The Battle Standard (Flag) with the Image of the Immaculate Conception

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Abstract

When maritime communications lacked the sophisticated technologies of today, seafarers had to conceive signals so that they could communicate with each other at sea. Flags were one aspect of the code language in use during early modern times all over the Mediterranean Sea. Flags were not only used to denote the nationality or religion of the owner of the vessel but also as signals, in particular when ships sailed in convoy or squadron formation. A successful encounter at sea depended on good coordination. For this reason, a particular flag was devised to be used in time of battle. It was known as the battle standard, and was raised to signal the beginning of combat. This article focuses on this particular flag and explores its use by both Christians and Muslims. Particular reference is made to the battle flags used by the Knights of Malta. The General of the Knights’ galley squadron adopted a personal battle standard and, more often than not, chose to have the iconography of the Immaculate Conception depicted on this flag in what might be interpreted as an invocation for protection and victory.

Keywords : Battle Standard, Immaculate Conception, Corsairing, Knights of Malta, Signals Flags

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In one of the harbour cities of the Island of Malta there is a collegiate church which is dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. The city is called Bormla but is also referred to as Cospicua. The church pre-dates the Turkish siege of 1565 but it experienced the same fate as some of the other churches in the area (Croveri, 2005: 97-105): it was totally destroyed and had to be rebuilt. Ten years after the siege, the edifice was recorded as still being in a precarious condition (Documentary 2001: 164). The church became an independent Catholic parish in 1584\(^1\) and slowly the community invested its time and money to build a magnificent church. A construction programme initiated in the seventeenth century continued uninterruptedly throughout the eighteenth, during which periods the church edifice underwent different modifications and adaptation to suit the dominant artistic styles of baroque architecture. (Mahoney 1996: 171, 188, 207) Along with these architectural changes, Bormla's parish church was embellished with many works of art, many of which survive to this day (Galea Scannura 1983).

The parish church has an antependium (or an antique panel which was used in Catholic liturgy to cover the frontal of an altar) bearing the image of the Immaculate Conception which, it is said, was originally a small banner used in processions. On closely observing the frontal one notices immediately that it must have been very special because of its size. It is much smaller than those banners normally associated with religious processions nowadays in Malta. No doubt both in size and shape this banner was inspired by others that had been in use during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

\(^1\) Notarial Archives Valletta, Malta, Acts of Notory Andrea Albano, Repertorio. 12/5, (1587-88), ff. 326-327.