

# CORON CAPTIVES IN MALTA

## AN EPISODE IN THE HISTORY OF SLAVE-DEALING

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In September 1685 the eight galleys of the Order and auxiliary vessels returned triumphantly to Malta, laden with captives and spoils. Knights and men had fought with great honour in the campaign, and Coron (1), after a desperate resistance of forty-eight days, was now in the hands of the Venetians. A blow had been dealt to the Turks and everyone in Malta was pleased:

Coron had fallen on August 11. Even when everything was lost many of the defenders put up a spirited fight in the streets of the doomed town, and several non-combatants were slain in the heat of battle. The town was then thoroughly ransacked. Huge bales, too heavy to be carried on men's backs, were dumped over the town's walls near to the place where the galleys were moored, and many of the Turks themselves fled to the galleys to escape the general massacre and were put into chains. In the following days captives could be obtained quite cheaply if one had ready money. Two days later the Captain General of the combined forces prohibited all such transactions (2) and, probably at the same time, ordered all captives to be revealed so that a proper and equitable distribution among the component forces of the army might be made.

The method of distribution had been determined on months before the start of the campaign (3). A list was made of the captives, taken at random; they were then allotted, just as haphazardly — males and females, adults and children, whites and blacks — to the various forces (4). Dal Pozzo (5) tells us that the total number of captives revealed by their "owners" reached 1,336, of which the Order received 334, but had to transfer one third to the Papal forces. The number retained must therefore have been about 223 (6).

Not all the Coron captives brought to Malta are, however, included in this total. It was an open secret that several others had been quietly taken on board by Knights, soldiers and seamen and were carried to Malta or sold *en route*. Dal Pozzo says that if all these were taken into consideration the total would reach a figure higher than 500. The "owners" of these unrevealed slaves were greatly mistaken if they thought that they would be allowed to keep them.

- (1) Coron was a small Greek town on the south-western peninsula of Morea. It had a small Jewish community and some hundreds of Turks, in all probability soldiers and their families. There is a long account of the siege and capture of the town in Dal Pozzo's *Historia della Sacra Religione...*, Parte 2a, Lib. X. The official *Relazione* is to be found in *Liber Conciliorum Status*, Ann. 1672-86, under the date Sept. 19, 1685 (A.O.M. Ms. 262, folios 202r-228v).
- (2) A.O.M. Ms. 646, f. 596.
- (3) Letter of the Grand Master to Ambassador Sacchetti, dated April 30, 1685.—A.O.M. Ms. 1452.
- (4) A.O.M. Ms. 262, f. 221v.
- (5) *Op cit.*, vol. II, pp. 573-4.
- (6) See below for statement that 284 slaves had been consigned to the Treasury. It is difficult to say what exactly this number represents. Does it include slaves acquired by private persons *before* the distribution? Does it include slaves acquired by the Order by purchase?

Soon after the return of the galleys the principal officials of the Treasury issued a declaration (7) that all slaves captured in an engagement in which the squadron of the galleys of the Order was present should automatically belong "without any doubt and by all rights of law and reason" to the Treasury. Commissioners were appointed by the Grand Master to make an enquiry into the affair of Coron, and to carry out civil and criminal proceedings against all who defrauded the Treasury by keeping slaves who belonged to it by regalian right (8).

Two days after this, on the 28th September, twenty one Knights and other members of the Order protested that they had all served in the late campaign and had bought, in all good faith and without any secrecy, several slaves to keep for their personal service. They complained that these slaves had been taken away from them by the Treasury, and asked the Grand Master for their return. They claimed that they had obeyed the Captain General's order to surrender all captives for a proper distribution to be made, but their captives had notwithstandingly been left out of the general list for distribution (9). Forty four soldiers and seamen made a similar demand for the restitution of their slaves (10). All arguments proved useless; the Treasury declared on October 3, 1685, that the absence of any prohibition on the purchase or sale of slaves for two whole days after the fall of the town did not affect the matter: the slaves belonged to the Order and should not be restored to the claimants (11).

On October 13 the *Procuratore delle Cause* of the Treasury reported to the heads of his department that in addition to the 284 slaves consigned to the Treasury by the *Riveditore delle Galere* there were several others still in the possession of persons who claimed to have bought them *after* (not *before*) the official distribution of captives. He asked for, and obtained, the appointment of a commission to enquire into the matter (12).

Giovanni Battista *di Bono* complained that he was forced to give up three slaves of his, though it was a well known fact that he had bought them after the distribution. He was quite prepared to prove his point — he said — but did not intend to take the matter up to court because he was employed by the Order as a *Comito* of one of the galleys. He contented himself with asking for some sort of compensation to be made for his great losses. His tale of woes is a long one, but has some interest as it shows us a part-time slave-dealer at his trade. He had bought the three slaves after the distribution and maintained them until he sold them in the Sicilian town of Augusta. When he was asked for them by the Treasury he had to buy them back and surrender them to the Order. He had lost money on a female slave, who died before he disposed of her. Another four slaves of his had been confiscated because he had bought them before the general distribution; for them he merely received forty scudi maintenance money. In answer to his pleas the Treasury declared the three slaves

(7) Sept. 22, 1685. A.O.M. Ms. 646, f. 565.

(8) Sept. 26, 1685. A.O.M. Ms. 262, folios 230v-231r.

(9) 28 Sept. 1685, (*Date of Registration*) A.O.M. Ms. 670, f. 593.

(10) A.O.M. Ms. 670, folios 594-5.

(11) A.O.M. Ms. 670, f. 596.

(12) A.O.M. Ms. 670, f. 597.

to belong to the Order, but could be sold back to him for 100 pieces of eight (13).

Another unlucky speculator in human flesh was Captain Dimitrio Micalieci. He had taken a ship-load of biscuits for the provisioning of the galleys in front of Coron, and was present at the taking of the town. He bought sixteen slaves, five of whom he sold at Galipoli (Italy) on his return voyage, six he sold at Malta, one was taken out of his possession by the Inquisitor because she was a Christian, and four remained unsold. One of the latter was maimed in a foot and had fever, and another one had a continuous fever with signs of consumption; both of these were women. The unsold slaves and the proceeds from the sale of the others were all confiscated by the Treasury because he had bought them before the general distribution. In recognition of his expenditure on their purchase, maintenance, and transport (not to speak of the cost of money exchange) he was allowed to have them back provided he paid forty scudi a head to the Treasury. This was done on the grounds of equity. The slave believed to be a Christian was not to be returned to him, while a mother and infant son were to be counted as one (14).

Secret informers were the principal weapon the government had to defeat the concealers of slaves. They were of course given a reward for their information. On March 23, 1686, a reward of 10 pieces of eight was given to an unnamed person through whose information the Treasury had confiscated three female slaves (a mother and her two daughters) who had also been captured at Coron. The date of confiscation is given as March 18, 1686, and it seems quite possible that they were the very three slaves taken from *di Bono* on that same day, especially as the price of 100 pieces of eight for his three slaves is rather low if they were men and would be just about right if the woman and two daughters are really the slaves meant (15). If this conjecture is correct it would mean that the informer got 10% of the money acquired by the Treasury as a result of his information.

It is obvious by now to the reader that women and children were very numerous among the captives taken from Coron. They must have represented a very large proportion of the total number and this adds to the interest and importance of the whole episode. It would be very interesting to find out what became of all the hundreds of women and children, what tasks awaited them in their new homes, who their eventual owners were, and what was to be their ultimate fate. How many of them eventually obtained their freedom? Did it take them long? Were any won over to Christian ways, to settle permanently in the island, adding a new element to the racial make-up of the islanders? We shall attempt to answer as many of these questions as possible, having regard to the necessity for adequate documentation.

Of one thing we can be fully certain: the captives of Coron were all Turks, practically without an exception (but there were twenty or so Jews). The Greeks of Coron were not enslaved, and not one of the captives is referred to as a Moor in the documents. This is certainly of great significance, because, though by common usage during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the word *Turk* could cover practically any type of Moslem, the clerks of the Order seem to have used the word in its exact sense. Only one is described as "negra"

(13) 18 March 1686. A.O.M. Ms. 646, f. 626.

(14) 19 October 1685. A.O.M. Ms. 646, folios 572-3.

(15) 23 March 1686. A.O.M. Ms. 646, f. 627.

without any further racial designation (16): it could merely mean "black", not "negress".

It has not been possible to find out the proportionate strength of the sexes; none of the documents is explicit enough. But it is abundantly clear that women greatly outnumbered the men. When the Viceroy of Sicily asked for slaves for his galleys on the supposition that the Order now had enough slaves for its own needs and to spare, the Grand Master pointed out that out of the 60 galley slaves (*da remo*) brought from Coron only 36 were actually found capable of rowing (*atti al remitio*), the rest being sick or maimed (17). The 60 slaves must have represented all the men (i.e. adult males) taken by the Order at Coron. As the total of slaves lay somewhere between 284 and 500 it is obvious that few men escaped the massacre which took place when the town was captured.

An examination of persons from Coron granted "passports" registered in the *Libri Bullarum* for the years 1685 to 1706 and 1710 with particular reference to sex and age-group distribution at the time of capture (18) gave the following result:

Age-group	Males	Females	Total
1—5	2	2	4
5—10	4	4	8
10—15	6	4	10
15—20	3	9	12
20—25	3	3	6
25—30	4	5	9
30—35	1	6	7
35—40	2	4	6
40—45	—	3	3
45—50	1	3	4
50—55	1	4	5
55—60	—	5	5
All Ages	27	52	79

Even from this table the preponderance of females and children over male adults is evident.

Female slaves were of course no new thing to Malta, but were always much rarer than male slaves. We are fortunate in getting some direct information on this subject from a letter written by the Grand Master on the 16th July 1685 (a couple of months before the island was flooded with female slaves from Coron) to the Ricevitore Cordova, who had asked him to present a female slave to an *officiale maggiore della Segreteria di Giustizia*. The Grand Master said he would not forget to do so, but there were none then available, and he would have to wait until such slaves were brought into the island by corsairs or mer-

(16) Liber Bullarum, Salviconductus, die 26 Martii 1691. A.O.M. Ms. 494, f. 119r.

(17) Grand Master's letter to the Ricevitore di Cordova, dated October 29, 1685. A.O.M. Ms. 1452.

(18) Each passport holder (see below) has been roughly put into his age-group at time of capture by subtracting from his age at the time the passport was granted to him (really only a rough estimate itself) the number of complete twelve month intervals that had elapsed since August, 1685. In addition to the figures there were three males whose age was not given and one 6 year old child of unknown sex.

chants for sale. "As we have few corsairs in the Levant, female slaves are nowadays rarely brought here, and one has to be patient" (19). In a letter to the same person dated the 15th October of the same year the Grand Master referred to renewed demands on behalf of the same official and promised further information on the matter. At last on the 13th December the Grand Master informed the same person that he had sent a *schiaivotta* by Lorenzo Attard's *fregata*, and she was to be presented to the above *Segretario di Giustizia*, "per renderlo sempre più ben affezionato nelle cose della Religione".

This *schiaivotta* was not the only slave given away. Two young white male slaves were presented to the Viceroy of Sicily, and two young female slaves to the Viceroy's wife; a black slave (who might not have come from Coron) was given to the Secretary (20). On December 11, 1685, the purchase was sanctioned of a female slave from Coron together with her son for 200 scudi; they were to be decently dressed and then sent *al delegato delle cause di nostra Sacra Religione in Napoli Signor Don Fulvio Caracciolo* (21). Neither were the recipients of these gifts always august personages. A sick female slave aged 30 was given to the clerk Antonio Stofer in recognition of the painstaking and frugal administration of food by him to the slaves brought from Coron (22). Two old female slaves who could not be sold because of their age and infirmities were given away *gratis* to Pietro Scarpello, and a similar slave was given to Maestro Dimitri, the cook of the Magistral Palace (23).

Most of the slaves were probably sold by public auction but as the records of these sales are not kept with the other records of the Order in the Royal Public Library they could not be consulted or even discovered. One or two sales or purchases of slaves coming from Coron have already been mentioned above. Only two further sales have been traced so far. Fra Antonio Battaille asked for and was allowed a delay of six months in paying the sum of 49 scudi for a young girl of Coron (24). Another young girl (eight years old) was sold to a Knight for 53 scudi after having already been sold (illegally, it was claimed) to a Moslem *papasso* who was himself a slave.

The last transaction has an interest all its own. On November 26, 1685, the *Procuratore delle Cause* of the Treasury informed the heads of that department that a certain Hagi Mihamet of Fes, a slave of the Order, had bought by auction through a third person a "piccola schiaivotta", 8 years old, and had had her manumitted; the *Fiscale della Castellania* had already argued that the girl should be confiscated on the strength of a *Pragmatica Magistrale* which had prohibited the purchase by Infidels of such young slaves, in the hope that they would one day be converted to Christianity, but it turned out that this *Pragmatica* had not in fact been confirmed by the Sacred Council and could not be upheld in a court of law. Criminal proceedings against Hagi Mihamet fell through, and the Grand Master called on the Treasury itself to give a decision

(19) Letter *Al Ricevitore Cordova a dì 16 Luglio* (1685). A.O.M. Ms. 1452.

(20) Letter *Al Ricevitore di Palermo a dì 6 Dicembre* (1685). A.O.M. Ms. 1452.

(21) A.O.M. Ms. 646, f. 590.

(22) February 7, 1686. A.O.M. Ms. 646, f. 607.

(23) December 11, 1685. A.O.M. Ms. 646, f. 590. Pietro Scarpello must be the *Barbiere della Prigione* referred to in the same manuscript on folio 587.

(24) 29 May 1686. A.O.M. Ms. 646, folios 641-2.

on the manumission. The Procuratore cited certain texts of law shewing that slaves could not manumit other slaves; he urged the Treasury to declare that the girl therefore still belonged to Hagi Mihamet, and as he was himself a slave of the Order, she should be confiscated (probably on the principle that whatever belonged to a slave belonged in the eyes of the law to the slave's owner). The Treasury's reply could hardly be bettered for its curt simplicity: "We declare the female slave to belong to the Common Treasury". No reasons were given (25). Hagi Mihamet had failed in his endeavour to set the young *Scemscia* free; he not only failed in this but he found himself saddled with debt. He had borrowed the 52 piastres he spent in trying to free the girl; he tried hard to get a similar sum of money from the government who had taken the girl (26). Again he failed. In fact, Hagi Mihamet seems to have been a singularly ill-starred fellow. His claim for the return of the money was still outstanding when he was converted to Christianity fourteen years later (27); he was released conditionally from prison, but by November of the following year (1700), when he was about 68 years old he was back behind bars: the person who had stood surety for him refused to do so any longer. Mihamet wryly complained that the Moslem slaves, who had respected him so much when a Moslem that they had him as their *Papasso* (priest), now mocked him and attributed his misfortunes to his change of religion. The officials of the Treasury gave him a year's grace before he had to pay his ransom, during which time he could, he was briefly informed, stay out of prison if he found anyone who would stand surety for him (28).

Leaving aside the misfortunes of Hagi Mihamet it is now our task to examine the freeing of the Coron captives. The *Libri Bullarum* preserved in the Archives of the Order contain, under the heading *Salviconductus*, registrations of safe-conducts granted during the major part of the time the Order was in Malta. The registrations of safe-conducts gradually died out in the eighteenth century, but they were still quite numerous in the last decades of the seventeenth century and the opening years of the eighteenth, except for the years 1701 to 1703. Between January 1686 and December 1706, safe-conducts were granted to 627 males and 130 females, a total of 757. Out of these, 83 were granted explicitly to persons of Coron (to which number another one has to be added, granted in 1710). There is of course the ever-present danger that registrations were not regular, that many slaves who were freed left the island without getting safe-conducts. It is certainly suspicious that so few of those who got safe-conducts left the island on English or Dutch ships: only two or three cases are known (29). Was this caused by a belief that the flag of those countries offered enough protection; or did the returning freed slaves get passports or safe-conducts from consuls of those nations? One thing is clear; the safe conducts of the Order cost 10 scudi in 1658 (30).

There is also the probability that several of those captured at Coron were

(25) November 26, 1685. A.O.M. Ms. 670, folios 618-9.

(26) December 17, 1685. A.O.M. Ms. 646, folios 593-4.

(27) June 12, 1699. A.O.M. Ms. 647, folios 86v-87r.

(28) November 22, 1700. A.O.M. Ms. 647, f. 135r.

(29) Apr. 6, 1700. A.O.M. Ms. 504, f. 107v.

(30) There are several receipts to this effect, bound up with demands for safe-conducts in A.O.M. Ms. 6466.

not permanent inhabitants of the town. They would therefore not appear in our records as "di Corone", but as inhabitants of other places. As many of these places were also conquered by the Venetians in the years after 1685, it is impossible to include them in the count for Coron. Even if we did we could not escape the conclusion that only a small proportion of the hundreds who came to Malta in 1685 took out safe-conducts from the Order's Chancellery. What became of the rest? Did they settle down here? Were they sold abroad? Our documents are silent.

Almost the first Coronese to be freed were the Jews. Nine of them took out safe-conducts to go on a French ship to Smirna on December 23, 1686, and another five to go to Venice on the following New Year's Day (31). An examination of the Coronese who left shows us that by 1691 forty-five women and twenty men or boys had gone; after that year more men left than women, 13 to 6. Probably the few men captured at Coron found it relatively more difficult than their womenfolk to get their freedom because they were so useful to the Order as rowers in the galleys.

As Coron remained in Venetian hands for a long time after 1685, the freed slaves could not return to their previous homes. Most of them seem to have gone to North Africa. Of those whose destination is known forty seven went to North Africa. They do not include eleven whose destination is vaguely given as "per le parti di ponente", who could really only have gone to Morocco or Algeria and should therefore be added to the previous figure (32). Fifteen are described as bound "per le parti di Barbaria" (33); another fifteen went to Tunis (2 males, 13 females), while Tripoli took nine (5 males, 4 females).

Some slaves who stayed in Malta for several years might have done reasonably well for themselves. Tomaso Long informed the Treasury on October 26, 1699 that he owed the slave Ali di Coró 28 scudi and as Ali's ransom had been fixed he asked the Treasury to take this debt on itself on Ali's behalf, so that Ali might leave the island: the debt would be counted by the Treasury towards the settlement of Ali's ransom (34). The Treasury accepted Long's request, arranging that half of his salary should be retained until the whole sum had been paid. Did Ali get this money from relatives abroad, or by the sale of his assets? Did he earn it during his slavery? In spite of any laws to the contrary slaves were certainly allowed to earn some money by trade and other methods (35). Ali got his safe-conduct on the 22nd December 1699. *Ali figlio di Ussein di Coró 66 di mediocre statura con barba bianca con una cicatrice nel braccio sinistro si parte con.....(sic) (36).*

(31) Both groups are to be found in A.O.M. Ms. 491, f. 341r.

(32) A.O.M. Ms. 492, folios 178v, 179r.

(33) Examples: A.O.M. Ms. 491, f. 220r; A.O.M. Ms. 492, 168v.

(34) A.O.M. Ms. 647, f. 101r.

(35) This will have to wait for detailed study in another place.

(36) A.O.M. Ms. 503, f. 154v.

## APPENDIX

Table showing racial origin and sex of ex-slaves granted safe-conducts at Malta to return to a Moslem country (1686-1706). Those from Coron are given separately.

The following table has been compiled by an examination of the sections entitled *Salviconducti* in the *Libri Bullarum*, Ann. 1686-1706 (A.O.M. Mss. 491-510). Some difficulty has been found in deciding whether, for example, *Ali bin Mihamet delli Monasteri* was a Turk or a "Moor", but the majority of registrations are quite clear. The designations *Turco* and *Moro* seem to be applied in almost all cases with very great care. Even when they are absent other factors can be taken into account in enabling us to reach a conclusion. Practically all males described explicitly as *Turco* have the word *oghli* instead of *bin*, and we are justified in concluding that all those that have the same word must be Turks, while all those who have *bin* must be Moors. I have only hesitated in the case of *bin* names placed in the Balkans. The table is unavoidably only an approximation to the truth, though probably a close one.

	CORON		TURKS		MOORS		JEWS		NEGROES		VAGUE		TOTALS		Both Sexes
	M.	F.	M.	F.	M.	F.	M.	F.	M.	F.	M.	F.	M.	F.	
1686	4	16	21	4	33	9	2	1	1	2	3	—	64	32	96
1687	4	11	5	1	14	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	25	12	37
1688	10	9	21	2	12	—	—	—	—	—	2	2	45	13	58
1689	2	3	13	—	6	1	1	—	—	1	—	—	22	5	27
1690	—	2	24	3	14	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	38	5	43
1691	—	4	21	4	29	8	—	—	—	—	2	—	52	16	68
1692	5	1	12	1	27	3	—	—	—	1	—	—	44	6	50
1693	—	4	8	5	18	4	—	—	—	—	2	—	28	13	41
1694	1	—	16	2	12	1	1	—	1	1	—	1	31	5	36
1695	2	—	10	1	23	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	35	1	36
1696	2	—	33	1	21	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	56	1	57
1697	—	—	20	3	25	—	—	—	—	—	3	2	48	5	53
1698	1	—	4	1	5	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	10	2	12
1699	1	—	2	—	16	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	19	—	19
1700	—	1	1	1	11	2	1	—	—	—	—	—	13	4	17
1701	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1702	—	—	7	1	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	8	1	9
1703	—	—	2	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	—	3
1704	—	—	27	4	12	1	—	—	—	—	4	—	43	5	48
1705	—	—	17	1	5	—	—	—	—	—	3	—	25	1	26
1706	—	—	13	—	3	1	—	—	—	1	2	1	18	3	21
Totals:	32	51	277	35	287	31	8	1	2	6	21	6	627	130	757