

Anatomies of Spanish Settlers in Malta between 1580 and 1648: Their Family Stories

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Abstract: This paper will attempt to reconstruct the different identity kits of Spanish settlers in Malta between 1580 and 1648. The analysis shall use the *Status Liberi* documentation which is a series of Ecclesiastical Acts recording the assessment of foreigners by an ecclesiastical judge of those outsiders who wished to get married in Malta. This procedure was undertaken to verify whether the candidate was single or not, the former being and remains *sine qua non* for marriage. The surviving documents recount the lives of these settlers before taking up permanent residence in Malta and highlight the reason behind their decision to settle down in Malta. The most fascinating aspect of these documents is that these stories are recounted by the protagonists themselves. They give insight to issues of identity and shared memory among the Spanish settlers. In the majority, they were simple folk without any pretensions or extraordinary expectations. Were it not for such a prerequisite their life histories would have been lost forever.

Keywords: Malta, Spaniards, *Status Liberi*, marriage, seafaring, identity

The Research Methodology

In the following analysis I will attempt the reconstruction of what one might term to have been a ‘Spanish’ identity in Malta at a time when Europe was passing through widespread political turmoil as a result of the Wars of Religion. My historical-critical interpretation of this past migratory experience will be based on the patchy survival of court

records. What I intend to do is to reconstruct through these documents what may be defined as the irretrievability of human experiences. These records provide intriguing images of the personalities and endeavours of these Spanish migrants.

The chosen series of documentation represents only one type of repertoire or set of data for the study of migratory movements. It falls under the *Status Liber* category, that is, the attestations that foreigners, or even locals who had been absent from the island, had (and still have) to undertake to marry in Malta. Therefore, this series can never be taken to cover all the Spanish migrants living in Malta at the time. Those who remained single were not covered by this documentation unless they were called to give their testimony in court in favour of the migrant who was seeking to obtain a single status attestation. Nor were those marrying in Gozo included in this category. Gozo had a separate ecclesiastical structure and a vicar was appointed with responsibility for the administration of this ecclesiastical unit. He assessed all marriages taking place there.

The study of these Acts was not subject to any arbitrary choice or selection. Instead, each and every Act related to a Spanish migrant was studied. Even if the Acts are few, they offer the right material for a careful prognosis about the Spanish migrants' historical past and identity. The chosen period followed a carefully selected time-frame. It starts from the time that these Acts began to be kept by the Catholic Church authorities in Malta around the 1580s and ends in 1648, with the Treaty of Westphalia which delimited the European borders and sanctioned the decline of Spain as a major European power.

Using hermeneutical tools developed in the historical-critical method of interpreting history, I will try to reconstruct the actual history behind some of the events recounted by these Spanish settlers and the motifs for settling down in Malta. This is done by reconstructing through their actual answers and the supportive information given by witnesses in court and the migrants' movement before establishing their abode in Malta. I will also seek to go a step further and try to uncover any innuendos transmuted through these conversations between the judge and witnesses.

At the same time, I want to avoid the normal pitfall related to the selection bias or perhaps the temptation to try to read the gathered

data only through ethnographical theory, even if the latter enhances the historical data. It would also have been risky to depend only on the quantitative analysis in particular for the last two decades of the sixteenth century, owing to a strong presence of under-registration and this can question the trustworthiness of the statistics. Instead I read the data through both qualitative and quantitative methodology. Normally, qualitative analysis rests on 10 interviews. In this case, the analysis will use over 73 statements made by Spanish settlers, together with other statements made by non-Spanish but with direct or indirect relevance to the history of the Spanish settler in Malta. Three *Status Liberi* concerned statements by widows and their witnesses. The first was requesting the right to marry after the death of her Spanish husband abroad, while two other *Status Liberi* not directly related to the Spaniards, were used as they shed light on the Spanish migratory route.

In other words, all the cases of Spanish migrants encountered in this series of documentation were analysed. While the number of 73 may appear small for a quantitative analysis, it is sufficiently good for a qualitative study and goes beyond the normal scientific requirements. At the same time simple quantitative methods can produce the average Spanish migrant's age at marriage, and the rate of literacy. Therefore, the resulting correlation between existing theory and the gathered data can be taken to reflect the general situation of the Spanish migrant community in Malta at the turn of the seventeenth century.

The court proceedings consisted of the presentation of at least two witnesses, chosen by the plaintiff himself to attest in his favour. However, the plaintiff could do away with the witnesses when he obtained attestations from his home country verifying his single status. Domenico Silva provided these documents confirming his *Status Liber* proof.¹ Thus, his court hearing lacked the interrogation of witnesses.

The total number of Spanish migrants is not high. There were 36 statements made by plaintiffs who wanted a *Status Liber* besides another 39 made by witnesses. The later number does not include witnesses who had appeared in the same court as plaintiff. These should not be understood to represent the total number of Spaniards who got married in Malta at the time. Without doubt, there is under-registration as some of the Acts have gone missing. In fact, in studying the *Status Liberi*, one

1 A[rchivum] C[uria] M[elitense Floriana], Status Liber, Box 8, No, 31.

encounters married Spaniards, as was the case with Valentius Closa,² Bastiano Torres,³ and Gregorius Roldans⁴ who are not covered by records of their *Status Liber* approval. This means that their Act is either lost or misplaced. As these Acts were registered and stored according to the year, the loss of an Act would not constitute a coverage error but would only lead to an arbitrary loss of data, which is neither biased in favour or against any particular ethnic group. For statistical purposes, the Portuguese were assessed with the Spanish migrants. Between 1580 and 1640, Portugal was governed directly by the crown of Spain after the former was hit by a succession crisis.

Reading between the lines of these attestations, one can better understand how the migrants were identifying themselves with the political consequences of this religious upheaval in Europe. Migrants from the Iberian Peninsula, at times, were simply called Spaniards but, during other periods, they were identified by region or their town of origin. Thus one finds migrants being called only Spaniards, others were described as being from the *Principato* of Catalonia, Palma di Majorca,⁵ Minorca, Valencia, besides a handful of settlers were from Castile, Seville, and the Bay of Biscay.⁶ Such data questions Ferdinand Braudel's theory about the Mediterranean islands being isolated worlds.⁷ The migrants from the region of Catalonia represented the majority, with those from Majorca registering the highest numbers. In terms of statistics, the Majorcans represented 25 per cent of the Spanish migrants on Malta.⁸

The distance factor and the lack of direct communication between Malta and the Iberian Peninsula could be two reasons why the number of Spanish migrants was small, and well below the number of

2 Ibid., Box 18, No. 21. Valentius Closa was asked to testify for Andrea Catalano. During the court proceedings, he declared to be '*filius Monserretti de Barsalona et uxoratus in burmula*' (sic).

3 Ibid., Box 25, No. 94.

4 Ibid., Box 17, No. 54.

5 Ibid., Box, 3, No. 23; Box 10, No. 40.

6 Ibid., No. 62.

7 Simon Mercieca, 'The Spatial Mobility of Seafarers in the Mediterranean: A case study based on Status Liberi Documentation (1581–1640)', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2002), 129–48.

8 This calculation was based on 52 migrants who had their places of origins declared. Among this number were those who declared themselves as Spanish. Thirteen clearly affirmed to have been from Majorca.

Italian and French immigrants. Without doubt, this distance reduced their opportunities of interacting with their families back home and discouraged them from settling in Malta. Secondly the maritime routes were mainly focused towards the Levant, while communication between Malta and Spain was rarely direct but came either through Messina or Naples (which were part of Aragon's territory).

The history of Spanish migrants cannot be separated from the history of Spain, in particular that of Aragon and its Mediterranean relationship. Messina was one of Spain's important capitals at the time. This appears clearly in the *Status Liber* documentation and sailors attest for the navigational patterns of the galleys of the knights at the end of the sixteenth century. They took this political reality into consideration and their navigational route to Spain would have been through Messina, not only because the Order had important stores there, but also because, this city was the most important Spanish possession. Hospitaller galleys are attested travelling from Malta to Messina and then leaving for Spain. In 1579, during a return voyage from Spain, the knights of St John's galley, the *San Paolo*, was hit by a big wave taking with it the sail, the *scifo*, the galley's *fregatina*, and three men.⁹ A similar story was told in 1584, when the same galley *San Paolo* fell into the hands of the Turks. All the slaves were taken to Algiers and the Christian slaves were placed on 18 Turkish *galeottas* for a raid against Spain.¹⁰

In Spain, Hospitaller galleys recruited rowers, often under the heading of *buonavoglia* – that is convicts, who would accept work as rowers, on galleys, to avoid prosecution by criminal justice. It was a secure way in which convicts could negotiate their crime and accept a voluntary exile by becoming rowers on state-owned ships. Petrus Rodrigues was a *buonavoglia* or rower.¹¹ Hieronimus Conca was another Spanish rower who preferred to become a *buonavoglia* on the Hospitaller galley, the *triremes capitanea*,¹² rather than face criminal justice. The galley *capitanea* was known during this period among its sailors as the *triremes padrona*. Spaniards are also found working as salaried soldiers on this galley. In 1593, Alonso Benedicto from Spain

9 ACM, Status Liber, Box 2.

10 Ibid., Box 1, No. 19.

11 Ibid., Box 1, No. 7.

12 Ibid., Box 1, No. 4.

was described by fellow Spaniards, Hieronimus Conca and Petrus Rodrigues, as '*militis stipendiarii supra trireme p[at]rona*' (sic).¹³

Spanish Migrants in Malta

Either because the keeping of ecclesiastical records improved or because of a better political climate between Spain and France, the number of Spanish migrants increased at the turn of the sixteenth century. On 2 May 1598, Henry IV of France and Philip II of Spain signed the Treaty of Vervins which ended the war between these two kingdoms. In Malta, this was followed by an increase in Spanish and French migrants. The French migrants became the most numerous group marrying on the island. In that same year Philip II died and was succeeded by Philip III whose reign is considered to mark the end of the Spanish power in Europe and of the Habsburg hegemony on the continent. Spain began to focus more and more on its internal politics. This can further explain why French migrants were more numerous in Malta than Spanish ones. The French presence reflected the slow emergence of France as a new power, with Marseilles becoming the commercial capital of this new kingdom. But it also marked the political decline of Spanish influence in Europe.

The first Spanish migrant to settle in Malta following this political settlement was Salvatore de Argilla from the Catalan town of Vilassar de Mar. He came to Malta after being employed at Barcelona as servant to the Knight Hospitaller and Commander Raimondo de Veri.

After the Treaty of Vervins, Spanish soldiers and even sailors will be found again seeking to work in Malta but the Hospitallers are no longer their principal employers. This does not mean that the Order did not offer job opportunities within its army and navy even if, as the attached documents show, the number of the sailors exceeded that of the infantrymen. In 1603 Aloisius de Alsevado was working as a soldier on the galley *Capitanea* (sic)¹⁴ and in 1612 Antonio Durer de Olivares defined himself as '*nauta gallionis sacre Religionis*'.¹⁵ The presence of Spanish sailors in the Hospitaller squadron was to continue

13 Ibid., Box 1, No. 7.

14 Ibid., Box 3, No. 62.

15 Ibid., Box 9, No. 46.

in the following decades. For example, in 1633, Francesco Ernandes de Gusman was a soldier on one of the galleys of the knights.¹⁶

The Order's squadron continued to ply the sea between Messina and Spain. The husband of Marietta, Lazzaro Valletta, was Maltese. He worked as sailor on the knights' *Capitana* galley. In April 1607, while the galley was on its way to Spain, he fell sick and was taken to the Lazaretto of Marseilles where he died.¹⁷ The fact that he was taken to a French town confirms the new political climate that the Treaty of Vervins permitted for maritime exchange in the Mediterranean.

This does not mean that Spain abandoned its army or that Spanish soldiers stopped roaming around the Mediterranean. Francesco Romero was '*soldato nella infanteria Spagnola*' who remained in the army when he moved from his home country to Naples and sought a similar occupation when he later came to Malta.¹⁸

But, by the seventeenth century, there was a change of focus, and more Spanish migrants began to find alternative employment to working on the '*vaxelli di Malta*'. They kept to their work as sailors but began to be enticed by the many licensed corsairs or with French merchant shipping. Francesco Ferrandi and Antonio Catalano were working as sailors '*sopra l'armamento del s[igno]r Castelnovo ... a corseggiare in Levante*',¹⁹ while Antonio Cole was a '*Maiorchino*' employed as a sailor on '*vascelli di mercantia*'.²⁰ Others used their skills, such as that of a barber,²¹ or entered in one of the categories of servants. But these attestations lack the presence of highly skilled artisans for which there was a great demand at the time and most probably better pay. All the Spanish settlers who described their occupation as '*famulus*' were invariably at the service of a knight Hospitaller. As the Latin word *famulus* had a rather extensive meaning at the time, the job could vary from a private secretary to an attendant or butler.

Another category of Spanish migrants consisted of priests, knights, and abbots. They were often asked by one of their servants to appear in court. Don Pietro de Anaiia described himself as '*clericus beneficato*'. He

16 Ibid., Box 33, No. 27

17 Ibid., Box 5, No. 115.

18 Ibid., Box 17, No. 54.

19 Ibid., Box 18, No. 21.

20 Ibid., Box 24, No. 123.

21 Ibid., Box 13 No. 27.

accompanied the knight from the langue of Castile, Don Alvaro Altimiano y Sottomaior, to give evidence in favour of Didacus Duran.²² Different categories of knights appeared in court, varying from simple knights to a bailiff and a prior. All were members of one of the two Spanish langues, Leon and Castile or of Aragon and Catalonia. Bernardo Ferrer asked the prior of Catalonia, Don Francesco Sabatrier, and Joseph De Guevara asked the prior of Navarre, Raimondo Spilotta, to speak for him.²³

The only category of sailors that kept its past pattern intact were the *buonavoglie*. These continued to be enrolled on the galleys of the knights after the peace treaty. In 1614, one encounters another Spaniard working as *buonavoglia* on the Hospitaller galley *Sancta Maria*. Witnesses mentioned that Antonio Rius, who hailed from the surroundings of Barcelona, asked to be enrolled as ‘*bonavoglia*’ (sic) on the Hospitaller *triremerus*, *Sancta Maria*.²⁴ Leonardo Vassallo from Zurrieq informed the bishop’s court in 1624 that Pietro Giovanni de Aragona ‘*si havea accordato p[er] bonavaglia alli galieri di questa Sacra Relig[ion]e*’.²⁵

The new political climate opened the doors to new opportunities and several Spanish individuals were more than ready to grab the opportunity. Francesco Cartoci from Majorca found employment as a mercenary with the army of the French king in Toulon. After marrying Margerita in Malta, he continued to serve in the French army and moved to France.²⁶

From this point of view the Treaty of Vervins opened Marseilles to Spanish migration. Marseilles began to appear in the route of Spanish mobility. In 1623 Francesco Pedarsi, aged 13, left his city of Solterra for Marseilles, and 10 years later settled in Malta.²⁷ Antonio Cole left Majorca in 1629 at the age of 16 on French *vascelli di mercantia* and sailed for four years before settling in Malta.²⁸

Mobility continued to be a convoluted path. Most of the Spanish migrants continued moving around in the Mediterranean before settling down in Malta. The Catalan Francesco Ferrer had a three-year residency

22 Ibid., Box 1640, No. 43.

23 Ibid., Box 9, No. 13.

24 Ibid., Box 10, No. 75.

25 Ibid., Box, 16, No. 26.

26 Ibid., Box 29, No. 8.

27 Ibid., Box 23, No. 73.

28 Ibid., Box 24, No. 123.

before asking permission to get married in Malta. In the meantime, he had been to Majorca, Sicily, Messina, Leghorn, and Naples.²⁹ Vincenzo de Stefano had an even more roving life before settling down in Malta. He moved to Madrid from his home town of Valencia. Then, he returned to Valencia before moving to Naples, then Lombardy, and back to Naples again. Soon he was journeying to Messina from where he travelled to Malta. In the meantime, he had also stayed for a while in Majorca. The reason for this mobility was due to his profession as a barber; in whichever town he went, he sought to practise his profession.³⁰

Irrespective of occupation, the maritime activity had a direct impact on the Acts themselves, as most of the demands for the *Status Liber* were between September and April, that is, when the maritime season comes to a halt owing to adverse weather conditions. Like the locals, the Spanish settlers preferred to tie the knot in the winter season.

Unfortunately for Spain, the country was on the side of the losers from the seventeenth century onwards and history tends to be written by the victors. Therefore, its history tends to be portrayed rather negatively, as a country in decline, dominated by a harsh or cruel inquisition, as though, the rest of Europe did not practise the same atrocities in implementing criminal justice. But, below the surface, the level of literacy appears to have been higher among those coming from Catalonia and the nearby regions of Spain than from the rest of the continent. Without doubt, this province or *principato*, had a relatively good educational system for that time. More than one witness from Catalonia was found to be literate, even if he had a humble profession as a sailor or servant. Their level of literacy contrasted with that of other individuals, some of whom occupied higher social positions. The French grooms, for example, had a higher percentage of illiteracy as they had more applicants percentage-wise who signed their application with a cross.³¹ There were 40 Spaniards, both plaintiffs and witnesses, who signed their deposition: 18 signed by writing their name in full and 22 signed by a means of a cross. If one has to accept that those who signed their name in full are literate, then the rate of literacy was extremely high, amounting to the staggering figure of 45 per cent.

29 Ibid., Box 10, No. 77.

30 Ibid., Box 13, No. 27.

31 Vide, for example, *ibid.*, Box 3, No. 4, Salvatore Bordai or *ibid.*, Box 3 No. 11, Salvatore de Argilla.

Literacy, however, was not of great value at the time and counted for less in Malta for job promotion or mobility. This appears clearly from the declaration of the Spaniard from Biscay, Agostino Rodriguez. He produced three witnesses, all compatriots and fellow soldiers. Lieutenant Didacus de Galbis signed with a cross, a clear sign that he was illiterate. The other two, Leonardo Ferrer and Aloisius de Albevedo, signed their name but they held an inferior rank with the army: they were foot-soldiers.³²

Most probably the servant of Fra Raimondo de Veri, Salvatore de Argilla, knew how to read and write as servants employed by the knights were literate individuals.³³ In fact, the same situation was again encountered with at least two other knights: one was the Hospitaller chancellor, Antonio Enteno (sic) and the other was Heronimo Fermen (sic). Both had Spanish servants, Hernando de Sa Aberdra and Antonio Froncollo, who both knew how to read and write.³⁴ Unfortunately there were instances where the attestation was not signed, as was with the case of the Portuguese Jacobus Paglia who worked as a butler with Fra Joannes de Saldanta,³⁵ making it difficult to attest to his literacy level. However, as they did not sign, together with all the rest who failed to sign their statements, they were not included in the calculation of the rate of literacy. This does not mean that all the servants were literate. Joannes Perali from Valencia was the Knight Don Policarpo de Castelan's butler. He was definitely illiterate, as he signed with a cross.³⁶ Without doubt, literate butlers acted as private secretaries, while the uneducated ones were employed as attendants.

The Council of Trent and Marriage

During this period, migration was a 'male world'. Women were generally ill-advised, in particular if still single, to try and embark

32 Ibid., Box 3, No. 62.

33 Raimondo de Veri signed the act. Petrus Buschi, another servant of de Veri's was asked to give witness. Like de Veri, he lacked a certain level of literacy as he signed his deposition. Ibid., Box, 3, No. 11.

34 Ibid., Box 9, No. 11.

35 Ibid., Box 17, No. 54.

36 Ibid..

on such an experience. This was not only a phenomenon to be found present with the Spanish migrants but extended to the rest of the European continent and beyond as well. Women were expected to enter the migration cycle through marriage. It was a period when women, in their majority, were expected to retain their virginity at least until marriage, even if one has to add that sexual responsibility for women began before that of men. This was a fact recognized by the Catholic Church and sanctioned by the Council of Trent. Marriage represented for the Church a rite of passage, the transition to adulthood. Thus, the age of marriage was pinned one year lower to that of men. Women could marry at the age of 12 but males were only allowed to marry from 13 years onwards. This rather early female age did not make a great difference to the migrants in general. Migrants tended to marry at a more advanced age than the locals.³⁷ As Spanish migration to Malta followed the established norms, all registered migrants were male. No female migrant was found in the records. All the migrant grooms tended to be older than the bride and all were over 20, with some Spanish migrants going into their thirties before deciding to marry. Agostino Rodrigues was 34 years old when he decided to get married.³⁸ Perhaps, even for a migrant, he represented a rather extreme case, as the average age at marriage of the Spanish migrants was 23 years, two years older than that of the locals.

Once married, migrants tended to settle down in the harbour cities. The Spanish migrants were not an exception. Agostino Rodrigues, for example, had his residence in Bormla,³⁹ while Francesco Ferrer's was in Senglea.⁴⁰ As their employment was linked either to the city or to a service on demand among urban dwellers, the choice of the harbour cities came more naturally for most migrants. At the same time, migration was the key to the success of the harbour cities. It gave the inhabitants of these cities the opportunity to return home with new ideas, while it helped them to meet whoever came from diverse or different cultures. Perhaps, the fact that migration was mostly male-

37 Mercieca, Simon, '*Amicitia Extenditur ad Extraneos*, Marriage Law and the Concept of Citizenship (1563–1789)', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, Vol. 10, Nos. 1 & 2 (2000), 151–71.

38 ACM, Status Liber, Box, 3, No. 62.

39 *Ibid.*, Box 3, No. 23.

40 *Ibid.*, Box 15, No. 88.

oriented, explains the gender deficit not only in politics but also in the rest of the spheres of the humanities. The female sex was not yet part of this world.

Marrying a foreigner did not represent the maximum fulfilment for a woman in those days. Most women were illiterate and marrying a foreigner represented a communication challenge, which until now has not been seriously studied. The language was a challenge and communicating with a Spaniard, made it even more difficult as most probably the women would have to learn a regional variety. This explains why, whenever possible, migrants sought to marry within their own community. At least, this helped to overcome the communication barrier. However, language and communication were not a *sine qua non* social requirement for marriage at the time. As Paul Seabright rightly observed in his *The War of the Sexes*, sex was the sole language, which was universal. Marrying and bearing children represented the summit of a woman's fulfilment in the early seventeenth century.⁴¹

Unlike what many might think, society in Malta began to become increasingly diverse after 1530. The records of such diversity become even stronger after 1563. On one side, there was the island's attraction to foreign sailors and merchants. On the other hand, there were the religious requirements as established by the Council of Trent in 1563. The new Tridentine legislation about Catholic marriage was to have far-reaching consequences on the issue of integration. Still, more than the Council itself, it was the work of a Jesuit father, the Spanish Thomaso Sanchez, which would define Catholic marriage in the south of Europe for the next 200 years. His main work *Disputationes de Sancti Matrimonii Sacramento* (Genoa, 1602), had a lasting effect on Catholic marriage and still conditions the way Catholics see their marriage bond today. The Council of Trent first, and Sanchez afterwards, introduced the concept of equality in marriage, which was absent in the Medieval Christian marriage as inherited from both the Roman and the Barbarian traditions.

It was during the time-span under study that the concept of marriage evolved to a legal precept of equality between men and women in

41 Paul Seabright, *The War of the Sexes: How conflict and cooperation have shaped men and women from prehistory to the present* (New Jersey, 2012).

Malta. Past precepts did not take into consideration women's wishes and welfare. This new idea of equality in marriage began to be shared by some of the Spanish settlers and their local friends. More than one witness affirmed that Geronima, who was asking permission to remarry after her Spanish husband Bastiano Torres passed away, lived this equality as the couple '*erano maritati insieme et si trattavano da marito e moglie*'.⁴² The verb '*trattavano*' (meaning to treat) was purposely used to reflect this new marital deal.

The new considerations for marriage were universal, binding everybody irrespective of creed or social standing. For the first time in 1563, marriage was seen as the institution protecting the rights of children. The procreation of children became a focal point of marriage. This was not something new but it was only codified in a coherent legalistic way in 1563. Marriage was old in the Church and even pre-dated the Church itself. Some scholars, Sanchez included, even concluded that marriage is the oldest social institution which binds human relations. These laws were enacted to address forced marriages or marriages made for social or political conveniences without real consent. The Church expressed serious concerns for the welfare of girls in its legal marriage formulation. A statutory requirement was imposed on girls to get married. As stated previously, marriage was fixed at 12 years. Any infringement of such a requirement required a official exemption, which was solely based on a medical certificate confirming that the girl had reached womanhood. Thus, it brought a halt to an abuse, when children aged 8 and younger were being married. Moreover, a three-month statutory requirement was introduced, known as banns or marriage notices, before any marriage could be officiated. However, before the age of 21, the girls were expected to get parental permission to marry.

Moreover, the legal concept that a marriage could be void was enforced even if not practised during the time of study. Annulments had now definitely replaced any vestiges of the Medieval claim for divorce that had existed in the Christian commonwealth. Thus annulment replaced the concept of divorce but the former was rarely practised at this period.

42 ACM, Status Liber, Box 25, No. 94.

A Community of Mutual Feelings

The acceptance of marriage meant that the migrants were being accepted into the intimacy and privacy of the family circle. Any stress of deprivation that migrants might have been suffering was overcome. Already in those times, families were not necessarily extended. Most of the households were formed by what is known as nuclear families, that is of parents and their children without the presence of in-laws, but these households were not sealed units, as members of the same family tended to conglomerate in the same neighbourhood. In their own right, households were a unit of economic production which guaranteed the migrants a secure living in a foreign land. It is not a coincidence that most of the Spanish migrants continued to settle in Valletta or one of the Three Cities. At the same time, families were open to external encounters but, once accepted within their folds, the migrants were automatically considered as part of the in-laws and this was irrespective of their geographical origins. This feeling of inclusiveness was encountered in the testimony of Placido Brandi from Messina. In 1620 he was living in Malta and was asked to appear before the Ecclesiastical Court to give witness in favour of Vincenzo de Stefano. Brandi recounted that, many years previously, he had been a guest at de Stefano's home in Valencia and treated by Vincenzo's father as '*quasi figliolino*'.⁴³ The two witnesses brought over by Baldino Simiano told of similar experiences. Francesco Ferrer insisted that he had known Simiano '*quasi da sua infanzia*' in Catalonia and '*conosco alli suoi padre e madre*' (sic) and when Simiano came to Malta '*siamo stati amici e conoscenti l'un del altro*' (sic).⁴⁴ The prior of Catalonia, Don Francesco Sabatier, was expressing these feelings when he told the ecclesiastical judge, Bishop Cagliares, that he knew the plaintiff Bernardo Ferrer '*da picciol età in casa di suoi padre et madre*'.⁴⁵ Bernardus Cadavaglia preferred to refer to his acquaintaintance with Salvatore Bodai with the words '*da quando era piccolino*',⁴⁶ while Salvatore Avayano of Majorca had a more moving story to tell '*Io ho conosciuto il prod[ucen]te Antonio Cardona mio cogino carnale da picculta sua p[er] esser parenti et mi*

43 Ibid., Box 13, No. 27.

44 Ibid., Box 15, No. 88.

45 Ibid., Box 20, No. 75.

46 Ibid., Box 3, No. 4

semo allevati insieme conosco anco alla sua madre di nome Cat[eri] na et ho conosciuto il suo p[ad]re di nome Ant[onio] morto tempo fa et o insieme con il d[ett]o prod[ucen]te ci siamo sempre conversati p[er] insino quattro anni in dietro per haver lui imbarcato su una barca et da sop[r]a q[ue]lla preso schiavo in Tunisi dove havendo restato p[er] tutto il passato tre mesi sono inc[irc]a venne qui in Malta dove havendomi io venuto anco cinqui mesi p[rim]a di lui lo viddi qui da d[ett]a schiavitù'.⁴⁷

These attestations show that these migrants were referring to their past. Perhaps, they were seeking to revive their memory and reinvent themselves as immigrants. They were certainly not seeking to erase their past.

There are two other questions that need to be asked. How did the Spanish migrants organize themselves? How did such a small minority succeed in presenting itself as a collective force? The answer lies in the collective manner in which migrants organized themselves before leaving their countries of origin. Rarely did they leave alone. Normally, one finds them leaving in the company of a friend or friends. Salvatore Bodai left Catalonia with Bernardus Cadavaglia, who was also from Catalonia.⁴⁸ They did not come directly to Malta. Instead, the island was reached after a long process and numerous travels. Salvatore Bodai and Bernardus Cadavaglia first went to the Levant before settling in Malta.⁴⁹ Petro de Castro from Palma went first to Palermo before moving to Malta. In this case, one of the witnesses, Agostino Rodriguez gives the reason why de Castro chose to settle in Malta: he had been encouraged by the witness himself, a fellow Spaniard, who had taken up abode in Malta first.⁵⁰ The Basque Joseph Deguavara fell into slavery and was sent to Constantinople where he lived in slavery for about 20 years. He was redeemed by Maestro Marcus Samuno and brought over to Malta. Samuno lived in Senglea and appears to have been a fellow countryman.⁵¹ Christophero Dalmas, from the city of Majorca, was called as a witness on behalf of Antonio Beasani who hailed from the same city. Dalmas knew Beasani from childhood days. They joined the

47 Ibid., Box 25, No. 21.

48 Ibid., Box 3, No. 4.

49 Ibid., Box 3, No. 4.

50 Ibid., Box 3, No. 23.

51 Ibid., Box 9, No. 13.

brigantine captained by Scipione Cortes and, in the words of Dalmas and also of another witness, Antonius Natale, who was from Cagliari in Sardinia, Cortes took them with his brigantine ‘*in diversi louche del mondo*’ (sic) before settling down in Malta.⁵²

Homes were the localities that at this time offered a secure economic means of survival. The harbour towns were not only where the political and economic destiny of Malta was forged but also the place where society’s covenantal activities were taking place. To a certain extent, then as now, it was a question about the distribution of economic power among gender. Without doubt, most of the migrants dedicated themselves to their families, systematically basing their entire lives on earning money through their work. The Spanish migrants were not an exception. This appears clearly from applications of widows in seeking remarriage. Sometimes, an element of nostalgia comes out in the witnesses’ attestation. The husband of Margerita, Francesco fell ill in Toulon where he was serving as a mercenary with the French king’s army and died around April 1614. His death was witnessed by Gaspar Arnau. When Arnau arrived in Malta, he told his wife what had happened and agreed to testify in her favour. He made the following statement ‘*il quale Francesco mi diceva p[er] la familiarità che suo haver che era accasato qui in Malta nell’isola Senglea*’ (sic).

Francesco Ernandes de Gusman recounted a different marital experience. He was in his late teens when he had married Maria. However, his marriage was not successful. His wife, either for economic reasons or perhaps because of lack of attraction, betrayed him. Ernandes de Gusman was from Granada but his engagement as a soldier on the galleys of the knights brought him the opportunity to travel and to marry in Augusta in Sicily. He set up home in Messina. According to one of the witnesses, one day, on his return to Messina after being away with the galleys for some time, he found his wife loitering in the streets, or as it was politely put, ‘*ritrovò per strada e li diedi doi pugnalati e che l’havevan portato nel hospitale grande di S[anc]ta Maria*’. She died in the following days from the wounds received after being struck twice by her husband’s knife.⁵³ Honour killing was then exempted from criminal justice, but the plaintiff could not stay in Messina and avoid

52 Ibid., Box 10, No. 40.

53 Ibid., Box 33, No. 27.

the anger or even the revenge of her family. Without doubt, even if this was never said in the Acts, it was the reason why he moved to Malta to begin a new life. Finally, he was still young, aged 23, when in 1633 he demanded to have his state of single or widower recognized by the Church.

More often than not, once married, husbands continued with their previous activities. As most of the Spanish migrants, like the rest of the migrants, had their daily existence linked to the sea, they continued with their travels, with the result that some died away from home. In some cases, they were even victims of crime. The widow of Francesco Ferrandi, Domenica, applied at the Ecclesiastical Court to be allowed to remarry. She produced witnesses to attest that her husband had been killed in the Neapolitan hinterland. Now, it was Domenica's turn to go through this procedure of having her new status recognized by the Church, as her husband's death could not be recorded in Malta. In redress, she followed all the customs expected from a widow, including dressing in black as a sign of mourning, having Mass said for the repose of her husband's soul, and, most importantly, '*fatto suonare le campane*' so that everybody in Valletta, where she lived, would know about the death of her husband.⁵⁴ The husband of Giovannella, the Catalan Francesco Luntet, died after falling overboard from his galley of Sicily when he was employed as sailor.⁵⁵

However, not all the Spanish migrants met violent or tragic ends abroad. Bastiano Torres, the husband of Hieronima, was a *buonavoglia*; in 1635, his wife and witnesses stated that he died '*de infirmità en Barsalona sopra la galera melita a ventiseis di gennaro 1633*'.⁵⁶

The Spanish Identity in Malta

Such an analysis gives rise to the next question. What did it mean to be a Spanish migrant in Malta at the turn of the seventeenth century? It was more than sharing a common moral belief system. The belief was the same among all the migrants as they were all expected to be Catholics. It was more a question of a common behavioural code. The behavioural

54 Ibid., Box 22, No. 47.

55 Ibid., Box 6, No. 7.

56 Ibid., Box 25, No. 94.

code was different among migrants which was more than an issue of language. For the Spaniards, it was a foremost allegiance to a king who was the element of unity in an otherwise complex geographical region. Catalonia was defined in 1600 as a *principato* with its capital being Barcelona.⁵⁷ From a geo-political point of view, such a title expressed political inferiority. Castile stood on higher political grounds in popular perception. Giovanni de Aumanda defined his home-town to be in the *Regni Castilli* (sic).⁵⁸ Even the Basque territories were considered as an autonomous kingdom. Joseph Deguavara who was employed as a servant with the prior of Navarre, Don Bernardi Spilotta, described himself as from the city of *Sancti Sebastiani Regni Bisionie*.⁵⁹

The formula of '*eius regno cuius religio*' established at the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 reached Malta. Historians affirm that it was at this peace treaty that the concept of the modern nation state was formed and the use of the word '*natione*' obtained currency in Europe. It was the first step towards the creation of one nation made of different religions, in other words, inverting the Medieval formula, which sought the creation of one religion and different monarchs. In 1603 Augustini Rodrigues was described as '*Hispani de Biscaya*'.⁶⁰ As from 1614, a new formula began to be used in Malta in relation to migrants from Spain. The island was, during this period, without a bishop or *sede vacante*. The acting leader of the diocese was a Maltese, Don Francesco Mizzi, a member of the cathedral chapter he had been chosen from amongst his fellow canons. Therefore he was elected to lead the Maltese diocese until a new bishop was appointed and arrived in Malta. Mizzi does not describe Antonio Beasani in relation to one of the kingdoms of Spain but simply as '*Natione Hyspani (sic) de Civitate Maiorcam*'.⁶¹

Yet, the court procedure presided over by Mizzi brings to the fore another reality that this new concept of 'nation' was still a very loose epithet amongst the 'Spanish people'. It was still a hybrid concept, a reflection of both old and new ideas. In the case of the Spanish community, this concept of a nation came from someone who was external to this community, a Maltese ecclesiastic, but whose views were still detached

57 Ibid., Box 3, No. 11.

58 Ibid., Box 9, No. 11.

59 Ibid., Box 9, No. 13.

60 Ibid., Box 3, No. 62.

61 Ibid., Box 10, No. 40.

from the sentiments of identity of the Spanish nation. Contemporary youngsters from Majorca felt more at home with fellow sailors from other harbour cities rather than in forging alliances with other areas of the emerging Spanish 'nation'. In fact, they found it easy to join forces with sailors from Cagliari.⁶² These alliances were more governed by the fact that Cagliari was a maritime city rather than by the fact that it was a part of Aragonese territory. A similar sentiment was expressed by Joannes Font from Barcelona. Cagliari was a neighbouring maritime city and Joannes was reported to have lived there, besides going to other cities in Italy, including Venice, before settling down in Malta.⁶³

These allegiances show that the concept of nation was still at an early stage and the use of the word '*natione*' as a concept of nationhood was still far from having a shared meaning. In 1614 the diocese of Malta passed over to Baldassare Cagliares, whose mother was Maltese but whose roots were Spanish. He appears to have been less concerned with issues of identity. The next Spaniard to be met in the *Status Liber* documents was Paolo Giovanni de Allegretto. In 1619, he was simply defined as Aragonese⁶⁴ and was followed by Vincenzo de Stefano, described as from Valencia in Navarre. One of his witnesses, Laurenzio Alonso, simply described himself as from Majorca.⁶⁵ Towards the end of Cagliares' reign, the concept of nationhood re-emerges in the Acts. In 1630 Bernardo Ferrer qualified himself as '*Spagnolo Catalano di una Villa chiamata Villanova*'⁶⁶ (sic). A similar claim of identity was pronounced during the period of Cagliares' successor, Miguel Juan Balaguer Camarasa who was bishop of Malta between 1635 and 1663. In 1640 Didacus Duran⁶⁷ was described by a witness as '*Spagnolo della città di Saviglia*'.

The submission of evidence shows that the regional identity was an important feature among one category of Spanish migrants: the Catalans. As is to be expected, they showed a strong cultural allegiance to their region and ethnicity. It offered a bond of unity that distinguished them from the rest. This was strongly emphasized in the way they

62 Ibid., Box 10, No. 40.

63 Ibid., Box 10, No. 79.

64 Ibid., Box 12, No. 28.

65 Ibid., Box 13, No. 27.

66 Ibid., Box 20, No. 75.

67 Ibid., Box 30, No. 43.

began to present themselves, showing a strong desire to confirm the label of ‘*Catalani*’ and at the same time seeking friendship either with fellow Catalans or with other nations, in particular the French, rather than with other compatriots from the Iberian Peninsula.⁶⁸ In some cases, the attachment was so strong that the geographical expression Catalan became their identity in Malta as it either substituted their surname or was incorporated within their surname. For example, Francesco Luntet was known also as Catalani. More than a nickname, Catalani was taken as part of his surname.⁶⁹

The above cases confirm that the issue of identity also depended on the way others, including fellow migrants, saw one another. The *Status Liber* of Antonio de Blandes offers another interesting case study on the issue of identity. He applied, in 1623, and preferred to identify himself with the region rather than with the surname of his father, with the result that in Malta he took the surname of Catalano. This is how he was registered in the records: ‘*Antonio Catalano filii Michaelis de Blandes*’. Except for one, Valentius Closa, none of the witnesses were Spanish. The non-Spanish settlers were less intrigued with this Catalan identity. The Frenchman Antonius Faldelu understood Spain solely in terms of the kingdom of Castile. He attested that he had known Antonio de Blandes for the last four years in ‘*Spagna, Barsalona, in Denia* (a town in Alicante), *in Siviglia, Catalogna, et in altri parti et da doi anni qui in Malta*’ (sic). But such an identity was opaque or non-existent for the Neapolitan Stefano Pilito. In his view, Spain stood for the whole of the Iberian Peninsula. When asked how he knew Antonio, he replied ‘*per aver navigato insieme sopra vascelli in napoli e spagna venetia qui in Malta et altri parti*’ (sic). France Sauvo identified himself as ‘*Gallus*’ that is French, from the city of Oriol-en-Royans. In his perception the islanders of Majorca were Catalans. In the same proceedings, Sebastiano Baldagno from Vittoriosa identified Francesco Ferrandi, who happened to know Antonio, as ‘*portughese*’.⁷⁰

Surprisingly, the few Portuguese found in these Acts approached the issue of identity and memory differently from the Catalans. The Portuguese succession crisis was mirrored in the judicial acts of the Maltese Church. At least, judging from these Acts, this did not create

68 Ibid., Box 10 Nos. 77, 79.

69 Ibid., Box 6, No. 7.

70 Ibid., Box 18, No. 21.

any identity problems for the Portuguese settlers. Either because the Portuguese migrants were few or else because they were seeking to reconstruct a mutual common past with Spain, they were ready to identify themselves with the collective Spanish memory. In fact, their preference of choice went to their Spanish neighbours. Domenico de Silva from Lisbon applied for his *Status Liber* in 1611. One of the witnesses, Paolo Saragosa from Palermo, specifically referred to him as a ‘Spaniard’.⁷¹ The next Portuguese request came from Pietro Ferrara on 28 November 1624. He described himself ‘*da villa S[anc]ta Maria de Martin in Portogallo*’. In Malta, he built acquaintances with Spanish settlers as all the three witnesses brought to court to testify in his favour, identified themselves as ‘*Ispanus*’ (sic); two of whom confirmed to have befriended him in Malta, while the third one had got to know him in Messina.⁷² In June 1623 Francesco Ferrandi, from Lisbon, produced as witnesses Michele, who hailed from Barcelona, and Francesco Viges from Majorca. Both testified to have known the ‘*producente*’ for a number of years, together with his father and mother and ‘*tutti di casa*’.⁷³ Incidentally when, two months before, Viges had asked for his *Status Liber*, he asked fellow migrants to appear in court in his favour.⁷⁴ Gregorius Roldans, another Portuguese, was married in Malta and lived in Valletta. He had no problem in identifying himself with Spain as he described himself as ‘*Hispanus del Porto di Portogal*’.⁷⁵

The Castilians also ganged up as a community and they are frequently found in the knights of St John’s army, mostly as soldiers on the galleys. Giovanni de Aumanda was from the town of Villadiego in Burgos. He came to Malta in 1612 from Villadiego, and asked, as one of his two witnesses, a knight from the langue of Castile, the Chancellor Herbaro desa Abedra.⁷⁶ Francesco Pedarsi described himself as ‘*Spagnolo della città di Solvterra*’ (sic) in 1633. Solterra was a city situated at Roa, also in Burgos, the historic capital of Castile. As witnesses, he called the knights of St John, two of whom belonged to the langue of Castile. One was Fra Laurentius Ruis de Herrera. The other was the prior himself, Fra

71 Ibid., Box 8, No. 31.

72 Ibid., Box 18, No. 27.

73 Ibid., Box 18, No. 49.

74 Ibid., Box 18, No. 26.

75 Ibid., Box 17, No. 54.

76 Ibid., Box 9, No 11.

Aloisio Seron et Gusman. The third and last witness was Fra Gabriele Peres de Varis from the priory of Navarre.⁷⁷

On reflecting on America, G.K. Chesterton noted that a nation is founded on one of two principles. The first one is a material basis. The second one is belief. The material basis requires concepts of territory or race. The one of belief requires a vision, which in the case of America, is defined as a nation ‘where men and women from every race, religion, and national background could live in equality’.

Yet, the study of these Acts, which preceded the Declaration of Westphalia of 1648, shows that the migrants had already a strong vision of territory but such a vision lacked a unifying substance. Slowly Spain began to ground itself on a new form of material culture rather than on belief. While, in other parts of Europe, the geographical and cultural backgrounds began assuming greater importance for unity than the spirit of the Christian commonwealth, or what Giacomo Bosio a century earlier had loved to claim the *Res Publica Christiana*. Spain got messed up in different forms of nativism.⁷⁸ At this early stage, claims of superior status came from the provinces which began to differentiate according to the regional identity of the inhabitants. The resulting claims of superior status of one territorial enclave over another created typologies of different inhabitants, enforced issues of identity, and strengthened concepts of superior and inferior status within the same nation. The decline of the Spanish monarchy stopped furnishing the illusions and deceptions of grandeur, so much needed in empire-building, with the result that Spain failed to rally behind one king, as happened in the rest of Europe. Instead, Castile and Aragon, together with Catalonia and Portugal, continued to perceive their respective territory in terms of separate kingdoms. This happened as the Spanish monarch was unsuccessful in aligning the different circles of power within his realm.

77 Ibid., Box 23, No. 73.

78 The term, nativism refers to the political demands of established inhabitants to have a favoured status over newcomers or immigrants.

Conclusion

Perhaps today, the root cause of immigration is associated with economic inequality. For this reason, immigration is seen as a problem. The Mexican-born archbishop of Los Angeles José Gomez had this to say in relation to the current anti-migration feeling in America. ‘People leave their homes and their families because they are needy and desperate. They leave their home countries because they cannot provide the necessities of life for themselves and their families.’⁷⁹ Thus, they seek a new life in a new country but, unlike the contemporary debate about immigration, these past documents are void of references to fear or chauvinism.

Economic reasons are not to be excluded and they have already been listed as one of the reasons for the presence of these Spanish settlers in Malta. However, there is one big difference. Normally, the life of an economic migrant is marked by precariousness and uncertainty. This uncertainty was much less in travelling to Malta as most of the migrants already had a job in hand, such as secure employment in the army or navy, which lessened the challenges associated with settling down in an alien land. A modicum of research in these records confirms this picture. The reason for the migration of these Spaniards is not really linked to economic reasons. At least, none confessed that he was leaving his hometown or village owing to economic hardships.

The personality of the Spanish settlers, as emerges from these *Status Liberi*, is that of sailors, soldiers, and servants. This anatomy has all the ingredients typical of the migratory flows of the seventeenth-century Mediterranean. These occupations project rigid but dutiful settlers. At the same time, as most of the Spanish migrants were within the ranks of the army or navy, they are to be associated with the poorer classes. For this reason, they might have appeared in the eyes of the elite as rabble and scum. This explains why very few important individuals appear as witnesses in their favour, except for the occasional knight who invariably was their employer. But, unlike what one would expect with this class, they were highly literate for the times. Was this the reason why the local society, which was highly illiterate, was more than ready to accept them within its fold?

79 José Gomez, *Immigration and the Next America* (United States, 2013).

The way the Spaniards presented their testimony was rational and methodological, characteristics associated with soldiers and sailors. But their disposition lacked the traits common with roaming merchants. Compared with the merchants, the places visited by these settlers before coming to Malta were definitely fewer. The latter are normally hyperactive. This may explain why the above statements seem to be less thrifty, parsimonious, or calculating, as is normally the case with depositions made by mobile merchants.

The lack of references to women, except for wives of deceased settlers, falls within the gender representation of the time. No doubt, women had other ambitions, avenues, and values through which they exercised power and by which they expressed their political skills but most preferred to spend their time in raising children which, owing to the numbers and also to the daily constraints, was a full-time occupation. The exercise of political or economic leadership had to wait the forthcoming generations to come along for it to become a reality. However, these past constraints were eventually perceived as external barriers imposed and erected by society against women. On the contrary, these attentions show that, even among the Spanish community, marriage was a negotiating tool which empowered women and gave them a status. The marriage doctrine of the Catholic Church endowed them with a pivotal role in the procreation of the children.

In these attestations, the home country always ends up receiving two sorts of different labels. It could be ignored from the migrants' and witnesses' narrative or else described as a paradise lost. The 'lost' home was a topic of narrative of some of the Spanish migrants. The way they answered the questions in court show that they sought to reaffirm a relationship with the past and their home memories. The emotional experience lies in the short description given by some of the witnesses. Just one word would indicate that the migrant is seeking to recount the fondness and nostalgia for a bygone past in Spain. This affinity appears strongly among those coming from rural areas. These were few as most of those coming to Malta came from the main harbour towns, although some did hail from small satellite towns of the hinterland. At least, from the attestations given, those coming from the countryside appear to have had more affinity with their place of birth. Spanish migrants coming from the cities seem to have less attachment to their city of

origin. This is a normal feeling, also encountered in other studies, which found that migrants from big cities have a less psychological attachment than those from rural areas. This lack of affinity became even stronger with migrants who were not home-owners and who would express less attachment to their place of origin. Owning a home in Malta could be the reason why many migrants built strong attachments to its harbour cities. Sometimes, this attachment was expressed through pious devotion and, when this happened, it ended up being transmitted from one generation to the next. Thus, the concept of nativism failed to gain territorial strength in Malta. This facilitated the integration of migrants within what at the time began to be called the *natione maltese*.⁸⁰

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