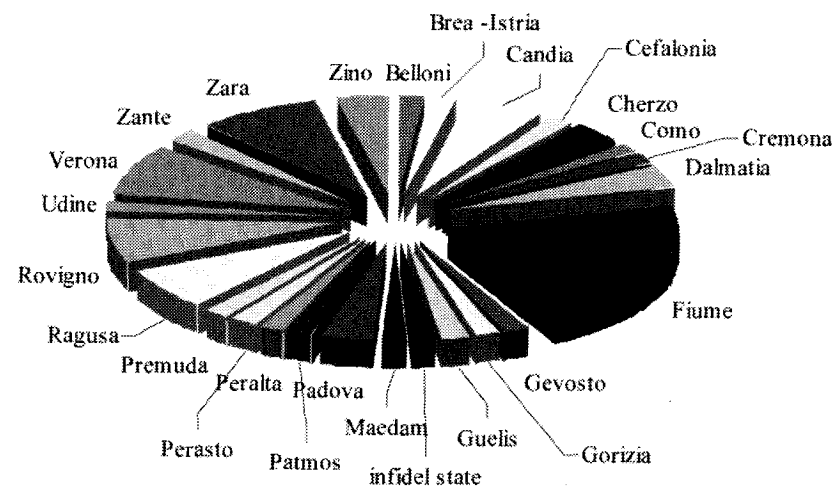
Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

9. E.G. Ravenstein, 'The Laws of Migration', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 48, 1885, 167-227.

Graph 3 presents in visual terms the name of the towns (the graph excludes Venice) from which the migrants were arriving. In fact, the focus was on those coming from the provinces of Dalmatia and the Levant. Fiume was the city after Venice to have the highest Venetian migrants in Malta. One here has to specify that Fiume is being taken into consideration even if it was not a Venetian city during the period of study, but the migrants coming from this city were either members of the strong Venetian community present in Fiume, or else held strong connections with the city of Venice. Most of the other cities whose name appears on Graph 3 only featured a few migrants and some recorded only one or two spouses over a period of two hundred years.

Graph 3

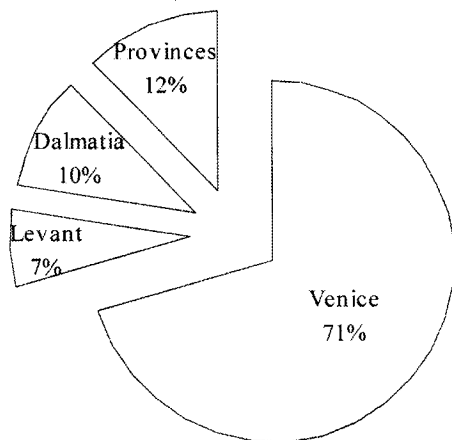
The Places of Origin of Malta's Venetian Community (excluding those coming from Venice)

Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

Similar trends were re-encountered in a separate analysis undertaken on the witnesses. Those arriving from the city of St. Mark represented the overwhelming majority. The only difference concerned the Venetians coming from the provinces. They were slightly more numerous than those hailing from Dalmatia.

Graph 4

The Provenance of the Witnesses



Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

Once in Malta, the natural choice of residence among all the migrants was the harbour towns. Only a minute fraction settled in the villages. Furthermore, it appears from the records that some of the witnesses, around 6 per cent, held no fixed residence in Malta. They declared as their abode the ship on which they were employed. Such a choice was by no means uncommon or peculiar to the Venetians. The choice of the harbour towns bears out the above results, where it has been established that most of the migrants hailed from port-cities. In other words, the migrants were choosing a place with similar characteristics to the one they knew back home. Yet, the choice of the harbour cities was determined also by other considerations. The Maltese cities offered a similar urban environment to the one of Venice. The neck of sea separating the town of Birgu from Senglea, with magnificent palaces on both sides of the quay, and the sight of boats making their way from one side to the other, was the nearest nostalgic resemblance that they could find to the Gran Canal. Moreover, the Maltese towns' environment also offered a mixed society as the one of Venice. In the cities, the homes of the poor were not segregated from those of the rich.¹⁰ They lived cheek by jowl, dominated by a strong community feeling which gave rise to rivalry between one quarter and another, between one parish and the next. This could have been an added reason

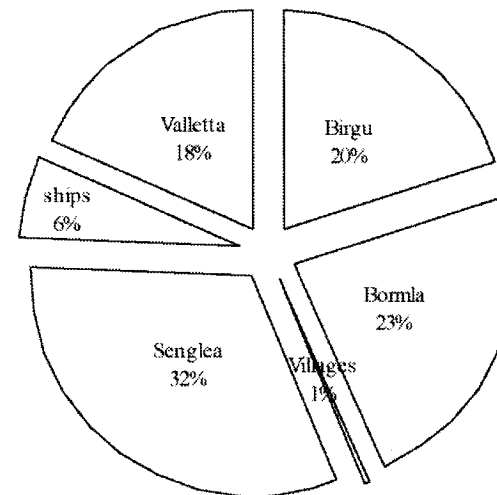
10. F. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic*, John Hopkins U.P., 1973, 11.

why the Venetians, despite the Hospitallers' hostility towards their Republic, still chose the local harbour towns as their new place of residence.

What is less clear is the majority's eventual decision to settle in one particular harbour town. The Maltese harbour area was dominated by Valletta, the capital city and the most densely populated place in Malta. Then, on the eastern flank, there were three towns, Bormla (the second most populated place in eighteenth-century Malta), Senglea and Birgu. The latter was the oldest of all, having roots going back to the Middle Ages, and for some time until Valletta was built, it served as the Hospitallers' principal town. One would have expected that Valletta, being the capital city, would have been the most popular with the Venetian migrants. However, Malta's capital city was the least preferred, as on top of the Venetians' preferences came Senglea, followed by the neighbouring town of Bormla, then Birgu and Valletta. Other migrants followed the same pattern. A study of the marriage registers of all the harbour parishes has demonstrated that the Flemish community, for example, between 1550-1650, preferred to settle in Senglea. This town was the most favourite abode with seafarers.¹¹

Graph 5

The Choice of Residence of the Venetians in Malta



Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

11. A. Schembri, *Senglea 1586-1744* (Unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Malta, October 1999) 116-120.

The Venetians migrating to Malta were rarely arriving directly from their home country. In many cases, their arrival followed upon other stages in accordance with an itinerary that took the migrants on a tour of many towns in Italy. It was only in the period 1690-1710 that cases were encountered of a direct voyage from Venice to Malta. Thus, except for the herein mentioned period, one can conclude that most of the Venetians had no preconceived ideas, before leaving Venice, of settling in Malta. Two even declared having been to America.¹² A popular itinerary among the migrants was first to travel overland to Leghorn,¹³ or Genoa¹⁴ and then to take a boat to Malta. In itself, this itinerary epitomizes the relationship of the Knights with Genoa. Others took a tour of the Mediterranean and then proceeded to Sicily and finally settled in Malta. Some went to Spain and others – indicated on graph 6 by the word *various* – were seasoned travellers in the Mediterranean, touching most of the region's harbours before settling here. Thus, the majority of the Venetian migrants visited at least another Italian location, in particular Sicily, Leghorn or Genoa, before settling in Malta. It was often in these places that they came into contact with Maltese boats and sailors, inculcating in them the desire to visit the island.

The second largest group was constituted by migrants who used to travel directly from the city of Venice to the Levant prior to their settlement in Malta. This itinerary partly explains their choice of settlement. The expeditions in the Levant on board Hospitallers' ships were the cause for adopting the island as their second home. For some, participation in sorties against the Muslims introduced them to Hospitaller galleys and Maltese corsairs, giving rise to friendships and an eventual settlement on the island. Others considered their coming to Malta as accidental. The story of Giovanni del Core represents a rare case of how a micro-history could lead to a possible international crisis. He was a slave condemned to the rowing bench of the Ottoman galley - *Corona Ottomana* - which was sailing the coasts of the Levant collecting tax money on behalf of the Ottoman Treasury. Del Core became the ringleader behind a revolt that involved the participation of a number of Maltese slaves who took control of the ship, and sailed to the Maltese harbour, incurring in the process the wrath of the Turkish Sultan, who threatened to invade Malta. The crisis was defused after the intervention of France, through whose mediation the Hospitallers accepted to give back the galley to the Porte after the former agreed to pay a hefty indemnity.¹⁵

12. CEM AO 316 (1761) f. 151r.

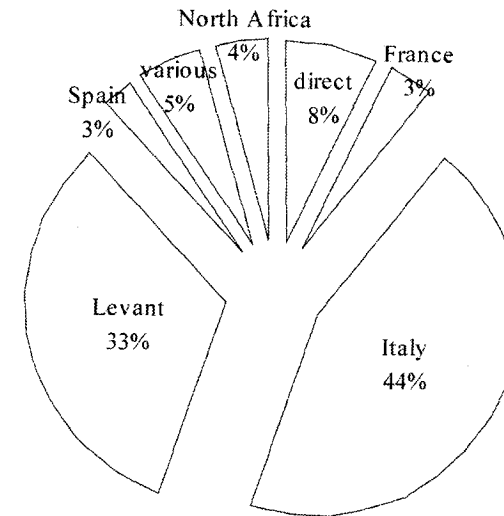
13. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1673-1677 case 61; CEM AO 720 (1705) f.101r, 103v; 104r-v; CEM AO 744 (1718) f.363r; CEM AO 745 (1718) f.106r; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1722 case 31; CEM AO 627 (1721) f.111r.

14. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1670 case 50; CEM AO 792 (1755) f.107r; CEM AO 338 (1781) f.90r.

15. C. Testa, *The Life and Times of Grand Master Pinto*, Malta 1989, 248-59.

Graph 6

The Countries visited before arriving in Malta



Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

The means of transport by which the Venetians came to Malta was not always indicated in the *Status Liberi*. However, when mentioned, it gives a general idea on the ships used in their sea passage to the island. Few were those who arrived on Venetian ships. Only three declared having used a Venetian boat and one disclosed its name - *La Felice*.¹⁶ Some declared having crossed on Maltese, Ragusan, Flemish, French, English or Spanish boats without mentioning the type of vessel employed in the voyage. When the technical names are used, they reflect the transformation in methods of navigation. In the seventeenth century, the name of *triremis*, *schiacca*,¹⁷ *vascello*,¹⁸ and *galere*¹⁹ were frequently mentioned in the court proceedings. In the eighteenth century, the crossing was undertaken on smaller boats,

16. CEM AO 732 (1713) f. 309r.

17. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1664 case 106.

18. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1657 case 45; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1670 case 50, case 48.

19. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1656, case 21; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1665-66, case 47, case 80; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1665, case 18.

in particular the *tartana*,²⁰ *pollacca*,²¹ *pincio*,²² *brigantino*²³ and *trabaccolo*.²⁴

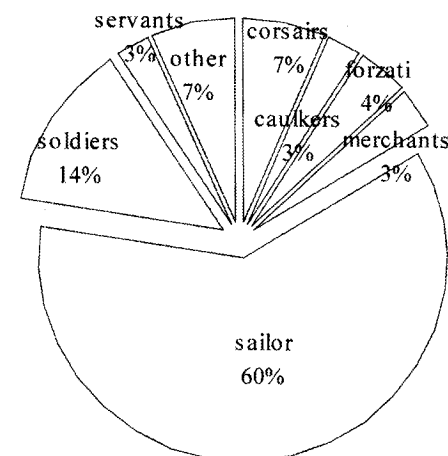
The arrival of Venetians in Malta was also conditioned by employment factors. In nearly all the cases in which both the witnesses and plaintiffs were asked to declare their work activity, the occupation was linked to the sea. The study of the professions took various aspects into consideration. The mutable character of employment duties affected the quality of the working assessment, as in the *Status Liberi* the profession was not always precisely indicated. On certain occasions, it was even completely omitted. Sometimes, the plaintiff only declared the profession held before coming to Malta, without giving any indication of his job after settling on the island. On the other hand, there were occasions when they gave a job description relative to their period of stay in Malta but omitted any reference to the work exercised back home.

The study on employment took a holistic approach to the declarations made on the profession by both the plaintiffs and the witnesses without distinguishing between what the described profession was before and after they came to Malta. A clear-cut trend emerges. The overwhelming majority had an employment linked to the sea. Sixty-five per cent declared that they were sailors, while only a handful of individuals, less than 2 per cent, had a job not related to the sea. Even when the job description was given as that of a soldier, in the majority of cases it involved army men employed on ships.²⁵ The majority of merchants were true seafarers as they toured the Mediterranean Sea with their merchandise. Out of the six cases analysed, only one held a sedentary trading occupation. He opened a wine cellar in Malta.²⁶ The job professions described under the title of *other* were also in their majority connected to the sea. One was a barber on ships.²⁷ The others were a ship captain,²⁸ a pharmacist working on a ship,²⁹ a drummer boy,³⁰ and a number of shipping clerks.³¹ The land-based occupations included a handful of servants,³² a tailor,³³ a tapestry maker,³⁴ a cooper³⁵ and a violinist.³⁶ The latter was Angelo Nani, who came to Malta in 1768. He became the founder of the Nani dynasty of musicians that was to dominate the local music scene up to the last century.

20. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1657 case 45; CEM AO 599 (1690) f.213; CEM AO 721 (1706) f.102v; CEM AO 722 (1707) f.391r; CEM AO 738 (1716) f.117, f.228; CEM AO 744 (1718), f.459; CEM AO 745 (1719) f.217r; CEM AO 622 (1718) f.189r; CEM AO 629 (1726) f.21r; CEM AO 959 (1736) f.33r; CEM AO 588 (1685) f.17r; CEM AO 288B (1738) f.161; CEM AO 748 (1721) f.227.
21. CEM AO 785 (1753) f.302r; CEM AO 802, (1761), f.31r; CEM AO 813 f.270r.
22. CEM AO 717 (1703) f. 233; CEM AO 782 (1751) f.73r; CEM AO 784 (1752), f.193r; CEM AO 788 (1754), f.398; CEM AO 982 (1754) f.35r; CEM AO 283 (1735) f.240; CEM AO 748 (1721) f.280.
23. CEM AO 768 (1742-3) f.176r.
24. CEM AO 954 (1730) f. 26r; CEM AO 1014 (1774) f.33r; CEM AO 276 (1729) f.49.
25. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1649 case 23; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1665-66 case 47; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1668 case 82; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1645 case 59; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1646 case 40, case 57, case 61, case 122; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1647-8, case 32; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1648 case 45; CEM AO 710 (1694) f. 131r; CEM AO 715 (1701) f. 370; CEM AO 734 (1714) f.123r; CEM AO 926 (1705) f. 139r; CEM AO 1014 (1774) f.25v.

Graph 7

The Professions of the Venetians



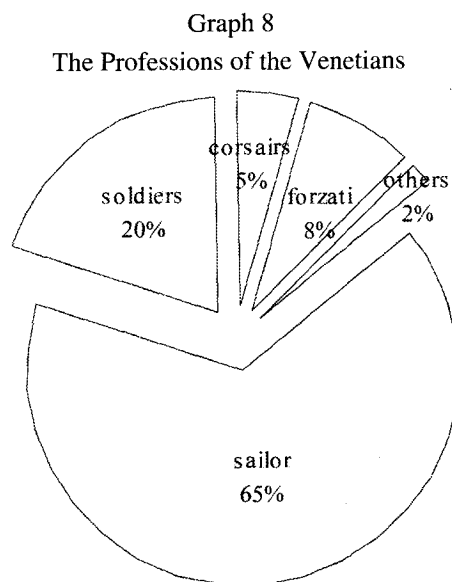
Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

A micro-study of the Venetians' professions expresses aspects of legislative changes made by Venice to solve some of its employment problems. A decree passed in Venice in 1559 required that each ship of 300 tons had to have cabin boys. This

26. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1664 case 21.
27. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1657 case 67.
28. CEM AO 1023, (1780) f. 175r.
29. CEM AO 298 (1747) f.219r.
30. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1664/7 case 17.
31. CEM AO 745 (1718) f. 91r-v; CEM AO 1023 (1780) f.175r; CEM AO 288B (1738) f.205r; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1738 case 56.
32. CEM AO 660 (1757) f. 31r; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1649 case 99.
33. CEM AO 767 (1741) f.171r.
34. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1649 case 76.
35. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1646 case 9.
36. CEM AO 813 (1768) f.270r.

law was introduced on the grounds that service at sea would reform the morals of many young boys by rescuing them from begging.³⁷ A reflection of this law appears in the *Status Liberi* documents. A number of mariners confessed to having begun their seafaring adventure as a *muzzo*,³⁸ the old Italian word for cabin boy.

The profession of the witnesses did not deviate from the above trends. The mariners constituted the major group. Those who declared their profession amounted to 114. For the purpose of the present statistics, the shipping clerks and sea captains, who amounted to four cases each, were included under the heading of sailors. The others were two caulkers,³⁹ two merchants⁴⁰ and an optician.⁴¹ The latter profession stands for one of the crafts for which Venice was renowned. Therefore, it is not by mere coincidence that in 1736, the profession of optician was being practised in Valletta by a Venetian, Giovanni Torisi.⁴² The rest were sailors.



Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

37. Lane, 388.

38. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1664 case 121; CEM AO 265 (1719) f.248r; CEM AO 283 (1735) f.240r; CEM AO 301 (1748) f. 216r; CEM AO 797 (1759) f. 241r; CEM AO 748 (1721) f.227r.

39. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1664 case 111; CEM AO 718 (1704) f. 290.

40. CEM AO 744 (1718) f. 364r; f. 459r.

41. CEM AO 761 (1736) f.158r.

42. Ibid.

However, the profession of a seafarer was not a stable occupation. All over the harbour cities, maritime jobs were seasonal, linked to the sailing period that in the Mediterranean extended from May to December.⁴³ Once the sailing season was over, the mariners opted for jobs, which in Venice, for example, included agricultural work. In Malta, the Venetians had more restricted opportunities. The sea continued to be their main source of livelihood and any change in employment was within the maritime sphere. They transferred from Hospitaller galleys to mercantile vessels. The latter continued sailing even during winter. Once the wintry season was over, there was the possibility of switching again to corsairing, and turn back to mercantile shipping at the end of the season. Marine crew even swapped duties during the summer season while remaining on the same ship, as in the cases of soldiers on galleys who opted to undertake sailors' duties.⁴⁴

While job opportunities were related to mobility, there were other important considerations that the migrant had to face before leaving his homeland for good. The survival of the parents was one such factor. The study of the parental influence on migration was undertaken on 137 cases. The latter are all the cases encountered in the *Status Liberi* with Venetian plaintiffs yielding information on the survival of the parents. The results showed that the mother's influence often determined her son's decision to leave home. In the majority of cases, the child left home only after the death of the mother. In cases where she was the only surviving parent, her male offspring found it more difficult to leave her on her own. In fact, only 13 per cent of the Venetians left home when their mother was a widow. The same low frequency was experienced by children who had lost both parents. Their percentage was as low as 12 per cent. Was it the case that the elder male offspring remained at home to take care of the other siblings? Incidentally, the records rarely give indication on the presence of siblings and when they are indicated, the acts fail to illustrate the status of the plaintiff in relation to the other siblings. In normal circumstances, the elder brothers would take over the responsibility of the family when both parents passed away.

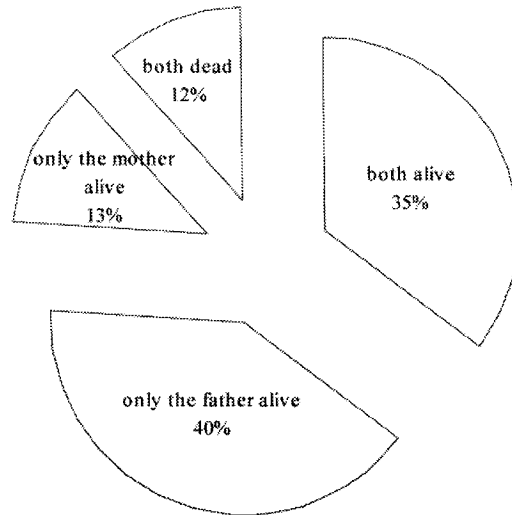
The next aspect of the study analysed other reasons that could have influenced the decision to migrate. First, it was sought to establish if the plaintiff was acting alone or in a group when s/he migrated. The number of the analysed individuals was again 230. Only 26 individuals (11 per cent) declared that they had come to Malta alone, while 75 (or 33 per cent) were in a group. Despite the high percentage of those who gave no information, (56 per cent) the trend is particularly clear. The Venetians preferred to migrate in the company of other Venetians. Company offered refuge and psychological support much needed by foreigners to settle in an alien land, as Malta appeared to the eyes of Venetian Republic in those days.

43. P. Dan, *Histoire de Barbarie et ses Corsairs*, Paris 1636, 307.

44. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1664 case 111.

Graph 9

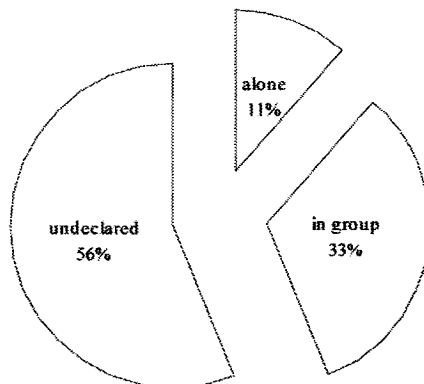
The Impact of the Survival of the Parents on the Mobility of Children



Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

Graph 10

Did the Venetians prefer to migrate on their own or as a Group?

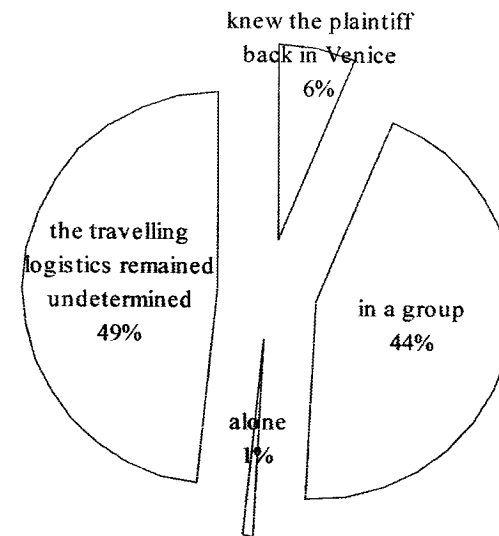


Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

The witnesses adhered to a similar pattern. The study was undertaken on 232 cases, of whom 112 were considered for the purpose of the present study as undetermined as no information existed on their movement. 103 declared to have travelled in a group, 2 declared to have been travelling alone and 15 affirmed that they had known the plaintiff back in Venice. These results were based on a number of cases where the witnesses were counted more than once as they appeared in more than one case. This detail still did not change the above trends, as when those individuals appearing more than once were eliminated, those in a group continued to hold a dominant position.

Graph 11

Witnesses' Preferences with regards to Travel



Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

The next study sought to analyse the age at which the Venetians sought marriage in Malta. In demographic studies, it is widely held that migrants find greater difficulty to marry in comparison to locals. Indeed, their average age at marriage was higher. In Malta, the Venetian males did not deviate from this pattern; their average age, over the time span 1587-1798 was 26. This was slightly higher than that of their Maltese counterparts, which at least in the town of Bormla reached 25.

On the other hand, the widowers showed a naturally higher age and their average was 37.

Table 2

The average age of single and married Migrants

Single	26.08
Married	37

Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

The analysis also took into consideration whether there were any variations along the centuries. For this reason, the period of study was divided into four time lags of fifty years each. A distinction was made between plaintiffs and witnesses and between those in their first marriage and widows or widowers. The resulting figures again tally with those of the harbour cities. In the seventeenth century, the male average age at marriage oscillated around 25 years and decreased to 24 during the aftermath of major plague epidemics.⁴⁵ This means that while the average age in Bormla remained relatively stable throughout early modern times, the Venetian average age at marriage underwent important changes. It was close to the 26 mark in the first half of the seventeenth century and declined below an average of 25 years in the period 1650-1749 to experience the most important variation between 1750 and 1799. During this period, the Venetian average age rose to over 28 years.

Table 3

Declared Average Age of Plaintiffs and Witnesses

	Plaintiffs	Witnesses
1600-1649	25.94	24.6
1650-1699	24.38	27.6
1700-1749	24.86	30.54
1750-1799	28.13	29.16
General	26.47	28.84

Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

45. Mercieca, *Community Life*, 235.

The study of age also established that the witnesses were usually older than the plaintiffs. The average age of the witnesses, who travelled in a group, was 27.21. There was a slight difference in age between those travelling in a group and the others who travelled alone. The latter tended to be younger and their average age was 24.9. The reason why the witnesses tended to be older than the plaintiffs can be explained by the fact that many of those who were asked to give witness were deliberately chosen from amongst the established members of the Venetian community in Malta.

The study of the average age at which the plaintiffs left their home for the first time shows important variations along the centuries and these variations are intimately linked to the history of Venice. In general, a big variation existed between the age at which the Venetians left home and that at which they settled in Malta. The only exception was the period between 1640 and 1649, when the average age at which the plaintiff left home was at the same level to the age at which he arrived in Malta. In all probability this reflected the conflicts in the Levant, where the Ottoman Turks were mounting pressure on the Venetians forcing some of the male migrants to come directly to Malta hence avoiding to undertake any trips to the East. The age difference in the other time lags was concomitant with Venice's political development. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the average age was 15. This was the normal age at which a boy was introduced to seafaring. Venice's decreasing interest in marine activity could explain the rise in the average age in the next century when it went up to 18. However, this change had little effect on the age at marriage of the mariners in Malta, at least until the early 1750s as, notwithstanding the age at which they left home, they continued to marry at about the age of 25.

Table 4

The average age at which Plaintiffs and Witnesses left their home town for the first time

	Plaintiffs	Witnesses
1600-49	26.83	/
1650-1699	14.52	15.83
1700-1749	18.80	23.75
General	18.12	19

Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

There were some gruesome blots in the movement of Venetians to Malta. This concerned the transfer by some Venetian merchants of slaves caught in the Levant

and brought to the island through the cities of Fiume and Istria. The *Status Liberi* records only two cases of the sale of slaves through Venetian intermediaries.⁴⁶ However, one cannot exclude the existence of more. The nature of the *Status*, a document that concerned only those foreigners or local seafarers who intended to marry, was bound to produce low figures. By their nature, slaves were not allowed to marry unless they had gained their freedom. Thus, these cases can be considered as an eye opener of the existence of an extensive practice rather than a source of measurement of its diffusion.

There existed another category of slaves. These were the Venetians who had fallen into slavery at the hands of the Turkish and Barbary corsairs. The number of Venetian slaves who sought marriage in Malta amounted to eighteen. The depositions made by the slaves themselves on their past experience in bondage reflected the changing policy that Venice was undergoing with the Ottoman Empire. The war of Candia forced Venice to slowly change its policy towards the Ottomans. Before 1648, Venice did its utmost to maintain good relations with the Sublime Porte and as the aftermath of the war of Lepanto would demonstrate, the *Serenissima* would be ready to accept humiliating conditions in an effort to maintain its privileged trading position in the Levant. This alliance aided Venetian merchants in their efforts to prevent themselves from falling victims of Ottoman and Muslim piracy. At least, few cases of Venetian manumitted slaves were encountered in the local *Status Liberi* prior to 1648.⁴⁷ After 1649, things changed. The Ottoman Porte began to accuse the *Serenissima* of supporting the Hospitallers' corsairing activity in the Levant and of hosting Hospitallers' galleys and other corsairing ships in its harbours in Crete. In reaction, citing a minor case of Christian piracy by the Knights as a *casus belli*, the Ottomans renewed their war of expansion in the Levant by attacking Candia. The Venetian subjects ceased to be immune to Muslim pillage. Venetian boats became a prey to Ottoman and North African corsairs. Ripples of this renewed war are met in the *Status Liberi* documents. Eighteen cases of slavery were encountered and all were confined to the period 1649-1765,⁴⁸ that is to the period in which Venice

46. CEM AO 741 (1717) f.187.

47. Only four cases of Venetian slaves were met before 1648. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1594 case 29-03-1594; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1603 case 20-11-1603; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1612 case 20-09-1612; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1619 case 15-02-1619.

48. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1649 case 50; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1664 case 106; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1664 case 121; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1684 case 741; AAM *Status Liberi* 1684 case 82; CEM AO 717 (1703) f. 233v; CEM AO 727 (1710) f.33r; CEM AO 734 (1714) f.123r; CEM AO 737 (1715) f.125r; CEM AO 741 (1717) f.187; CEM AO 788 (1754) f.398r; CEM AO 625 (1720) f.11r; CEM AO 629 (1726) f.21r; CEM AO 936 (1714) f.177r; CEM AO 588 (1685) f. 523r, f.524r; CEM 316 (1761) f.147r, f.151r.

developed a hostile attitude towards Turkey. The places of imprisonment varied from Constantinople⁴⁹ to Alexandria⁵⁰ and from Tunis⁵¹ to Algiers⁵² and Tripoli.⁵³ The plight of the Venetian merchants continued to worsen as Venice constantly refused to reach an agreement with the North African Beys. It preferred to settle trading and navigational problems directly with the Sultan but this policy left its citizens unnecessarily exposed to Muslim corsairs.

The Venetian community in Malta had also individuals who were in a semi-state of bondage. Graph 7 indicates that 4 per cent of the plaintiffs were Venetian *buonavoglie* or *forzati*⁵⁴ that is convicts who were either condemned to forced rowing on the galleys or had voluntarily engaged themselves in such an occupation. The next category of social recluses was made up of army deserters. At least six of the *Status Liberi* plaintiffs were soldiers who had deserted the Venetian army. These were sporadic cases confined to the period 1646-1722.⁵⁵

The last study concerned the level of literacy of the Venetian community. The majority were illiterate but the statistics show that there was an improvement in the percentage of the literate in the eighteenth century. Despite the negative balance in favour of the illiterates, the Venetians' literacy level was by far higher than that of the Maltese. When one remembers that the majority of this community was made out of humble citizens, in their majority seafarers, the resulting percentage is much more encouraging. Definitely, Venice's heroic stand in defence of the printing press and resulting trade of books had a bearing on these heartening results.

Table 5

The level of literacy among the Venetian plaintiffs and witnesses

Plaintiff	Illiterate	Literate	Total	Witnesses	Illiterate	Literate	Total
1600-1699	79.2%	20.75%	63	1600-1699	80.51%	19.48%	77
1700-1799	62.36%	36.55%	92	1700-1799	66.10%	34.74%	116
General	68.45%	31.54%	General	71.28%			

Source: *Status Liberi* at CEM and AAM

49. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1649 case 50; CEM AO 629 (1726) f.21r; CEM AO 316 (1716) f.147r.

50. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1664 case 106.

51. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1664 case 121.

52. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1684 case 74; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1603, case 20/11/1603; AAM *Status Liberi*, Box 1622, case 05-04-1622; CEM AO 936 (1714) f. 177r.

53. CEM AO 788 (1754) f.398r.

The Venetian migrants formed part of a bigger pattern of migration to Malta from all over the Mediterranean world. The Venetians were not the biggest ethnic group. Migrants from Marseilles were the ones who had that status, albeit their mobility fell within general migration patterns. As most of the migrants in Early Modern Malta, the Venetians were largely seafarers or individuals with maritime experience. It should also be noted, in conclusion, that with the exception of the migration movement of the middle of the seventeenth century, Venetian mobility to Malta was not, in general, linked to any particular political crisis. It was mainly the result of individual initiative, connected with the maritime heritage that developed after the arrival of the military Order of the Knights of Saint John in Malta.

54. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1603 case 20-11-1603; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1612 case 20-09-1612; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1634 Date of case 16-05-1634; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1657 case 67; AAM *Status Liberi*, Box 1659 case 51. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1664 case 5; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1665-66 case 24, 47; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1668 case 72; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1668-1669 case 1; CEM *Status Liberi* Box 1668 case 72; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1670 case 68.
55. AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1646 case 57; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1659 case 37; CEM AO 732 (1713) f.314r; CEM AO 265 (1719) f.245r; AAM *Status Liberi* Box 1722 case 12, case 85.