

Notes on Eighteenth-Century Naval Contacts between the Order of St John and Sweden

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The fact that the Baltic countries, including Sweden, formed part of the Protestant camp throughout the period of the Order of St John's sojourn in Malta between 1530 and 1798 may lead one to think that relations between them and the Knights were strained. However, very broadly speaking, the staunchly Roman Catholic Order kept itself clear from the frequent dissensions between the European Christian States and, on the whole, directed its energies against the Muslims in what was known as the Holy War for both sides – a Crusade for the Order and a *Jihad* for their Muslim adversaries. Facts and events show that relations between the Scandinavian countries, including Sweden, and the Knights were quite cordial. To quote but two examples, firstly, letters dictated by protocol from the Kings of Sweden congratulating Emanuel Pinto de Fonseca in 1741,¹ Francisco Ximenes de Texada in 1773,² Emanuel de Rohan Polduc in 1776³ and Ferdinand von Hompesch in 1797⁴ on each respective election to the Order's magistracy and, secondly, reference is made to the eleven-day long visit to Malta by the Count of Hessenstein, the brother of King Adolphus Frederick of Sweden (1751-71), in March 1764. He was very cordially welcomed and treated as befitted his royal rank and was taken round to visit various places in the island, including a tour of all the fortifications.⁵

When the famous Swedish ship-builder Fredrik Henrik af Chapman (1721-

- 1 AOM, 269, *Liber Concilliorum Status*, f.246v and AOM, 57, *Liber Epistolarum (1523-1764)*, f.234, dated October 30, 1741.
- 2 AOM, 273, *Liber Concilliorum Status*, f.11, dated April 20, 1773.
- 3 *Ibid.*, f.87, dated February 26, 1776.
- 4 AOM, 275, *Liber Concilliorum Status*, f.65v, dated November 3, 1797. See also AOM, 276, f.32 and AOM, 278, ff.136-137v.
- 5 AOM, 272, f.1, item entitled *Ceremoniale usato con il Conte di Hessenstein, figlio del defunto Re di Svezia*: NLM, Ms. 14, *Giornale Maltese del Dottor Ignazio Saverio Mifsud*, 256-8, for details of the Count's stay in Malta and the places he was taken to visit. See also C. Testa, *The Life and times of Grand Master Pinto*, Malta 1989, 200.

1805)⁶ published his *Architectura Navalis Mercatoria* in 1768,⁷ he included among his drawings what was described as “La Capitana, a Row Gally of Malta”.⁸ It has been speculated that Chapman may have visited Malta during his seven-year tour of European dockyards in the 1750s but there is no record that he ever set foot on the island. The fact that he included exquisite line drawings and cross-sections of the Maltese Capitana (or flagship) should not be interpreted to mean that the Swedish navy ever constructed such warships exclusively on the Maltese model. Less attention has been paid to Chapman’s inclusion of line drawings of “a Row Galley” under what he termed to be “Pleasure Vessels – for Rowing”⁹ which was actually the demi-galley introduced and evolved by the Order of St John in 1742 as an economy measure.¹⁰ Actually, oared warships – including small galleys or demi-galleys – had found their way into the Swedish Navy many years before, prior to Chapman’s birth, with the first substantive fleet action involving galleys in the Baltic Sea taking place near Cape Hangö on August 6, 1714 when the galley fleet of Peter the Great of Russia overcame the Swedes who were thus supplanted by the Russians as the foremost Baltic Sea power.¹¹

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, galleys started to be phased out in the Mediterranean and only lingered on till the end of the 1700s in the navies of the Papacy, Venice and the Order of St John.¹² However, galleys found a new lease of life in the Baltic Sea due to the nature of the coast-line of Finland which was being defended by Sweden from encroachment by expansionist Russia. Rocks and small islands prevented large sailing-ships from fully co-operating with shore defences or forces attacking by land, and the necessary links could only be made through oared vessels with a low freeboard. The Russians were the first to recognise this and, in 1704, Tsar Peter the Great launched his first galleys in the Baltic. Sweden followed suit in 1712, when twelve such vessels were laid down, with the number increasing to a total of thirty galleys and demi-galleys by 1719. One galley was 154 feet long and the others 90 or 97 feet.¹³ This indicates quite clearly that only one galley

6 For information about Chapman and his contribution to ship-building, see L.D. Ferreiro, *Ships and Science – The Birth of Naval Architecture in the Scientific Revolution (1600-1800)*, Cambridge – Massachusetts 2007, *passim*.

7 Chapman’s work has been translated and re-published a number of times. In this paper, I am referring to the 2006 publication by Dover Publications Inc, Minnesota, New York, which includes reproductions of all the 62 plates from Chapman’s original work together with a translation by James Inman of *Tractat om Skepps-Byggeriet* (A Treatise on Shipbuilding), also published by Chapman in 1775.

8 Chapman, Plate LVIII and index under ‘Several Kinds of Vessels used by different Nations’.

9 *Ibid.*, Plate XLVI and index, under ‘Vessels for Swift Sailing and Rowing’.

10 J. Muscat & A. Cuschieri, *Naval Activities of the Knights of St John 1530-1798*, Malta 2002, 30. For descriptions of the galley and the demi-galley see *idem, passim*; J. Muscat, *The Maltese Galley*, Malta 1998; *idem, Sails Round Malta – Types of Sea Vessels 1600 BC-1900AD*, Malta 2008, 166-7.

11 R.C. Anderson, *Oared Fighting Ships*, London 1976, 90; F. Frasca, *Il Potere Marittimo in Età Moderna Da Lepanto a Trafalgar*, Lulu.com 2008, 81.

12 To quote but one example, France phased out its galley fleet in the course of the first half of the eighteenth century and officially abolished it in 1748. See P.W. Bamford, *Fighting Ships and Prisons – The Mediterranean Galleys of France in the Age of Louis XIV*, Minneapolis 1973, 272-3.

13 Anderson, 90-3.



Fig. 1. One of the Swedish iron naval guns, dated 1782, near the entrance of the National Maritime Museum of Malta, Birgu.

was as large as a similar normal Mediterranean warship which, in ca. 1725, was about 155 feet long. Here one must point out that, although some differences did exist, there was an appreciable amount of standardisation in Mediterranean galley construction which remained practically unchanged for about two centuries.¹⁴ Therefore, one should not and cannot really compare Baltic galleys with just their Maltese counterparts but with the standard Mediterranean oared warship.

The end of the so-called Great Northern War came to an end with the Treaty of Nystad in 1721 by which Sweden only retained Finland and a small district in Western Pomerania out of the great and extensive Baltic empire she once possessed, thus

14 *Ibid.*, 67-9; see table on p. 68 showing the various galleys’ lengths, beams and banks of oars; Muscat 2008, 172.

reducing her to the rank of a second-tier power.¹⁵ The war left Sweden exhausted and enfeebled but had driven home the essential fact that the Swedes needed an oared flotilla to successfully face up to the continued Russian threat. However, notwithstanding the fact that a commissioned study recommended a complement of seventy galleys, there were only twenty such warships available in 1741 when a humiliating war was fought against Russia till 1743.¹⁶

To the background of endemic troubles in the internal affairs of Sweden which lasted throughout the eighteenth century, it is at this stage that King Frederick I (1720-51) and the powerful Minister for War, Baron Anders Johan de Hopken, corresponded with Grand Master Manuel Pinto de Fonseca (1741-73) on naval matters. Hopken wrote two letters on April 3, 1749 in which he stated that the Swedish Crown Prince wanted to construct a naval squadron of galleys and requested that Commander de Polastron, a Knight of Malta and his friend, be given permission to act as an unofficial agent. He further requested drawings of a galley together with a model of an Algerian chebec so that similar warships would be constructed in Sweden.¹⁷ Furthermore, Hopken asked the Order to supply the services of four or five naval personnel to act as instructors on the proper use of the galleys.¹⁸

That the Swedes had a healthy respect for the Order's maritime reputation and prowess is also borne out by letter sent by King Frederick I to Grand Master Pinto on February 13, 1749 and presented by hand on February 4, 1750. The king recommended a certain Schijlman who was on a tour of foreign countries '*regarde la construction et l'usage des galeres*'. This letter of recommendation was presented by hand by Schijlman himself.¹⁹ Two years later, the same king recommended '*le Sieur Corrin*', a Swedish naval Lieutenant who was coming to Malta to perfect his profession of a naval officer.²⁰ However, whether practical help was provided to help train Swedish naval personnel in galley warfare is a subject still to be examined and studied.

Around the middle of the century, changes in the Swedish attitude to Mediterranean-type galleys came to the fore. In 1759, such galley-building was abandoned in favour of less mobile, more heavily-armed new types of rowing vessels designed by the above-mentioned Chapman: the so-called *turuma*, *udema* and *pojama* which, after displaying an initial lateen rig, soon changed over to square rigging. They were followed in 1788 by the much larger *hemema*. All these types carried guns on their sides and so were different to the type of galley used

15 Frasca, 81.

16 Anderson, 94.

17 AOM, 1204, *Lettres de la Cour ecrites a l'Eminentissime Grand Maitre Pinto 1749 jusqu'en 1755*, ff.13-4; Testa, 199-200.

18 AOM, 1204, ff.15-6.

19 *Ibid.*, f.3; Testa, 199.

20 AOM, 1204, f.186; Testa, 200.

in the Mediterranean, including the Order of St John.²¹ The last time the Swedes used galleys in battle was during the 1788-90 Baltic War at the second Battle of Svenskund in 1790.²²

Yet it is a fact that the Order of St John did obtain certain naval stores from Sweden as evidenced by a letter written by the Swedish King Frederick I in response to a communication sent by Grand Master Pinto on March 27, 1744. On February 10, 1746, the King wrote from Stockholm with regard to the supply of timber for masts and other stores for the construction of a 70-gun ship-of-the-line and '*l'equipment de son Escadre de Vaisseaux*'.²³

Actually, the Knights were still acquiring some naval stores up to the end of the eighteenth century as clearly shown by entries in the inventories of the Order's *arsenale* (or shipyard) through the following examples and which refer to iron objects: Swedish '*quadro di Svetia*' in 1753;²⁴ '*ferro tondedetto piatto di Svezia*' and '*Ferro quadro*' in 1782;²⁵ nails designated as '*chiodi di Svezia*' together with '*Ferro Piatto di Svezia*' of various sizes in 1783;²⁶ and finally, '*Ferro di Svezia diverse qualità*' for a new galley, the *San Luigi*, constructed by the Order in 1792-93.²⁷

That the Order also imported iron naval guns from Sweden is a known fact and three such pieces of ordnance, all dated 1782, are extant in the National Maritime Museum of Malta at Birgu. Two of them are fixed on the façade of the Museum under the loggia near the main entrance, whilst the third is in the cannon depot. The dates are on the left trunions whilst the founder's symbol is on the right.²⁸ However, the full extent of the importation of guns and naval stores from Sweden by the Order of St John is still largely unknown and research in this subject is really still in its initial stages. Hopefully, this short paper will set the ball rolling so that more information will be unearthed in the future.

21 For details see Anderson, 94-6.

22 Frasca, 91.

23 AOM, 1205, *Lettres de la Cour ecrites a l'Eminentissime Grand Maitre Pinto depuis 1741 jusqu'en 1748*, f.308; AOM, 270, *Liber Conciliorum Status*, f.38v.

24 AOM, 1891, section entitled *Libro Maestro dell'amministrazione delle navi dal 1.V.1751 – 30.IV.1753*, 34, dated March 20, 1753.

25 AOM, 1877, section entitled *Materiali diversi introitati dal Comun Tesoro e dalla Congregazione delle navi dal 1.V.1782-30.IV.1783*, 17 and 31, dated July 22 and November 23, 1782 respectively.

26 AOM, 1878, *Giornale dell'introito e esito del magazzino del provviditore di terra delle navi della S. Religione (Gerosolimitana) dal primo Maggio 1783 a tutto Aprile 1784*, 19, dated November 8, 1783.

27 AOM, 1922, *Costruzione (della) Galera "S. Luigi"*, 48-9.

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