THE XPRUNARA

Joseph Muscat

The xprunara originated in Malta and was always designated as such, although a few were copied or bought and operated in Sicily, Livorno and North Africa. As the Maltese word xprunara is part of the local vocabulary the Maltese rending ought to be preferred to the rendition of speronara.

If we are to search for the first references to a xprunara we have to go back to the sixteenth century. In Malta at that period one would find the brigantine from which most probably the xprunara evolved. The open boat type brigantine with a sperone at the bows, double ended, using sails and oars first appeared in the Mediterranean in the thirteenth century and was very popular in the Muslim world. The xprunara was influenced by the brigantine and in time it developed the use of movable side washboards. The first written information about the xprunara goes back to 1576 but more reliable sources refer to the years 1614, 1618 and 1663. The first dated iconographical evidence of a xprunara is found at Tal-Herba Sanctuary in an ex-voto painting dated 1740. After that date one can trace the complete evolution of the xprunara up to the twentieth century mostly in the great quantity of ex-voto paintings in many churches in Malta and Gozo.

Influences on Maltese boat building

It is believed that the first men to cross over to Malta came from Sicily. Communications by sea continued for centuries influencing the whole social

1. P.A. Hennique, Les Caboteurs et Pecheurs de la Cote de Tunisie, Nice, 1989, 49
2. NAR Lib 3 April 1746 mentions the xprunara of Ternanoa; D. Manetti, Marina militare e costruzioni navali nel Granducato di Toscana (1815 - 1859) in T. Fanfani, La Penisola Italiana e il Mare, Napoli, 1993, pp.402-3; Hennique, 52.
4. P.P. Castagna, Le Storia ta' Malta il-gżejjer taghha, facsimile edition, Malta 1985, 1, 22 might have misinterpreted the nomenclature of the xprunara when it should have been a galley.
5. NLM 413, 98; AOM 1759, f.426v; MMV l, 87;
The ship of such a boat in Gozo. On modern Maltese boats of colour schemes and decorative elements which two features are to be found was the direct descendant of the Maltese type of boat building with that of early ships.

Sicilian influence can be traced on local boat building both in structure affinities and linguistic terminology. The Arab domination of the Maltese Islands lasted for centuries and North African influences must have affected the local boat building trade. The same type of boat must have sailed in the central Mediterranean between the countries of North Africa and Sicily right up to the thirteenth century. One would have expected that the long Arab or Saracen domination of Malta would have left clear signs of influences on local boats but it is not easy to establish these similarities.

The arrival of the Knights of St. John, brought a degree of French technological expertise especially from 1700 onwards that can be traced to present day Maltese boats. As a general rule these boats are built exactly to the same technological expertise especially from the Mediterranean between the countries of North Africa and Sicily right up to the thirteenth century. One would have expected that the long Arab or Saracen domination of Malta would have left clear signs of influences on local boats but it is not easy to establish these similarities.

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The registration of ships under the Order of St. John in Malta followed certain rules of control which were comparatively loose by modern standards. There was no direct checking on the tonnage of merchant ships although warships were rated as in any other country. Loading was left entirely to the discretion of the master with one condition. He had to certify when applicable, that certain cargoes were loaded on deck since such cargoes were not usually covered by an insurance policy. As the xprunara was an open boat or sometimes half decked, masters were at liberty to take on board what they deemed fit for each trip. It must be pointed out that the greater ships, employed on the grain carrying trade for the Università, were actually checked by two capi masiri of the Arsenal, certifying that the ship was fit for sailing and that the loading mark in the hold had been respected.

After the Napoleonic Wars, under British rule, Malta experienced a period of great mercantile expansion. British standards replaced the old methods adopted by shipbuilders and merchants under the Knights. Registration of ships became more comprehensive and included the nomenclature of the ship, its name, tonnage, number of decks and masts, dimensions of length beam and hold, description of deck, bowsprit, stern, galleries and of the figurehead if applicable. The registration included also the name of the master shipbuilder, the launching date and details of the owner. The registration of xprunari included such amendments indicating modifications affecting the capacity of the vessel such
as the lengthening of the hull and the transformation of the vessel from a simple boat to a xprunara.

With the availability of such data for the period 1820-55 one has a wealth of information about xprunari when compared to the rather meagre information about these vessels as described in the records of the Order. Yet the pre-British records abound with inventories, descriptions of cargoes carried by the xprunari and the personal reasons given for the movements of passengers from one country to another.

The wave of innovation under the British rule affected also the mentality of some local masters of xprunari who chose to adopt profane names for their vessels instead of names of saints. While all the xprunari operating under the Knights’ rule bore the name of a saint under British rule such names as Abbondanza, Glotosa, Sirena, Gianna, Giuseppina, Susanna, Speranza, Rondinella, Carmela, Superba, Generosa and others were introduced; however some xprunari retained the names of saints. The xprunara was generally allotted a feminine name although there are a few instances when the name Salvatore was used.

The registration of ships during the period 1820-55 included fifty xprunari; when such boats changed the ownership they were registered de novo. The registration footnotes included such events as sales or the whole number of shares of a boat, when declared unseaworthy or lost at sea or taken as a prize of war. From time to time, registration certificates were to be shown when required in other countries as a means of identification. The change of name of a xprunara often created confusion in further registration and identification. The change of name of a xprunara often created confusion in further registration and identification. The case of the xprunara Pace vis-a-vis the Consul in Tripoli is one such example.

From a perusal of the Register of Ships built in Malta, one could establish the principal master shipbuilders working in the French Creek area who constructed the xprunari for the period 1820-55. It seems that the Piscopo family specialised in building such vessels. Giocchino Albano and Francesco Orlando both of Cospicua, Antonio Gauci from Vittoriosa and the brothers Antonio and Agostino Piscopo built just one xprunara each. But Giuseppe Piscopo, Antonio Piscopo both from Senglea and Benedetto Ellul from Cospicua, launched nine, four and four xprunari respectively. Lorenzo Drago from Cospicua, Agostino Piscopo from Senglea and Lorenzo Piscopo from Cospicua constructed four, two and two respectively. The more renowned ship builders of the period such as Salvatore and Lorenzo German and Gioacchino Bonnici from Senglea and Giuseppe Camilleri from Cospicua, while concentrating on the construction of brigs and barques never refused a commission to build xprunari. There was an instance when four xprunari were being built concurrently in four different slipways at the French Creek.

The Register of Ships built in Malta provides technical information for the study of Maltese ships. The xprunara was built by master shipbuilders and perhaps also by non-professionals following traditional methods which had proved their worth over the centuries. No plans of a xprunara or other Maltese boat exist; indeed they were not required. All builders applied the rules which govern the design of the middle section of a boat. Such a practice continues to the present day. The owner of the xprunara dictates the length of his boat in the Maltese measure, the siber, and the builder translates the length into feet and inches. A boatbuilder at Marsaxlokk is still in possession of an old type of conversion wooden ruler showing the siber on one side and the equivalents in feet and inches on the other. Once the length is agreed between the owner and the builder, other dimensions would be calculated following the family trade "secrets" governing the galvu or moulds. While all xprunari were built to the same pattern the length between the perpendiculars determined the size and hold capacity. A twenty six foot xprunara registered a three ton burthen while a fifty foot one a forty five ton burthen.

14. NAR Lib is a series of booklets which contain interesting material as regards the movements of passengers from one country to another; NAMCons contains hundreds of volumes which show the inventories of local ships.
15. The study of ex-voto paintings showed that saint names were always used on the xprunari. It has been observed that in the series of NARLib a double name of Il Santissimo Crocifisso followed by another saint name has always been used.
16. NAR RSB passim
17. The study of the Register of Ships Built in Malta provided valuable information about the latest methods of registering shipping in Malta under British rule; NAR RSB passim.
18. Muscat, Maltese Ship, 76-77
19. Information kindly provided by Mr Joseph Maniscalco of Marsaxlokk.
21. NAR RSB 84
22. NAR RSB 20
Inventories

Whenever the xprunara was hired to undertake a journey transporting merchandise an inventory by a public notary was compiled for insurance purposes. In some cases the estimated value of the xprunara was assessed by Michele Scolaro who was a capo mastro employed in the galley Arsenal of the Order at Birgu\(^\text{23}\). The one masted xprunara named Il Santissimo Crocifisso e la Madonna del Rosario belonging to master Santo Vella was valued at one hundred and ninety scudi on 4 March 1740\(^\text{24}\) while another one masted xprunara, II Santissimo Crocifisso e l'Anime del Purgatorio was estimated at a value of one hundred scudi on 5 November 1739\(^\text{25}\).

The study of such inventories provides further information about such vessels which were equipped with regular navigational instruments, cooking utensils and the necessary carpenters’ and caulkers’ tools for minor repairs. The navigational instruments included a compass or one or two hour glasses and a small lamp, all kept in a small wooden cupboard known as chiesola or gisiola. A great lantern was hoisted on the mast at night but the xprunara also carried two lanterns. When caught on a deserted beach there was provision for the preparation of meals and therefore the xprunara was provided with great or small copper pots, frying pans and gridirons\(^\text{26}\).

Notwithstanding the restricted space available on the vessel it managed to carry barrels of drinking water and wine, water wooden jugs and wooden shovels for bailing when necessary. The frequent beaching of a xprunara necessitated the carrying of a number of wooden keel blocks, wooden and iron stakes, a great wooden mallet and various lengths and types of strong ropes and strops. A small, movable wooden capstan\(^\text{27}\) which was operated by two levers while fixed strongly on land to pull the xprunara on the beach was also carried.

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23. Muscat, The Arsenal, 291;
24. NAMCons 4 March 1740
25. NAMCons 5 November 1739
26. The study of numerous inventories for xprunari contained in the NAMCons series constitutes the basis for a thorough knowledge about the evolution of the ship.
27. W. Schellinki, Journey to the South 1664 - 1665, Rome 1983, pl.48b shows a picture of a wooden portable capstan; see also NAMCons 21 Inventario della Barca speronara nominata Il SSma Crocifisso padroneggiata da Pn. Francesco Camilloni where it mentions amongst other items piu un argano.
through the year and its crew were always ready to adapt themselves to the ever changing conditions of the elements and the exigencies of the market when for economic reasons, speed was the main asset\textsuperscript{29}.

The early xprunara like its forerunner, the brigantine, must have sailed under one lateen sail with a jib at the bows. As early as the end of the fifteenth century the simple rig of a spritsail made its appearance on boats. The spritsail, or tarkija\textsuperscript{30}, immediately attracted the attention of Maltese crews. A xprunara was manned by a relatively small crew when one considered the distances covered. The sprit rig required very few men to handle it and was the ideal sail arrangement for the xprunara. But greater versions of the vessel introduced a second mast which necessitated the installation of the lateen rig on both masts with a jib or pollakkun.

The sprit and lateen rig on xprunari continued concurrently up to the second half of the nineteenth century when the greater boats with a length of sixty feet introduced the third mast at the stern. Such a xprunara with lateen sails on three masts and a jib was an indication that Maltese masters were competing with the greater and faster brigs and barks.

In the 1850s there was an attempt to add a small lateen sail at the stern rigged on a mast situated in front of or behind the awning of the passengers with a sprit rig on the main mast. The sprit rig on one mast included the larger sail for normal sailing with a jib, the smaller sail for rough weather. Both sails with the jib rigged as a topsail was the normal rig when the xprunara ran before the wind. The chequered white and blue, small spritsail was quite popular with local masters of xprunari.

By the end of the nineteenth century there were individual attempts to introduce a schooner rig on the xprunara when it faded out completely into obsolescence\textsuperscript{31}.

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\textsuperscript{29} For more information about the Maltese sail cloth see Muscat, Arsenal, 297 et seq.

\textsuperscript{30} One can see a model of a ferilla under the sprit or tarkija rig in the Maritime Museum Birgu.

\textsuperscript{31} The study of the evolution of the sail arrangement on the xprunara was possible after examining a great number of Maltese ex-voto paintings which otherwise was not possible to trace except for few pages by Hennique where he explained the boat in the 1880s.

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Roles of the Xprunara

The xprunara was primarily a passenger carrying vessel designed for speed and the accommodation of a few people under cover without any means of defence except its swiftness. Round the Grand Harbour one could always find a xprunara ready to go over to Sicily against payment. Such boats were built in great numbers as there was a constant communication between Malta and Sicily. One could always hire the services of those boats either from Malta or Italy. As the xprunari were in great demand all through the year the charges were reasonable. A trip from Naples to Malta in 1777 was effected for just two hundred livres de France\textsuperscript{32} according to the itinerary of the route and the number of crew on the boat. The xprunara undertook much longer routes in the Mediterranean than those to Sicily when required and even ventured out of the Straits of Gibraltar\textsuperscript{33}.

Normally two passengers were enough incentive for a master of a xprunara to put to sea. But when required the boat could accommodate a party of passengers and greater numbers on short crossings, say from Malta to Gozo. Religious people made frequent use of the xprunara as most of the religious orders in Malta depended on their respective Mother Houses in Sicily or Italy\textsuperscript{34}. Even the Bishop of Malta residing in Reggio had his own xprunara\textsuperscript{35}. Another bishop travelling on a tartana was put down in a xprunara some distance from St. Elmo and later entered the Grand Harbour\textsuperscript{36}. This perhaps explains why the internal lining of the awning of the cabin at the stern is shown in red in one ex-voto painting depicting a xprunara. The dignitaries of the church and other nobles were treated with some distinction. When a Ricevitore, a high ranking officer of the Order of St John, had to call at Augusta to pay for the supplies of biscuits consumed on the ships of the Order, his xprunara was for security reasons escorted by the galley squadron\textsuperscript{37}.

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\textsuperscript{32} Borch, Le Comte De, Lettres sur la Sicile et sur l'Isle de Malthe, Turin 1782, 6

\textsuperscript{33} L. Boisgelin, Ancient and Modern Malta, London 1805, vol.1, 114

\textsuperscript{34} NAR Lib 30 April 1746 and 18 October 1746 show religious and secular priests using the xprunara for crossing over to Sicily or Italy but there were other Maltese ships like the tartana in NAR Lib 15 October 1746 which amongst other passengers it carried five ecclesiastics. Various ex-voto paintings show religious people travelling on the xprunara.

\textsuperscript{35} NLM 280, 193-4

\textsuperscript{36} NLM 280, 196

\textsuperscript{37} NLM 280, 103
Passenger comfort was reasonable. Food was kept in a large basket and passengers were expected to take their own food with them. On at least one occasion, we read about a crew who shared with the passengers their frugal supplies which were kept in their hammocks. They slept whenever they liked. When there were more than two passengers, they had to lie on the hard boards of the cabin and had to become accustomed to the rhythmical swinging of the boat. Borch wrote his diary while on the xprunara which danced continually but this does not seem to have affected him. Moreover, the confined space of the cabin was sometimes infested by vermin causing an unpleasant and irritating itchings. But at least on the non-decked xprunara one would never be annoyed by the bad smell from the sentina as experienced on all other types of decked vessels. In rough weather the terrified passengers could be consoled by the hardy crew who instead of continuing on a steady course might haul down the sail and head for the nearest port or shelter waiting for better weather conditions.

Arriving in Malta the xprunara would have to approach the Piccolo Barriera for sanitary certification. A quarantine officer would question under oath all passengers and crew in a most polite manner, about the circumstances of their voyage before issuing the sanitary certificates.

A typical journey from Naples to Malta entails the loading of provisions in greater quantities than the luggage carried by the passengers. That was necessary as the boat might be compelled to beach in deserted areas where one could not find any food. It was customary to pull such boats ashore at the least sign of approaching bad weather.

38. P. Brydone, A Tour through Sicily and Malta, second edition, London 1774, 319 and Borch, 133
39. Borch, 14
40. Arte, 7 March 1864, 32
41. Borch, 42
42. Brydone, 323
43. Borch, 5
44. Arte, 7 March 1864, 32
45. Brydone, 306
46. Borch, 6
47. id., ibid.

The Xprunara

Usually the predictions of the master of the boat as regards the weather proved to be correct and when in doubt he never faced the open sea but kept close to the coast; he was able to read the signs in the sky as so many Maltese fishermen do to this very day. An imminent tempest could force a xprunara to beach on a deserted coast if necessary for various days.

The unexpected delay left the crew and passengers without bread or meat although they usually had some wine. They all had to sleep in the xprunara which sometimes was equipped with mattresses and blankets. So the crew had always to be prepared for the unexpected. On one occasion the sea was so rough that the beached xprunara had to be pulled three metres further inland. As soon as weather conditions improved the passengers were advised to prepare for departure although it was almost midnight. Such nocturnal seafaring was normal for the crew of a xprunara, to evade marauding corsairs. However, when they arrived at harbour late in the night they usually had to wait till day break before proceeding with the customary checking of passports and quarantine formalities.

Another role of the xprunara included the carrying of great quantities of grain imported from Sicily since Feudal times. The xprunara was kept busy also with the carrying trade together with other auxiliary vessels.

A good number of xprunari were employed on the transport of corn and other provisions from Sicily. But sometimes the boat was also loaded with live cattle which were lashed fast to the thwarts of the boat for safety. Licata, Augusta, Siracusa, Messina and other places in Sicily were also frequented by Maltese amateurs. Even the few xprunari bought by North African masters were employed for the transportation of grain.

48. Borch, 5
49. Borch, 16, 25, 26
50. Borch, 13
51. Borch, 14
52. Borch, 24
53. Borch, 42, 64
54. Borch, 230
55. Boisgebin, 1, 114
56. id., ibid.
58. Hennique, 52
Most of the time the xprunari unloaded in one of the various warehouses in the Grand Harbour. But when required the boats had to call at St. Paul's Bay to unload the corn especially if it belonged to private owners or to the *Università*[^19]. St. Paul's Bay was equipped to cater for such transactions and it was covered also by the right of anchorage. The place was used, from time to time, by xprunari to embark passengers for Sicily and Italy[^46].

Bills of lading were always required when handling cargoes of grain and other material subject to fiscal duties. The master of a xprunara had to fill in the certificates before departure and to hand in a copy to the *Consolato del Mare* clearly declaring the provisions and money carried[^41]. For that reason the master was obliged to employ a suitable person to act as clerk of the vessel[^62]. Even those boats proceeding to Gozo with cargo had to produce a bill of lading[^63].

In his plight to persuade Grand Master Pinto to procure his pardon from Rome, Chevalier de la Richardie insisted that a xprunara should be sent at his own expense[^64]. A waiting boat was always ready at the Customs House in the Grand Harbour to convey an urgent message anywhere. Such boats were constantly employed for such work or the carrying of despatches for the Order of St. John[^65]. While at sea Fra Suffren received a message to return to base in 1798 by means of a xprunara[^66]. Exchange of letters at sea was frequent and provided a fairly efficient service for those who could afford it[^69].

[^59]: Castagna, II, 150

[^60]: id., ibid.

[^61]: Del Diritto, 196; Leggi e Costituzioni Prammaticali, Malta 1724, 145

[^62]: Leggi e Costituzioni, 147

[^63]: AFFV Misc.1, f.26 says: *Transportandini l'orzo del Gozzo nun marinaro o padrone di barca avuto l'ordine di trasportarlo senza prima aver dal secreto un polizino di retta al Notaro della secretia del gozzo, il quale notaro ogni qualvolta inviera orzo dovra dare al padrone della barca in scritto la quantità che avera imbarcata per presentarla nel suo arrivo o ad graf visconte o ad altra persona ben vista al Secreto.*

[^64]: C.E. Engel, *Knights of Malta*, London 1963, 148

[^65]: *Scientia*, vol.37, no.3, July/September 1974


[^67]: AOM 1768, f.64; AOM 274, f.223; Arte, 7 March 1864, 32


[^69]: C.S. Sonnini, *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt*, London 1800, 46

[^70]: Brydone, 313

[^71]: Cavaliero, 52

[^72]: Brydone, 332

[^73]: Borch, 159

[^74]: Borch, 158

[^75]: NLM 413, 98

[^76]: AOM 1759, f.426v

In this context the speed of the xprunara was well recognised and its services frequently used. It was referred to as a nimble vessel[^28] and perhaps the fastest sailor in the world[^65]. Brydone left a different appreciation of the speed when he said that it sailed at four miles per hour from Sicily to Malta but in face of a strong wind[^70]. This means that the boat would finish the crossing in fifteen hours. It seems that the crossing would normally take twelve hours with a fair wind and most probably in less when running before the wind and helped by the oars. Others are less optimistic and suggest that such a passage of sixty miles always took about a day[^71]. Brydone remarked also that there would remain a three hour sailing period from the first sight of Malta on the horizon till arrival at the Grand Harbour[^72]. Borch maintains that fifteen miles off Capo Passero, Malta would be visible[^73]. If we put these two assertions together, it seems that a distance of forty five miles used to be covered in three hours a speed of fifteen miles per hour. But Borch gives a time factor of seventeen hours for the sixty miles crossing between Malta and Sicily, a speed of three and a half miles per hour[^74].

The galleys of the Order of St. John were always accompanied by their respective caiques and feluccas. But on two specific occasions the xprunara was also employed although it was never classed as a fighting unit. On 21 August 1618 three xprunari were impressed by the Order of St. John to accompany the galley squadron for an attack by fire on Muslim ships at Susa. Due to a poor mixture of the gunpowder only two out of the ten enemy ships were destroyed[^75]. In 1663 the Council of the Order of St. John decided to replace a felucca of the galley squadron by a xprunara which was appointed to accompany the galleys Santa Maria, San Giovanni and San Luigi for the duration of a month each[^76].

Spying and *reconnoitre* missions for the galley squadron of the Order were always assigned to caiques, brigantines *feluccas* and *fregati*; such boats were
used by Muslims as well. The *xprunara* was too conspicuous and would be recognised quite easily from a distance. Yet on 9 August 1733 one such *xprunara* was sent near Corfu to keep an eye on the movements of the Ottoman ships operating in that area.

The Grand Harbour of Malta was guarded twenty four hours a day. For that purpose the Order of St. John erected a tower under Fort Ricasoli to watch out for any escaping slaves. But there was also a lateen rigged brigantine or a *xprunara* on guard duties usually moored close to Neptune’s Fountain to keep an eye on all traffic entering the Harbour and at the same time to check all ship movements up to the Marsa area.

Normally a *xprunara* carried no arms but when assigned guard duties it would be furnished with muskets, pikes, bucklers, powder and shot and other necessary provisions. When a guard boat would not be able to stay at its normal station near Neptune’s Fountain because of strong winds it would move to the opposite side under Fort Ricasoli. The *Congregazione* or committee for the running of the galley squadron controlled the guard boats.

The *xprunara* on guard duties was utilised also with other *caiques* to tow ships out of harbour. When required the same *xprunara* would sail at night to convey an urgent message to the ship squadron of the Order at sea. It would return the day after with the answer from the squadron commander. Even when not on guard duties the *xprunara* was engaged to tow a becalmed *tartana*.

The flat and somewhat narrow *xprunara* was not adapted to rough seas. For that reason it followed coast to coast routes keeping as close as possible to land, except where there was the hazard of unchartered reefs. Such a system of sailing guaranteed a speedy approach to shore at the least sign of trouble from rough seas or corsairs.

The Barbary corsairs were always a hazard for the *xprunara* although it normally outpaced all their boats. Even the Gozo *xprunari* were a favourite prey of the African pirates and Barbareseque vessels. The sea round the Maltese Islands was infested with corsairs right up to 1830 when they were blasted out of their last stronghold in Algiers. Two Maltese *xprunari* were anchored safely at Mazzarelli in Sicily but unfortunately they were ransacked on 26 May 1798 by two well armed Turkish *caiques*. Such stories were repeated quite often as the *xprunari* travelled between Malta and Sicily regularly.

Maltese *xprunari* were often employed on smuggling. Maltese sailors were notorious corsairs and smuggling was their principal occupation. Maltese corsairing continued even when Malta passed under British rule. A *xprunara* with twelve crew and led by the Knight Fra Luigi d’Anneville subdued a small Barbareseque *londro*. Therefore, the *xprunara* was not always that frail vessel persecuted by corsairs but it could be armed for attacking small enemy vessels when required.

When Napoleon took Malta in 1798 the Grand Harbour was teeming with *xprunari*. Ransijat referred to the many Maltese *xprunari* in the Harbour. This boat was to play an important role both for the benefit of the French garrison blockaded in Valletta and by the blockaders. The *xprunara* which happened to

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77. AOM 269, f.18
78. Leggi, 77
80. Leggi, 76
81. AOM 1773, f.70
82. AOM 1773, ff.81v, 82
83. NLM 280, 194
84. Henrique, 49; Brydone, 312
85. Brydone, 312
86. Borch, 64
87. Schellinks, pl.34; Henrique, 51
88. Borch, 157; Brydone, 318
90. Vassallo, 386
91. AOM 277, f.9v
92. Boisgctin, I, 114
93. Henrique, 49
94. G. Segond, *Storja ta’ Malta u Għawdex*, vol.5, Malta 1930, 259
95. AOM 271, f.256v
96. B. Ransijat, *Assedio e Blocco di Malta* (Giornale), Malta 1843, 17, 49
be outside the Grand Harbour before Napoleon entered the Harbour with his fleet, were utilised by the Maltese and their allies for various purposes. It was used by the blockaded and blockaders to carry despatches, link up communications between Africa and Sicily or Naples and for the transport of provisions98. The French authorities in Valletta were compelled to arm a felucca to intercept the xprunari operating round Malta99. After 1800 the arrivals and departure columns of the Malta Government Gazette register a very busy level of activity of the xprunara100.

While Sicilian armateurs introduced some elements of the xprunara on their boats, North African masters from Hamamet, Sfax and Gerba operated with xprunari bought and built in Malta101.

The Crew

The crew of a xprunara normally consisted of a master and six rowers who also had to handle the sails102. The number of the crew could also include a master and four rowers103 or six104 in all depending on the size of the boat. A specially prepared xprunara carried a crew of twelve with a Knight in command105. It is rather surprising to find a Sicilian rower on a Maltese xprunara. It might have been one of those rare occasions when such a boat ran short of a rower and the master recruited a Sicilian for the return journey to Malta106.

The Maltese sailor had no specific uniform. There might have been an attempt in the 1860s to dress the dhajsa man and the sailor of the xprunara with a sort of uniform influenced by British standards. The experiment failed. A picture depicting a Maltese sailor presents him with a typical Maltese dark blue headdress, the milsa; which was surrounded with a broad white band on the part round the forehead. His white shirt is open at the neck and he wears a white and dark blue thin striped trousers. In place of the belt the sailor uses the traditional Maltese waist band or terha, which is also striped to match the trousers. The heavy blue jacket hanging from the shoulders is fitted with white or silver buttons. The man is shown barefoot and holding a certificate or an identity card in his hand in testimony of his status107.

Generally speaking the crews of xprunari as depicted in ex-voto paintings are shown with white shirts and sleeves rolled up. The milsa was generally worn by all members of the crew in different shades of red, white, blue and green. Sometimes, the little money and the chewing tobacco was kept in the funnel end of the milsa. The terha is shown on every crew member, sometimes of one colour and on occasion in a mixture of reds, whites, blues or browns. The Maltese sailor always kept ready well tucked in his terha a short, broad knife and a pouch for the few coins that he may carry apart from those tucked away in the milsa. By the middle of the nineteenth century the straw hat was to replace the milsa, an introduction influenced by the advent of the Royal Navy. Long trousers were always worn in dark colours and sometimes shown rolled up to the knees. The Maltese expressed a trait of vanity by using a golden ring on one ear and the growing of the bushy moustache on the upper lip. The master is invariably shown standing at the tiller wearing his heavy coat complete with capuche or hood as a protection against the spray, rain and heavy sea. In fine weather his dress followed the pattern used by his crew including also the use of the straw hat108.

“The xprunari are navigated by the most intrepid seamen;” this remark by Sonnini109 was repeated by others who remark favourably on the expertise of Maltese sailors at sea. The Maltese had to go to the sea for their survival since prehistoric times and their activities on boats as fishermen or corsairs were always appreciated110. The chronicler of the Order of St John, Dal Pozzo, refers to a naval encounter dated 13 June 1636 between three Tripolitanian warships and the galley squadron saying that the Maltese proved themselves excellent soldiers

98. Hardman, XXIX, 104, 110, 292
99. Hardman, 170
100. MGG 1829, 4 February 1836
101. Henrique, 52, 77
102. AOM 277, f.9v
103. Henrique, 52, 77
104. Hardman, 170; Brydone, 324
105. AOM 271, f.256v; Boisgelin, 1, 114
106. G. Belli, Storja ta' Malta u Għawdex, vol.7, Malta 1932, 2496

107. NLM 1145 shows a picture annotated as Marinari di Speronara Maltese.
108. The examination of a number of ex-voto paintings was required to determine on the type of clothing worn by the xprunara crew.
109. Sonnini, 46
110. A.A. Cambana, Frammento Critico della Storia, Malta 1899, 474
and sailors. Brydone wrote in his diary that the crew of a xprunara preferred to sleep in their boat, “having much more confidence in their own element” and absolutely refuse to sleep under cover on the shore. They had such a thorough knowledge of the normal route between Naples and Malta that they would decline the services of a pilot even where a precise knowledge of the area was essential for safe navigation. The boldness of the crew was beyond description; “though constantly exposed to the dangers of a storm, they seldom experienced any serious misfortune.”

The crew of the xprunara could be judged at their best when rowing in perfect rhythm and synchronisation. As a rule the boat travelled under sail but when greater speeds were required the crew entered into action. The oars were handled with great dexterity with the crew facing the bows pushing them, while standing, thus applying all the weight of their body. This method of rowing effected a better push on the oar with the least exertion of the muscles. Maltese rowers seldom sit down while they row. The sailors of the xprunara were able to face the sea from all angles, under adverse conditions and undertake the longest voyages without risking the lives of the passengers. Their method of breaking through the waves shortened the duration of the voyage. Such manoeuvres were possible and proved to be a credit to the method of Maltese boat builders.

Departures

Although eighteenth century primary sources are incomplete they provide samples of reliable data as regards the departures of xprunari from Malta. The xprunari were always available, moored by Neptune’s Fountain or in the vicinity ready to sail anywhere in the Mediterranean. They sailed out of the Grand Harbour on any day of the year. June and July were the most popular months mostly chosen by passengers for their voyages to all parts of Sicily, the West coast of Italy in the Tyrrhenian Sea to France and Spain.

It has been observed that in June 1773, 1778 and 1781 the number of xprunari that left Malta to various destinations was ten, eleven and seventeen respectively. This may explain the popularity of the boat as a fast means of transport and at the same time reflects also on the great numbers of such boats that were available.
in the Grand Harbour. On 16 and 25 June 1777 six and seven xprunari left Malta on the respective days for the same place namely Marsamemi in Sicily\textsuperscript{126}.

A charge of ten grani\textsuperscript{127} was imposed on all small sailing vessels such as xprunari, brigantines, chebecs, martiganas, feluccas and fregate paid at the Castellania prior to departure to Sicilian ports. When such vessels sailed further away to Naples and round the Western coast of Italy to Marseilles and Spain they were charged one scudo. But one comes across exceptions to such charges without a plausible explanation. The greater ships with a better hold capacity such as a pinco or tartana where also charged one scudo\textsuperscript{128}.

**Arrivals**

Booklets\textsuperscript{129} dated 1744 to 1747 contain valuable information regarding the timing, crews, cargoes, and passengers on ships arriving in the Grand Harbour. The booklets for the year 1746 are complete while the others contain many gaps. The month July 1746 registered forty one xprunari arriving in Malta which was the greatest number for any one month. This number includes a few xprunari coming from Terranova\textsuperscript{130}. During other months in the period registered the arrival of sixteen and fewer numbers of xprunari monthly. The xprunari sailed all through the year depending on the prevailing weather conditions. Predictably in winter the smallest number of arrivals is registered.

One can safely say that the xprunari arrived in Malta between sunrise to sunset. Every hour or fraction of it are listed between 6 a.m. and 7.30 p.m. Other time indication is given as first Ave Maria, between the two Ave Marias, half an hour after the second Ave Maria, Pater Noster and the second Ave Maria. The registered places of departure include all the places in Sicily, Reggio, Naples, Rome, Leghorn, Genoa, Marseilles and Spain; the Adriatic or the East side of Italy is hardly ever mentioned.

It is very interesting to read how the xprunari were employed to collect information, to carry personal letters and despatches, to transport merchants and passengers, to run personal errands for the General of the galley squadron, to transport quantities of tunny fish from Sicily, at other times they are engaged in fishing, carrying sundry items to be sold elsewhere and on one occasion picking up an indisposed caravanist at Augusta. One can appreciate the fact that the great numbers of xprunari available in the Grand Harbour ensured a service at any hour of the day from sunrise to sunset\textsuperscript{131}.

As one might expect the xprunari carried small cargoes; the great ships were employed on the bulkier merchandise. But the xprunara was deemed more suitable for the carrying of perishable items like ricotta, cheese, cascio cavallo and fish. But the transportation of snow, which was highly in demand for iced drinks, was undertaken by the special fregata della neve\textsuperscript{132}. Pigs and poultry were imported from Sicilian ports quite often together with livestock including calves in somewhat smaller quantities. Other food commodities included honey, spices, nuts, rhubarb, olives, salami, salted meats, dried lentils, fresh fruit, cocoa and tea. Cloth, cotton thread, socks, handkerchiefs, glassware and books were regularly transported by the xprunara.

Quarantine laws were strictly observed and the booklets specify the restriction of sailing to a specific number of days. One can guess the hardship imposed on a master of a xprunara whose daily bread depended on its regular employment. Sanitary officials\textsuperscript{133} imposed quarantine periods ranging from thirty days to just a couple of days at Marsamxett without a plausible or explicable pattern emerging. A xprunara was granted a clean sanitary certificate in bringing back to Malta a caravanist and his valet while another such boat had to undergo four days quarantine because it carried a passenger most probably not covered by a clean certificate. A xprunara which was carrying una scatola di seta was subjected to the quarantine laws. The days spent by a xprunara at Marsalforn\textsuperscript{134} due to bad weather were counted as part of the quarantine period. A xprunara was granted clean certificate per non aver praticato\textsuperscript{135}.

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126. NARRP 1773, 1777, 1778, 1781 passim.
127. NARRP 15 July 1777, no.18
128. NARRP 17 November 1777, no.61
129. NARLib 1744, 1747 passim.
130. NARLib 10 and 29 July 1746
131. NARLib passim; the available number of Libretti provide ample material for the study of the role of the xprunara.
132. NARLib 8 October 1746, but sometimes a brigantine transported the snow, too; see NARLib 22 January 1746 and 16 June 1746.
133. Brydone, I, 306
134. NARLib 15 June 1746 refers to a xprunara which was carrying una scatola di seta and NARLib 7 March 1744 mentions the xprunara which was sheltering at Marsalforn, Gozo.
135. NARLib 14 October 1744
Harbour with all its crew in a sick condition, it had to undergo ten days quarantine. Such laws necessitated the availability of a great number of xprunari to cater for the daily needs and services required at the quays of the Grand Harbour.

Passengers travelling on the xprunara included people from all the social strata of those days including Knights, counts, and other noblemen, the Consuls of Holland, prelates, priests and friars, merchantmen and slaves. On one occasion a xprunara carried up to eight passengers; this means that on such occasions the vessel would not be able to carry much cargo.

A xprunara crossing over to Sicily or Italy with passengers returned invariably with other passengers travelling to Malta. It has been observed that there was quite a great deal of activity by the xprunari carrying ecclesiastics including Domenicans, Capuchins, Franciscan Conventuals and Minors, Jesuits and diocesan priests who were always ordained in Sicily and in Italy.

Sanitary Register 1714-15

Like all other ships leaving Malta, the master of a xprunara was supplied with a sanitary patente or certificate against payment. A Registro di Patente 1714-15 contains valuable information about the movements of xprunari. The register includes day to day entries from September 1714 to August 1715 covering a full year of activities. It lists ninety eight movements of xprunari to all parts of Sicily, Reggio, Naples, Rome, Leghorn, Genoa and Spain; it lists also two journeys to Sardinia and Venice.

There was a standard charge of one tari per passenger for any destination. While Knights and noble people were charged the normal tari, it was observed that religious friars, priests and in certain instances slaves were granted a health certificate gratis.

Ex-Voto Paintings

Erequent references to Maltese ex-voto paintings depicting local xprunari has been made for the compilation of this study. Indeed Malta and Gozo offer a wide range of varieties of ships and boats in storms at sea shown in hundreds of ex-voto paintings. As the xprunara was a purely Maltese boat there has been little or no literature describing it. Therefore it was imperative to study Maltese ex-voto paintings to establish at least certain characteristics. Ex-voto paintings are not always works of art and can never be an infallible source for technical details.

But certain Maltese madonnari or professional ex-voto painters, knew their job quite well and produced good portraits of ships. Particularly reliable are the ex-voto paintings of Vincenzo Gonzi and Nicholas Camilleri. There were others who painted good pictures but quite a number were executed by the donors themselves with a rather naive presentation and results.

Eight out of thirty one centres of devotion in Malta and Gozo contain ex-voto pictures showing the xprunara as follows:

- Tal-Herba Sanctuary, B'Kara: 25
- Mellieha Sanctuary: 7
- Tad-Dawl Church, Wied Il-Ghajn: 1
- Żurrieq Parish Church: 1
- The Redeemer Church, Ghaxaq: 1
- The Zabbar Sanctuary: 1
- Tal-Hniena Church: 1
- Private collection: 1

136. NARLib 21 November 1746
137. NARLib 8 June, 26 and 27 September 1746
138. NARRPat passim.
139. NARRPat 8 October 1714
140. NARRPat 22 December 1714
141. NARRPat 3 November 1714
Most of the ex-voto paintings were dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary but others were offered to:-

Our Lord the Redeemer
The Sacred Heart of Jesus
St.Joseph
St.Catherine
St.Genivieve
St.Paul
St.Anna
The Holy Souls in Purgatory.

The dates shown in the cartouches of the paintings confirm that the xprunara sailed practically all through the year from January to December. But quite naturally the crew always feared the winter season although they were always ready to sail if good money was offered.

The first dated ex-voto painting depicting a xprunara goes back to 1740; yet there may be others which are undated and perhaps had been donated earlier. The greatest number of ex-voto paintings showing the xprunara is found at the Tal-Herba sanctuary B’Kara; at the Mellieha Sanctuary one can see the last sail arrangement of the xprunara in an ex-voto painting dated 1907.

The study of the complete evolution of the sail arrangement on xprunari depended exclusively on the examination of the ex-voto paintings. Amongst the hundreds of nautical ex-voto paintings existing in Malta and Gozo depicting a great number of different ships the xprunara is represented more often than any other type of vessel because its service was in great demand especially during the eighteenth century.

The stories behind the ex-voto paintings of xprunari are the basis for a further study of such vessels which proved their worth for at least three centuries of constant traffic in the Mediterranean. The case of the two Capuchin fathers travelling on a xprunara which was attacked by Algerian pirates deserves a separate study. The incident is completely recorded in the cartouche of the ex-voto painting dated 1850 at the Tal-Herba Sanctuary but it refers to a story which started in 1799. When a boat loses its rudder at sea it becomes helpless. An ex-voto painting at the Mellieha Sanctuary dated 1843 shows the master of a xprunara holding a rudder from the tenon, while a member of the crew is in the water trying to fit the rudder in its pintles. A second sailor is held by the feet by two other members of the crew, head downwards, holding tightly the man in the water. Such an operation in a rough sea goes to explain the resourcefulness of the Maltese sailor in the face of adversity.

The xprunara disappeared from the local scene at the beginning of the twentieth century. The barkun, ferilla, Tal-Latini and the fast disappearing of the last Maltese passenger boats Tal-Pass together with the xprunara are few of the Maltese small crafts that were badly affected by the fast changing conditions of technology and modern social and economic standards.

The study of such local small crafts is important for a complete history of our Islands. Such vessels as the xprunara together with many other sailing ships and boats formed the home fleet of the Maltese Islands. Those humble vessels on their daily voyages maintained an essential link with other countries ensuring the provisioning and an economical sustenance so vital to our islands.

As the xprunara was built locally, manned by Maltese crews and was a means for the earning of the daily bread for so many people, it deserves a better acknowledgment as regards its history and a better evaluation of its potentialities.

Augustin Jal, the author of the famous Glossaire Nautique, wrote in 1840: “Je n’ai presque rien a dire du speronier.” The xprunara is an example of Maltese craftsmanship that has fulfilled a vital maritime role which is relevant to the social history of Malta. It deserves to be studied further by Maltese scholars. It is not likely that this humble vessel will attract the interest of foreign maritime scholars.

The Xprunara

143. One can see the ex-voto painting dated 9 September 1740 at the Tal-Herba Sanctuary, B’Kara.

144. Jal, A., Archeologie Navale, Paris 1840, I, 463
Xprunara - 1850 - under all sail with a small lateen rig. Note the oars stowed away on iron forks.

Xprunara - 1830 - using one sprit sail and a jib. Note thole pins on washboards and iron oar forks.

Xprunara - 1850 - under all sail with a small chequered sprit sail.

Xprunara with two lateen sails and a jib - 1832

A 1740 Xprunara with two sprit sails and a topsail

Xprunara del Gozo - 1250
Note that no tappiere or cabin are used; the best is shown under an awning.

Xprunara with three lateen sails and a jib - 1853.

Schooner rigged Xprunara - 1904.
1 brazzol tal-pruwa
2 hanzira
3 tamburett tal-pruwa
4 bank
5 mincott tal-arblu
6 bank il-lasta; melqa
7 makkarunetta
8 falka
9 bank
10 tamburett tal-poppa
11 brazzol tal-poppa
12 rota tal-pruwa
13 bardnell
14 skalmott
15 can
16 kurtun
17 can
18 paljol tal-kabina
19 bank
20 bokkaport taz-zannur
21 farfett
22 tmun

1 rota tal-pruwa
2 suf tan-naghag
3 skalmott
4 falka
5 skalm
6 makkarunetta
7 tinda tal-passigieri
8 farfett
9 laċċ
10 rota tal-poppa
11 xprun
12 tishih tal-ixprun
13 ghajn
14 mustaċċ tal-pruwa
15 tappiera
16 ċinta
17 bardnell
18 burdneri
19 bastun
20 mustaċċ tal-poppa
21 zokk
22 tmun