

Lord Nelson, HMS *Victory* and Sardinia – A Forgotten Episode?

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In November 2005, two historians based in Sardinia, Giovanna Sotgiu and Alberto Segà, very kindly offered to donate to the British Library a book which had been sponsored and published by their local historical society, in Sassari, in 2003.¹

The subject of the book was the restoration project of three major pieces of altar plate, made of solid silver – a large crucifix, approximately four and a half feet in height, and two accompanying large candlestick holders, approximately three feet in height, also in solid silver, apparently donated by Admiral Horatio Nelson in 1804, the year before the decisive battle off Cape Trafalgar, to the parish priest, the church and the parishioners of the Church of Santa Maria Maddalena (St Mary Magdalen), one of the small archipelagos in the cluster of isles off the North-Eastern tip of the island of Sardinia and some twelve nautical miles, as the crow flies, off the southernmost tip of the island of Corsica. It was not commonly known that the Admiral had been in the vicinity of Sardinia, nor that he had made such a generous personal gift to the inhabitants of a small island off the coast of Sardinia. The book contained a wealth of information which should be publicized to a wider English-reading audience.²

Nelson, although a frequent visitor to the Mediterranean Sea, especially to the Bay of Naples – witness his dealings with Sir William Hamilton (1730-1803) and Prince Francesco Caracciolo (1752-1799) – often used to sail closely and drop anchor off the coast of Sardinia, especially en route between Naples and Palermo, the twin capitals of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. This is perhaps not surprising considering the strategic importance of this part of the Mediterranean. Sardinia in general, and the North-Eastern point off La Maddalena in particular, not far from the Isle of Caprera, was ideally situated to dominate a large part of the coastline of Italy, was also not far from Spain and, more importantly, not far from the southern ports of France, in particular Toulon, where the majority of the French Mediterranean fleet was principally based. This part of the North-Eastern coastline of Sardinia, apart from being a particularly beautiful part of the Island, enjoying a sub-tropical to tropical temperature for most of the year, which was much loved by Nelson, also had the benefit of being blessed with numerous natural harbours, which Nelson found to be ideal anchorage points for his fleet (fig. 1).

Nelson anchored his fleet, including his flagship HMS *Victory*, off La Maddalena on no fewer than eight occasions between 31 October 1803 and 19 January 1805. *Victory*'s complement at the time was 850 men in total, including marines – a staggering number of men for a relatively small ship by modern standards – and living space for the vast majority on board was severely limited. Such a large body of men needed to be fed and watered on a regular basis and consequently supplies had to be organized, provided and purchased, in cash, on at least a monthly basis. The official ship's log for HMS *Victory* is extremely revealing.³

¹ *Il restauro del crocifisso e dei candelieri dell'Ammiraglio Nelson* (Sassari: Co.Ri.S.Ma. – Comitato Ricerche Storiche Maddalenine, 2003).

² On Nelson and Sardinia see also John Gwyther, *The Trafalgar Chronicle*, xii (2002); Colin White, *Nelson: The New Letters* (London, 2005) and Roger Knight, *Nelson: The Pursuit of Victory* (London, 2005).

³ PRO ADM 52/371.

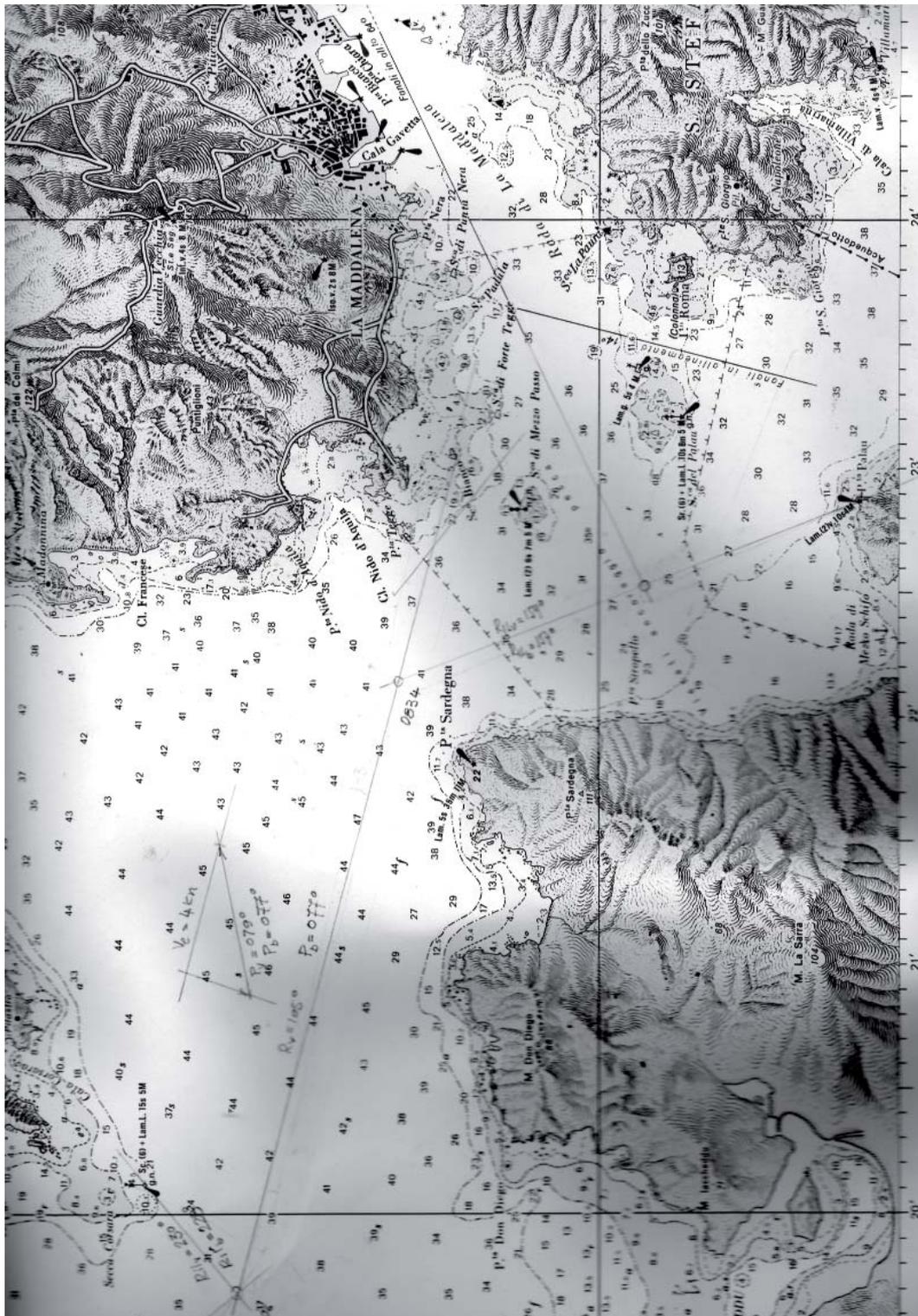


Fig. 1.

First Visit to La Maddalena, 31 October-10 November 1803

1 Nov.	The group of sailors charged with finding water and arranging regular water supplies lands on the island.
2 Nov.	16 tons of water; 19 barrels of water
3 Nov.	10 cattle, immediately slaughtered, for a total of 2,242 pounds; water in undetermined quantity
4 Nov.	26 tons of water; 10 cattle
5 Nov.	25 tons of water + 38 tons of water
6 Nov.	10 cattle
7 Nov.	water in undetermined quantity
8 Nov.	12 cattle; 5,479 pounds of onions
9 Nov.	62 cattle for a total of 9,746 pounds; 5 calves for a total of 280 pounds; 25 lambs (280 pounds)

Second Visit, 24 December 1803 - 4 January 1804

25 Dec.	28 tons of water
26 Dec.	water in undetermined quantity
27 Dec.	38 barrels of water
28 Dec.	67 barrels of water; 93 puncheons of water ⁴

Third Visit, 26 January 1804 - 1 February 1804

28 Jan.	water in undetermined quantity
29 Jan.	completed supply of water
31 Jan.	32 cattle
1 Feb.	completed supply of water

Fourth Visit, 8 February - 19 February 1804

10 Feb.	water in undetermined quantity
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Fifth Visit, 25 March - 3 April 1804

26 Mar.	cattle taken on board (the number not specified)
27 Mar.	25 cattle; 12 tons of water
28 Mar.	water in unspecified quantity
29 Mar.	water in unspecified quantity + taking on of wood ⁵
30 Mar.	water in unspecified quantity
1 Apr.	40 cattle 28 tons of water
2 Apr.	67 barrels of water: 93 puncheons (2) of water

⁴ A puncheon was a large cask for storing fluids – the *Oxford English Dictionary* has an intriguing definition as – ‘a cask for containing liquids-72 gallons for beer and 120 gallons for whisky’ presumably other spirits, especially rum, which was issued daily as a ration, and gin, must also have been stored in puncheons, also see note 6.

⁵ Presumably firewood.

Sixth Visit, 11 May - 18 May 1804

12 May	water in unspecified quantity
13 May	30 tons of water
14 May	25 cattle + water in unspecified quantity
15 May	water in unspecified quantity
16 May	6 sheep; 28 cattle
17 May	completed supply of water; 15 cattle

Seventh Visit, 18 October - 27 October 1804

19 October	23 cattle + water in unspecified quantity
20 October	water in unspecified quantity
21 October	wood; 15 cattle
22 October	25 cattle

Eighth Visit, 12 January - 19 January 1805

14 January	water in unspecified quantity; 20 cattle
15 January	water in unspecified quantity
16 January	water in unspecified quantity
17 January	18 cattle; water in unspecified quantity and wood
18 January	8 pipes of wine; ⁶ water in unspecified quantity
19 January	17 cattle

Napoleon is reputed to have remarked that ‘an army marches on its stomach’, and the Admiralty and the administrators of the Senior Service certainly made sure that its men did not want for anything. Apart from their fondness for beef and lamb, it is interesting to note the vast quantities of clean drinking water required by a ship of the line. Pipes of wine – possibly the equivalent of that well-known Sardinian red, referred to as ‘Cannonau’ nowadays (a strong, very fruity and an intense, deep-red wine, not unlike a good, premier cru, claret) – were only supplied on one occasion, or at least on one recorded occasion, on all eight trips to La Maddalena. It is possible that small quantities of other wine and perhaps even a local form of brandy were also supplied to the *Victory* since Nelson kept a good table and often entertained visitors on board his flagship. Legend has it that Nelson was very particular about the wines, fortified wines and spirits of which he partook: for example, his favourite gin was reputed to be Xoriguer Mahon gin, produced, to this day, on the Spanish Island of Menorca, rather than the Plymouth Gin which had been supplied to the Royal Navy since 1793. Xoriguer Mahon gin, one of only two gins to have Protected Designation of Origin status (it can only be produced on Menorca), is a complex and aromatic gin made from a secret family recipe using wine alcohol (rather than grain alcohol) and wild juniper berries. Nelson’s further consumption of wines off Sardinia is not recorded: a more plausible explanation is that the storm clouds were already beginning to gather by this stage and it was a question of when, rather than if, the joint French and Spanish were to be finally engaged, and Nelson wanted to ensure a good supply of wine, in the fairly certain knowledge that it would be unlikely that he would have an opportunity to lay in further wine during the forthcoming months, although the French fleet was not fully engaged at Cadiz, off Cape Trafalgar, until 21 October in that year.

⁶ A pipe is the modern day equivalent to 105 gallons or 430 litres.

In order to organize and provide food, especially livestock and water, in such large quantities, a good working relationship had to be struck up between the officers and crew of the English Navy and the local inhabitants of La Maddalena ('I Maddalenini') and other outlying places, since the large quantities of supplies required by the *Victory* and the rest of the squadron could not have been provided by the inhabitants of La Maddalena alone.

Although a cynic might well comment that Nelson was not only a brilliant naval strategist and tactician but also a shrewd and wily political animal who knew that he had to win the support of the inhabitants of La Maddalena in order to guarantee supplies for his ships, there is evidence that the relationship struck up between Nelson and the local Sards during his eight visits to the archipelago was warm, affectionate and sincere. On his sixth visit, there is definite recorded evidence that Nelson invited some of the local dignitaries to dine on the *Victory*, among them a certain Lieutenant Magnon, the Commander of the local garrison at Torre di Longonsardo (called in modern times Santa Teresa di Gallura). Nelson and his officers were, in turn, invited on several occasions to religious festivals and celebrations on La Maddalena and although his officers and doubtless several members of his crew attended, there is no firm evidence, as yet, that Nelson attended in person. He usually chose to remain on board his flagship for reasons of health, for he had been severely wounded in earlier campaigns. He had to consider his personal safety, as he could have been an easy target for a sniper, but probably the most compelling factors were strategic and logistic considerations. His strategy was to wait and pounce on the French fleet if it dared to put to sea from Toulon and he had to be ready to weigh anchor and to set sail at a moment's notice. Indeed, from 1803 to 1805 it is recorded that Nelson had only set foot on land once.

Nelson appears to have been genuinely impressed with the extremely enthusiastic cooperation and the very warm reception he received from the inhabitants of La Maddalena in supplying his fleet with water and provisions so unstintingly and, probably, at some considerable sacrifice to themselves. There had been no precedent, nor such an unparalleled demand for provisions, in such large quantities, or on such a vast scale, in living memory. He accordingly decided to reward the locals in some way. The festivities and socializing, however, were brought to an abrupt end when on 19 May 1804 the fleet had to weigh anchor and set sail immediately for the Gulf of Roses (Golfo de Las Rosas) off the North Eastern coast of Spain.

Whilst anchored off the Spanish coast, Nelson's Secretary, the Reverend Alexander Scott, a cultivated man of letters and a good linguist, read in an English or Spanish newspaper that an auction of antiquarian artefacts was due to be held in Barcelona and he informed Nelson of this. At lunch that day, Nelson suggested to Scott that since he had to go ashore at Barcelona in search of further supplies for the fleet, he should profit from this trip and attend the auction to see whether there was anything appropriate among the lots due to come under the hammer which could have made a suitable gift to present to the islanders of La Maddalena.

It is not recorded who first thought of the altar plate as a suitable gift for the Maddalenini, the Reverend Scott, or Nelson himself. On the face of it, it might appear more probable that it was Scott who actually spotted them in the auction list, and who later suggested them to Nelson, however, no records of the sale appear to have survived. Clearly, being in Holy Orders, it would appear more likely that the Reverend Scott would have instinctively gone for the ecclesiastical option of a gift of altar plate. It is likely, however, that Nelson gave Scott *carte blanche*. Nelson may have thought of giving the gift because it would be a way of rewarding the whole community as opposed to a few members of it. Whatever his state of mind at the time, he clearly considered the possibility of his own death and we should recall that Nelson certainly had religious feelings since he composed the following prayer in his private cabin on the eve of the Battle of Trafalgar:

May the Great God, whom I worship, grant to my Country and for the benefit of Europe in general, a great and glorious victory; and may no misconduct in anyone tarnish it; and may humanity after Victory be the dominant feature of the British Fleet.

For myself, individually, I commit my life to Him who made me, and may His blessings light upon my endeavours for serving my Country faithfully.

To Him I resign myself and the just cause which is entrusted to me to defend.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

The prayer is that of a God-fearing man and so the thought of an ecclesiastical gift could equally have been Nelson's own. Furthermore, as we will soon see, Nelson made the personal promise to the Maddalenini of an entirely new church.

We will probably never know for certain who identified the altar plate as a suitable gift for the Church of Santa Maria Maddalena, however, we can be certain that the original idea of making the gift was certainly Nelson's. The Reverend Scott was duly sent off to Barcelona, the following day, on the Frigate HMS *Juno*, with Nelson's commission to find a suitable present or the pre-selected altar plate, *coûte qu'il coûte*.

Scott arranged further supplies for the fleet, including, most probably, a good supply of Nelson's favourite gin, Xoriguer Mahon, from Menorca, and duly attended the auction and bid, successfully, for the three pieces of altar plate. Although, unfortunately, no records of the price paid for them appear to have survived, one thing is certain: since they were made of solid silver and had been beautifully crafted in Barcelona in the seventeenth century in the neoclassical style by a very talented Spanish silversmith, who signed himself ROCA they must have been expensive. The Reverend Scott duly rejoined the main fleet with his commissioned present and several cases of other artefacts and provisions shortly afterwards.

Nelson was very pleased with the pieces of altar plate when he inspected them on their arrival on board *Victory*, so much so that he decided to have each of the elegant elements of the trio specially engraved on board his flagship, so that there would be a lasting memorial to his gratitude. Each piece had a shield lozenge engraved on it: one of the candlesticks bears the engraved image of a crowned eagle with the inscription 'BRONTE' in recognition of the title of 'Duke of Bronte' (near Etna on the Island of Sicily) bestowed on Nelson, together with the Dukedom, castle and extensive accompanying lands, by King Ferdinand IV in 1800, in recognition of his invaluable assistance in suppressing an uprising by his Neapolitan subjects in 1799. The second candlestick was engraved with the inscription in Latin: 'VICE COMES / NELSON NILI / DUX BRONTIS ECCE / S.TE MAGDAL. E INS.E / S.TE MAGDAL.E / D.D.D.' ('Viscount / Nelson of The Nile / Most Excellent Duke of Bronte/ to the Island of Santa Maddalena / and [to the Church of] Santa Maddalena, dedicates, donates and disposes'. The crucifix, which also includes a figure of a unicorn, contains the same inscription in Latin, probably thought of by Nelson himself and translated into Latin by the Reverend Scott, but probably because it is the most sacred object of the set, limits the dedication of the crucifix to the Church of Santa Maria Maddalena alone, and not to the inhabitants of the Island of Santa Maria Maddalena (figs 2-4).

Nelson's choice of his official titles to appear on the engraved inscriptions is worthy of comment. After being awarded the Dukedom of Bronte, in 1799, Nelson used his Sicilian titles on all occasions. He even signed his letters to Emma Hamilton and their little daughter Horatia, 'Nelson & Bronte'. Nelson was reputedly extremely proud of the title of Duke of Bronte which he accepted immediately. (Emma Hamilton, apparently, was extremely impressed with the Duchy of Bronte and Nelson mentioned on several occasions that he wished for nothing more than to retire from public life, as soon as possible, and to set up home in the Duchy with his beloved Emma.) There is, however, probably, a simpler reason: Nelson might have thought that Copenhagen and Aboukir, although greater naval



Fig. 2.

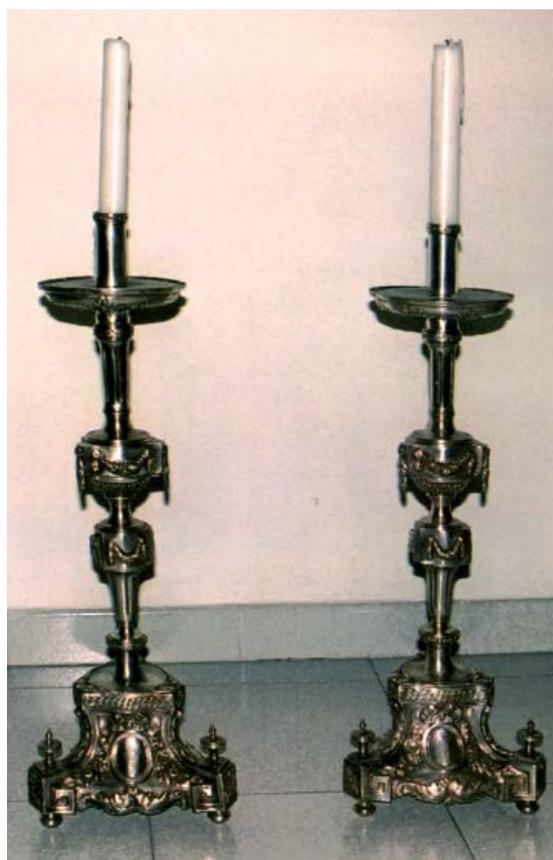


Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

victories, being farther away from Sardinia, might not have impressed the local inhabitants sufficiently; while the ‘Dukedom of Bronte’ – albeit an Italian Dukedom, and not a British Dukedom – with its castle and lands near Catania, on Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean, with the second capital at Palermo, in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and not too far from Sardinia, might have had a more impressive ring to it, and was certainly the more effective title if Nelson had been considering the propaganda stakes.

The very day HMS *Victory* weighed anchor on its seventh and penultimate visit to La Maddalena, on 18 October 1804, the Reverend Scott was charged with delivering the altar plate to the Church of Santa Maria Maddalena with an accompanying letter, in Nelson’s hand, which reads:

Victory, Octb. 18th, 1804

Revd. Sir

I have to request that I may be allowed to present to the church at Madalena a piece of church plate as a small token of my esteem for the worthy inhabitants, and of my remembrance of the hospitable treatment His Majesty’s fleet under my command has often received from them. May God Bless us all.

I remain Revd. Sir

Your most obedient servant

Nelson & Bronte

The Revd. Dr. Scott will present it to you

The Revd. The Superior of the Church at Madalena (fig. 5)

The local inhabitants were delighted with the great fuss and the naval party sent under the Reverend Scott’s command with a personal gift for their parish church from the greatest naval hero of the day, not to mention the considerable and quite unexpected honour conferred upon their community. The Maddalenini were a little embarrassed, however, since the parish priest, Don Antonio Biancareddu, was on business at nearby Tempio. As soon as Father Biancareddu was informed of Nelson’s gift, and of the arrival of the naval party, led by Reverend Scott, he returned, post haste, to La Maddalena.

On his return to La Maddalena and after receiving Reverend Scott and his party with the due ‘onori di casa’ which are particularly lavish and hospitable in Sard tradition, Don Biancareddu sat down on 22 October and wrote to Nelson:

Eccellenza

Mi son’ fatto un sacro dovere d’affrettare il mio ritorno da Tempio mia Patria in quest’Isola della Maddalena per inviari Da vicino alla E[ccellenza] V[ostre] i miei più rispettosi ringraziamenti pel grazioso, e segnalato dono fatto a’ questa chiesa Parrocchiale sotto la mia cura affidata, dono altrettanto prezioso, perche accompagnato dai venerati suoi caratteri che resteranno depositati a perpetua gloriosa memoria e della chiesa e del commune e del più divoto de suoi servi.

La E.V. è supplicata ad accettare li più ossequiosi ringraziamenti da parte di chi non cesserà di porgere quotidiani e perenni voti dal Cielo per la prosperità, lunghi giorni, e gloria dell’E.V., nell’atto, che si rassegna col più profondo rispetto

D. V E

La Maddalena addi 22 8bre 1804

Dono ummo ed obblatissimo servidore

Don Antonio Biancareddu

Victory Oct^r, 18th 1804

Rev^d. Sir

I have to request that I may
be allowed to present to the church at
Madalena a piece of Church Plate
as a small token of my esteem for the
worthy inhabitants, and of my remem-
brance of the hospitable treatment His
Majesty's feet under my command has
ever received from them, May God Bless
us all. I remain Rev^d. Sir

Your most obedient servant
Nelson J. B. B. B.

The Rev^d. B. Scott will present it to you
The Rev^d. the Superior of the church at Madalena

Fig. 5.

[Excellency

I have undertaken a sacred duty by hastening my return from Tempio where I originate from on this Island of La Maddalena in order to send you from closer proximity to Your Excellency my most respectful thanks for your most gracious and outstanding gift to this Parish Church entrusted to my care – a gift which is even more precious in that it is accompanied by your letter which will remain deposited in perpetual and glorious memory by the Church, the Comune and by your most obedient servant.

Your Excellency is supplicated to accept my most obsequious thanks on behalf of one who will never cease to offer up daily and perennial thanks to Heaven for the prosperity, longevity and glory of Your Excellency

In the hope that Your Excellency accepts my most grateful respect and thanks

La Maddalena 22 October 1804

Don Antonio Biancareddu Parish Priest of Santa Maria Maddalena]

Nelson's autograph letter survives and is jealously guarded in the very same church, while Don Antonio Biancareddu's autograph letter is to be found among the Nelson papers in the British Library (Add. MS. 34949).⁷

Nelson was so moved by Don Antonio Biancareddu's reply on behalf of the Parish Church of La Maddalena and the Maddalenini that legend has it that he is reported to have stated 'These little ornaments are nothing. Wait till I catch the French outside their Port. If they will but come out I am sure to capture them; and I promise to give you the value of one of their frigates to build a church with I have only to ask you to pray to La Santissima Madonna, that the French fleet may come out of Toulon Do you pray to her for that, and as for capturing them I will undertake to do all the rest.' This promise, which appears to be confirmed by the statement recorded by J. W. Tyndale,⁸ would invariably have been kept by Nelson, who had a deep sense of justice and of fair play, two of the many qualities which endeared him to his officers, and why he was reputedly almost worshipped by both his officers and men – had he survived Trafalgar.

HMS *Victory* weighed anchor hurriedly, that very day, 22 October, because it was rumoured that Admiral Villeneuve and the French fleet had slipped anchor at Toulon, but Nelson was to return to La Maddalena, on one last occasion, on 12-19 January 1805. It is perhaps of little value to speculate what Nelson's precise thoughts were, as, on the sudden news that the French fleet had been seen finally leaving the Port of Toulon, *Victory* sailed out of the Bay of Mezzo Schifo off La Isola di Santa Maddalena, on 19 January 1805. A strong westerly gale was blowing at the time. The *Victory's* log records that she and the fleet left by the eastern passage, known as the Biche Channel, not by the more normal western entrance. He had left a lasting token and testament of his appreciation, affection and even love for the Italians, as *Victory* carried on past the delightful Bay which Nelson himself considered to be 'the most beautiful Bay in the World' and which had been renamed Agincourt Sound, out to sea for his final appointment with Villeneuve, history and destiny, later that glorious, yet fateful, year.

⁷ There is a pressed copy of Nelson's original letter to the priest in BL, Add. MS. 34957.

⁸ *The Island of Sardinia* (London, 1849), vol. i, p. 342.