

**THE *PROVVEDITORE DI MARE*  
ON THE ORDER OF ST JOHN'S 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY *VASCELLI***

**Joseph F. Grima\***

Although founded as a hospitaller and a religious body, the Order of St John also had its material interests to safeguard, interests which provided for its continued existence for centuries on end. These interests also included safeguarding its *materiel* and investment on its two naval squadrons in the best possible way. It therefore follows that steps had to be taken to ensure that the best possible use was made of both galleys and *vascelli* (as its ships-of-the-line were known) by providing them with all the necessary stores and goods designed to make them potent naval forces but, at the same time, ascertain that proper and judicious use was made of all that was provided. This is the reason behind the appointment of various officials, important watchdogs of the Order's Treasury, whose job was to look after and safeguard the Order's material interests. At the dawn of the eighteenth century, galley squadron officials such as the *Riveditore*, his clerk and the galley pursers had existed for years on end and the results were certainly gratifying for the Order's Treasury. It comes as no surprise, therefore, to note that the formation of the new men-of-war squadron in 1701 brought with it the institution of the parallel offices of the *Provveditore di Mare* and the ancillary clerical staff whose reason for existence was the same as that of their galley counterparts.

This official – the *Provveditore di Mare* or, literally, the Purveyor at Sea<sup>1</sup> – was responsible for the economy of the men-of-war when at sea. His

**\*Dr Joseph F. Grima PhD, MA, BA(Hons), DipEduc, MIM** is a History graduate from the University of Malta where he carried out post-graduate research on the naval history of the Order of St John during the 17th and 18th centuries. Presently a visiting lecturer at the University of Malta, Dr Grima was a former History teacher and Head of School who retired as Asst Director of Education in 2006. Dr Grima has published books about the History of the Order and the French in Malta, Printing and Censorship in Malta and the history of his native Qormi and its parishes together with papers on various historical subjects including naval history. E-mail: josephgrima@euroweb.net.mt

1. This paper considers the *Provveditore di Mare* and his duties throughout the entire eighteenth century and, therefore, extensive attention will be focused on the updated regulations of 1777 in the Archives of the Order in Malta (AOM) 1764 together with the 1709 ordinations in AOM 1761.

responsibilities included all the stores in use by the tradesmen and every item issued or obtained during a voyage.<sup>2</sup> He was an official distinct from the *Provveditore di Terra* though he was charged with helping him, without being a disturbance, and the members of the Ships Commission – whose official nomenclature was *Congregazione dei Vascelli* – in all their needs.<sup>3</sup> In 1701, the founding Commission had included in its proposals the institution of the office of *Provveditore*, on the same lines of the galley squadron's *Riveditore*.<sup>4</sup> In 1704, an official responsible for the whole squadron was chosen.<sup>5</sup> He was to sail on one of the ships-of-the-line where he would carry out his duties and be responsible for its economic affairs, whilst analogous work on the other vessels would be carried out by the ships' Clerks who would be subordinated to the *Provveditore*.<sup>6</sup> So the post of *Provveditore* was instituted and remained as such until 1709 when the Council chose two Purveyors, the *Provveditore di Terra* and the *Provveditore di Mare*.<sup>7</sup>

The post of *Provveditore di Mare* was similar to that of the galleys' *Riveditore* and both had to answer to their respective Commissions and the Order's Treasury, whose interests they represented. Both were allowed funds to be used if the need arose and they carried out duties which resembled each other but were sometimes that bit different because they served on ships that had different characteristics. Although the name *Provveditore* may have been borrowed from the then current Venetian naval jargon,<sup>8</sup> it may also have been adopted to distinguish these two officials from each other. After

2. AOM 1761, p. 75: 'Il Provveditore di Mare e' quello che ha il carico et il pensiero di tutto cio' che restano incaricati tutti l'Ufficiali, e Macstranze de Vascelli, e di tutto quello che s'esita e s'introita nel tempo del viaggio.' Cf. also AOM 1764, I, f. 28.

3. *Ibid.*

4. AOM 265, f. 31. The exact words of the Commission are as follows: 'Si deputera' da Sua Eminenza e Venerando Consiglio sopra li Vascelli, come s'usa sopra le Galere, un Cavaliere di puntualita', e di zelo con la carica di Riveditore, affinche' riveda, e difenda le cose spettanti al Comun Tesoro secondo l'Instruzioni che se gli daranno, per il qual effetto terra' un scrivano salariato dalla Congregazione.' It is clear that the proposal was to copy the galley squadron which had one *Riveditore* for the whole squadron. National Library of Malta Manuscript (NLM) 4, pp. 62-3, repeats more or less in general terms the original Council decision. Neither of the two references include the specific words 'per ogni vascello' which was used to denote, for example, the posting of a priest on each vessel.

5. AOM 135, f. 80<sup>v</sup>, 22.iv.1704. AOM 6430, f. 215, contains a list of all the knights who held this office between 1704 and 1778. The list is transcribed *infra* in the appendix with the first incumbent being Fra Guillermo Sannazzaro.

6. AOM 1764, I, f. 71<sup>v</sup>.

7. AOM 136, f. 203, 9.iii.1709, when the two *Provveditori* were chosen.

8. M. Nani Mocenigo, *Storia della Marina Veneziana da Lepanto alla Caduta della Repubblica*, Rome 1935, 6.

all, the original nomenclature suggested by the founding Commission had been *Riveditore* and not *Provveditore*.<sup>9</sup>

To help him, the Purveyor was allowed a Clerk, an Assistant Clerk and two guards who helped him distribute stores from the warehouses to the ships,<sup>10</sup> though by 1738 onwards he was allowed only one Clerk.<sup>11</sup> The Purveyor was expected to have up-to-date registers of the state of the stores, including consumption, to be able to obtain replenishments from the Commission. He had to make out reports on unserviceable and obsolete goods with the help of the tradesmen so that they would be handed over to the *Provveditore di Terra*.<sup>12</sup>

Food distribution was one of the provinces of the Purveyor who had to exercise great care when provisions were handed out so that no fraud would occur. The Purveyor had to ensure that ships carried reserve stores of rations aboard in case a voyage took longer than previously expected. Daily distribution of rations had to be made in conformity with the orders of the Commission. No rotten or decayed food was to be distributed and, if certain provisions were suspect, a portion was sent to the Lieutenant-General – the overall commander of the *vascelli* squadron – or the ship's Captain who would request the doctor to report on its quality. If the food in question had gone bad, its distribution was strictly prohibited. The first provisions to be consumed were the livestock on board and this was for three reasons: to remove the inconvenience of having live animals on the ship, to avoid the expense of their maintenance, and to have fresh meat eaten in its best condition. Mutton was to be kept last of all, and perhaps in reserve, because these animals adapted themselves well to maritime conditions. If the ships arrived at locations where livestock was abundant, any type of animal could be bought and slaughtered but it had to be eaten before it started to deteriorate. If the ships anchored at places where meat and provisions were expensively priced, the Purveyor was instructed to buy only what was indispensable and to note such places for future reference.<sup>13</sup>

Only the Purveyor had permission to buy supplies of timber outside Malta and no such supplies could be disembarked except by order of this official, who had to ensure that all the wood was taken to the warehouses

9. Cf. *supra*, note 4.

10. AOM 1761, pp. 76 & 141.

11. National Maritime Museum of Malta (NMM), *Statuti*, p. 244, February 1738; NLM 273, p. 281, l.xi.1754; NLM 342, p. 193, dated 1777.

12. AOM 1761, pp. 77-8; AOM 1764, I, f. 28<sup>v</sup>.

13. AOM 1761, pp. 78-9; AOM 1764, I, ff. 28<sup>v</sup>-29<sup>v</sup>.

for storage. If specific journeys were made to buy timber for use by the men-of-war squadron, or for the Treasury, the Purveyor had to abide by the instructions that would have been given to him.<sup>14</sup>

When the men-of-war left harbour, the Purveyor asked for permission from the Lieutenant-General to call the roll on the flagship while the ships' Clerks did the same on their respective vessels. Before sails were set, weather permitting, the *Provveditore* sent ashore a note in duplicate, to the Grand Master and the Commission, informing them of the number of crew members present, the names of the seamen who had remained in Malta due to certified illness and a list of crew men who had skipped the voyage and had remained ashore for no real reason, specified as *inutilmente*. The last-mentioned were to be apprehended as deserters. When passengers of quality embarked on the ships, they were invited to the Captain's table, but others were treated according to their rank and the *Provveditore* was to be informed accordingly.<sup>15</sup>

The Purveyor was required to embark always on the flagship, with his posting being near the Lieutenant-General during combat. If service matters made it incumbent on him to change ships, he was to take with him the funds or cash entrusted in his care by the Treasury. His sleeping quarters were near the powder magazine, known as the *Santa Barbara*, between the two guns on the right. During combat, the money chest and his registers were to be placed within the hatchway of the *Santa Barbara*.<sup>16</sup>

When sailing, a ship in need of help could only be succoured after the *Provveditore* had given his opinion as to the amount of aid to be given. If this help was considerable, the advice was to be tendered in writing. If a prize was captured, the Purveyor would proceed on board accompanied by his Clerk and a prize crew, make out a detailed inventory of all the goods on board, seal up the hold's hatches by means of his personal seal, render safe any munitions on board, and take captured slaves in care. Later, he was to inform the Grand Master and the Commission about what had happened.<sup>17</sup>

When the ships anchored in a foreign harbour, the Purveyor was to be informed of the duration of the visit so that he would plan how to carry out the Order's business there. However, he could not go ashore or use the ship's boat without first obtaining permission from the Lieutenant-General.<sup>18</sup>

14. AOM 1761, p. 80; AOM 1764, I, ff. 29<sup>v</sup>-30.

15. AOM 1761, pp. 82-3; AOM 1764, I, ff. 30<sup>r</sup>-<sup>v</sup>.

16. AOM 1761, pp. 81, 87 & 89; AOM 1764, I, ff. 30<sup>v</sup>-31.

17. AOM 1761, pp. 81-2 & 87; AOM 1764, I, f. 31.

18. AOM 1761, pp. 84-6; AOM 1764, I, f. 31<sup>v</sup>.

He distributed salaries according to the pay lists, ensured that every item issued was covered by the relevant receipt, noted wood consumption daily, ascertained that sick members of the crew were given their rations and medicines, weeded out malingerers from the sick bay and, if possible, held a reconciliation exercise of his stores and registers every month.<sup>19</sup> He could take part in Councils-at-Sea provided he was invited to do so, normally if economic matters were going to be discussed. In this case, he could write down his observations and opinions but only after he was asked for his views. Naturally, at the end of every cruise, he was to render a full account to the Grand Master and the Commission.<sup>20</sup> Actually, the Commission held regular meetings with both its *Provveditori* every Monday, and this gauges the importance accorded to their office and work.<sup>21</sup>

Since the Purveyor could sail only on the flagship, similar duties on the other ships were carried out by the Clerk. The *Provveditore's* *honorarium* was fixed at twenty *scudi* per month at the inception of the men-of-war squadron and remained unchanged until 1776 when the Chapter General decreed an annual raise of sixty *scudi*.<sup>22</sup> This increase lasted till 1796 when economy measures resulted in a reversal to the Purveyor's pre-1776 *honorarium*.<sup>23</sup> His Clerk's salary was equal to that of the ship's First Clerk which amounted to ten *scudi* monthly in 1738<sup>24</sup> and was increased by twenty-five per cent, to twelve *scudi* six *tari*, in 1776 in accordance with the salary increases ordered by the Chapter General of 1776.<sup>25</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

All things considered, one concludes that the Order made full use of the experience it had gained over the years through its organisation of the galley squadron. Throughout the years, it had managed to block most, if not all, loopholes on the economic side and the same practices were then foisted on the new men-of-war squadron but with improvements based on the experience gained in the past. In fact, the galleys in the eighteenth century had more clerks attached to them than in the previous century and

19. AOM 1761, pp. 80, 89 & 90; AOM 1764, I, ff. 31<sup>v</sup>-32.

20. AOM 1761, pp. 83-4; AOM 1764, I, f. 32<sup>v</sup>.

21. AOM 1761, p. 26; AOM 1764, I, ff. 15<sup>r</sup>-<sup>v</sup>.

22. AOM 256, f. 30<sup>v</sup>; AOM 309, f. 58<sup>v</sup>; AOM 1764, I, f. 7.

23. AOM 275, ff. 7 & 12<sup>v</sup>, 13 May 1796.

24. NMM, *Statuti*, p. 244.

25. AOM 1764, I, ff. 12 & 92.

both squadrons followed the same pattern, at least in the numbers employed. With regards to the Purveyors, the Order at first tried to have one person responsible for all stores, on land and aboard, for the men-of-war, on the same lines of the galleys Purveyor. The idea did not work because ships-of-the-line stores are different to and more extensive in range than those of the galleys and so, within five years, the Knights had to remedy this defect by appointing two responsible persons, one on land and the other at sea. Attention to detail, checking and counter-checking twice over were very conspicuous and certainly helped to lessen as much as possible fraudulent practices on the part of the officials.

## Appendix

### List of the Knights of St John who held the office of *Provveditore di Mare* (1704-1778)<sup>26</sup> and the dates of their elections

Fra Guillermo Sannazaro – 22 April 1704  
 Fra Francesco Cittadella – 28 November 1707  
 Fra Giovanni Puego – 9 March 1709  
 Fra Bonifacio de Castellane Desparron – 7 July 1714  
 Fra Domenico Sarvini – 24 January 1716  
 Fra Antonio Maurizio Solaro – 21 February 1720  
 Fra Bartolomeo Tomasi – 21 August 1721  
 Fra Giorgio de Sales – 28 February 1728  
 Fra Don Francesco Ximenes de Texada<sup>27</sup> – 16 December 1732  
 Fra Don Giuseppe Aunon – 3 September 1734  
 Fra Don Francesco Tort – 30 August 1737  
 Fra Vittorio Rocchi – 4 February 1739  
 Fra Giovanni Battista de Valabres – 1 January 1743  
 Fra Marcellino Coris – 23 June 1757  
 Fra Errigo d'Hautpont – 11 October 1768  
 Fra Don Giorgio Serra – 26 August 1773  
 Fra Don Salvatore Bru – 2 March 1775  
 Fra ..... de Greiche – 23 July 1778

26. AOM 6430, f. 215.

27. Grand Master of the Order of St John (1773-75).