

DOCUMENTS AND ARTEFACTS OF THE FRENCH PERIOD AT THE MALTA MARITIME MUSEUM

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Although the collections at the Maritime Museum of Malta are not extensive, its holdings are nonetheless varied and illustrate several facets of Maltese maritime history and culture. This short communication will focus attention on the museum's collection of artefacts and documents relevant to the French occupation of Malta which covered the period June 1798 to September 1800.

It was customary during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to convert obsolete iron ordnance into bollards. With their muzzles stuck into the ground, many old guns received a new lease of life securing ships along piers and waterfronts. Thus used they were saved from the smelters and preserved for posterity. Recently some of these bollards have regained their martial dignity, adorning monuments and bastions. A few found their way into the Maritime Museum where they are now exhibited. One of these guns is mounted in a reconstruction of a section of a gun deck of a British man-of-war. Dated 1806, it bears the cipher of King George III and is of the same pattern as that in use by the Royal Navy in 1798.

More directly relevant to our subject is a pair of French 1786 pattern eighteen pounder naval guns. These impressive pieces of ordnance were manufactured in the second year of the French Republic (September 1793-September 1794) at the foundry of Ruelle sur Touvre near Angoulême. The weights of the guns are incised on the left trunnion whilst on the right trunnion appear their respective serial numbers (136 and 108). The cipher of the French Republican Navy is engraved on the barrel between the trunnions. These guns were standard armament aboard French frigates. According to Dr. Carmelo Testa they could have formed part of the ordnance belonging to the frigates *La Justice* and *La Diane* which was put ashore prior to their departure from Malta in August 1800.¹ In 1992 the guns were brought to my attention by Lt. Col. Parnis and retrieved from a repository at St. Andrew's barracks.

¹ C. Testa, *The French in Malta, 1798-1800* (Malta, 1997), 805.

The museum also houses a small collection of cutlasses from the French period. Designed to cut rather than for thrust, naval cutlasses are characterised by their broad, thick blade with one cutting edge and a solid, rugged hilt. The cutlass evolved from a German sixteenth-century cavalry sword. It was adopted by European navies as a standard weapon for boarding and fighting at close quarters. The museum has four British and one French naval cutlasses. Three of the British ones are engraved with the cipher of George III while one British and the French cutlass are complete with their scabbard. A naval dirk of the type used in the days of Nelson completes the museum's small collection of period edged weapons. The dirk is a double-edged short sword, approximately 40.5 cm. long, and has a brass and ivory or bone hilt. British midshipmen generally wore dirks rather than standard-sized swords.

The model of the French second-rate ship-of-the-line *Bucentaure* is a prized exhibit at the Maritime Museum. It is of a type known as prisoner-of-war model, developed by captive French sailors of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. The *Bucentaure* was the flagship of Admiral Pierre Villeneuve at the battle of Trafalgar (1805). The hull of the model is partially solid, laminated with strips to look like planking, but is built up from the waterline upwards. The model was acquired by the Museums Department in 1925 and was restored by Mr. Joseph Muscat in 1959 and again in 1989. Of recent construction is the model of *H.M.S. Vanguard*, a 74 gun British ship-of-the-line which, in 1798, served as Lord Nelson's flagship.

The engraving *Prise de Malte* represents the capture of Malta by the French in June 1798. It is a well-known rendering of General Napoleon Bonaparte on a *chaloupe* about to land in the Grand Harbour. The caption along the bottom edge reads: *Le grand-mâitre ayant refusé l'entrée du port par toute la flotte, Bonaparte s'en empare de force*. A print with a caption in Dutch, produced by Duplessi-Bertaux, shows the French armada menacing the Grand Harbour. Very fine and impressive is a pair of hand-coloured engravings, entitled *The glorious victory over the French at the Bay of Bequiers* and *The Battle of the Nile: the British approaching the French squadron*, after originals by Nicholas Pocock (1741-1821). These engravings, dated 1799, were printed to commemorate the first anniversary of the battle of the Nile.

The museum has two portraits of Vice Admiral Lord Nelson (1758-1805). The first is an engraving by M. Cormack after an original painting by John Hoppner (1758-1810). Messrs Albert and John Delia of the firm Gio. Batta Delia of Valletta presented this full-length rendering of the admiral to the Maritime Museum. The second portrait is a late eighteenth-century Wedgwood plaque with a relief portrait of Lord Nelson. This attractive curio, issued to commemorate Nelson's victory at Aboukir, was purchased by the Maritime Museum in 1998. A third portrait represents Rear Admiral

Sir Alexander Ball (1756-1809) and is a work attributed to Gaetano Calleja (1760-1838). Ball was detailed to Malta after the Maltese had asked for assistance to fight the French. Once in Malta, Ball took matters in hand and was instrumental in defeating the French and consolidating Britain's position on the island.

Among papers presented to the museum by Prof. Victor Griffiths is a set of manuscript documents relating to an incident which took place at sea shortly after the uprising of the Maltese against the French. The Royal Navy brig *Transfer* encountered and captured the Maltese polacre *Sant'Anna*. The captain of the *Transfer* had mistaken the *Sant'Anna* for a French vessel. The Vice-Admiralty Court at Gibraltar held an enquiry into the affair on 28 November 1799 and decided against the Maltese ship as it was flying the French flag at the time.

The dramatic events that punctuated the uprising of the Maltese and subsequent blockade of the French in Malta attracted the attention of the contemporary British press, some of which may be consulted at the Maritime Museum. *The Edinburgh Advertiser*, dated Tuesday, November 6, 1798, falsely reported that the French had surrendered Malta into the hands of its inhabitants. *The English Chronicle and Universal Evening Post*, dated Saturday, October 11 to Tuesday, October 14, 1800,



The *Prise de Malte* print

published dispatches sent by Major-General Pigot to the Rt. Hon. Henry Dundas, giving an account of the surrender of the French in Malta. *The London Chronicle*, dated Tuesday, March 30 to Thursday, April 1, 1802, reported on the agreement reached to restore Malta to the Knights of St. John and to guarantee the neutrality of the island. The same issues carry a transcription of the Treaty of Amiens. Finally, *The London Chronicle* of Saturday, February 6 to Tuesday 9th 1802, contains an extract of a letter said to be written by a member of the medical staff, dated Malta, November 25, 1801, reporting that the French had pillaged treasure from St. John's Church to the value of £100,000.