

The Maltese nobility during the Hospitaller period: towards a reappraisal

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Abstract: *Over the last thirty years the nobilities of early modern Europe have become a subject of major interest for historians working on the social history of the period. This increase in attention has resulted in the development of new approaches to what is a very productive topic of research, in the course of which some established conceptions on the European nobilities have been revised. This paper draws on a number of these new approaches and revisions to suggest ways in which they might illuminate similar research on the Maltese nobility during the Hospitaller period. Through a discussion of the existing research on early modern Maltese society, this paper highlights two broad sets of questions that arise from the study of the Maltese nobility. These questions concern the disintegration of Maltese elites following the arrival of the Order of St John in 1530, and the formation of a new titled elite in the eighteenth century. In the course of addressing the second set of questions, this paper puts forward the hypothesis that the increase in the number of title-holders in the eighteenth century was connected to the contest over jurisdictions and privileges between the magistracy and the inquisition. This paper offers a tour d'horizon of the existing historiography on these topics and draws on some examples from the copious source material that is available for further research.*

Keywords: *Nobility, social stratification, economy, inquisition, eighteenth century, historiography.*

It has been just over thirty years since the appearance of John Montalto's study on the Maltese nobility during the early modern period.¹ As the only scholarly historical monograph on the subject, Montalto's work has exercised a quiet influence on the subsequent historiography of the islands. The distinctive feature of Montalto's study is its descriptive approach, by which various aspects of the Maltese nobility are discussed under very broad headings and in considerable detail, within a loosely chronological and comparative framework that addresses a set of broader historical questions current at the time.

One corollary to this approach is that, in certain respects, it mingles the antiquarian concerns of much earlier Maltese historiography with the analytical

¹ J. Montalto, *The Nobles of Malta 1530–1800*, Malta, 1979.

approaches adopted by subsequent historians. The substantial amount of archival research conducted over the last thirty years or so has contributed to an increase in our knowledge of early modern Malta, both in depth and breadth – from the culture of its inhabitants to their economic activities, and social life more generally. The question arises naturally whether, in the context of these developments in Maltese historiography, our knowledge and conceptions regarding the Maltese nobility in this period should be reassessed and developed through further research and vice-versa. That a large amount of material is available for this research, varying from manuscript and published sources to architectural evidence, is evident from Montalto's study and from the work on genealogies undertaken by Charles Gauci.²

The existence of copious material is not itself enough to justify a research agenda which, when properly directed, seeks to provide answers to historical problems. Formulating a coherent set of research questions is essential to any such enterprise. Montalto's study highlights many different possibilities for further research, especially with regard to the changes that occurred both to and within this social group during the Hospitaller period. This essay will draw attention to two broad sets of questions about the Maltese nobility arising out of Montalto's work, and discuss their treatment in more recent historical literature, before going on to take a closer look at one set of questions in particular.

Two sets of questions

A first set of questions on the Maltese nobility in the early modern period revolve around Charles V's grant of the Maltese islands to the Order of St John. In the conventional chronology of Maltese history, this event marks the transition from the late medieval to the early modern period. For the social elites that dominated Maltese society at the time, the arrival of the Order had drastic and far-reaching consequences. In his discussion on the Maltese nobility in the late medieval period, Montalto lists 72 families who were recorded as feudatories on the islands prior to 1530.³ According to this data, the emergence of this social group can be dated to the beginning of the fourteenth century.⁴ These families formed an elite group on the islands whom Montalto refers to as 'notables'.⁵

With the transfer of the islands to the Order these notables came under sustained attack as Grand Master Philip Villiers de L'Isle Adam (1521–34) adopted a policy, continued by his immediate successors, of reducing the number of feudatories and

² C. Gauci, *The genealogy and heraldry of the noble families of Malta*, Malta, 2002.

³ Montalto, Table 1, pp. 9–14.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 5. For a further discussion of these notables, see S. Fiorini, 'Malta in 1530', in V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.) *Hospitaller Malta 1530–1798*, Malta, 1993, pp. 142–50. For a recent survey of the Medieval period of Maltese history' see C. Dalli, *Malta: the medieval millennium*, Malta, 2006.

requiring the remainder to recognize the Order's authority over the islands.⁶ According to Montalto's data, the number of fiefs was reduced to 13 and these were held by only eight families.⁷ The long-term effects of this attack on the notables have been much discussed if little investigated, although Godfrey Wettinger has noted that resentment over this policy continued even into the seventeenth century.⁸

A second set of questions, some of which this essay will address further on, concern the equally dramatic increase in the number of titleholders in the eighteenth century. Here again Montalto provides some very striking data. In describing the composition of the early modern Maltese nobility, Montalto lists 36 titles granted by the grand masters in the early modern period. Of these, four were granted in the sixteenth century, three in the seventeenth century, and 29 in the eighteenth century.⁹ Furthermore, whereas in the sixteenth century the grand masters were eager to reduce the number of fief holders, during the eighteenth century these were increased, as five families had their lands recognized as fiefs and thereby acquired noble status.¹⁰ This indicates a reversal of the policy adopted by the Order on its acquisition of the Maltese islands in 1530 as, having decimated one social elite during the sixteenth century, the grand masters of the Order played an important role in creating another social elite two centuries later.

What we have, then, are two long-term historical changes occurring in Maltese society, each approximately a century in duration and separated by an interval of a further one hundred years. A further question also arises: why the interval? In his description of the origins and structure of the early modern Maltese nobility, Montalto offers very little analysis of the historical developments outlined above that can be discerned from the data he provides. There is no discussion, for example, of the economic and social changes stemming from the disintegration of the late medieval Maltese elite, nor of the various factors that coalesced to produce the increase in title-holders in the eighteenth century. When Montalto references these issues, he does so obliquely through an examination of relations between the Hospitallers and the Maltese nobility, summarizing the trajectory of these changing relations thus:

⁶ Montalto, pp. 27–9. See also L. Butler, 'The Maltese People and the Order of St John in the Sixteenth Century', *Annales de l'Ordre Souverain Militaire de Malte*, 23, 4, 1965, pp. 143–48; and 24, 3, 1966, pp. 95–101.

⁷ Montalto, Table 2, p. 27.

⁸ G. Wettinger, 'Early Maltese Popular Attitudes to the Government of the Order of St. John', *Melita Historica*, vi/3 1974, pp. 255–78.

⁹ Montalto, pp. 32–3, Table 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

[T]he relationship of the Maltese nobility with the Order follows a pattern distinguishable in three phases. Up to the Great Siege and the building of Valletta, relations probably reached their lowest. The second phase, lasting up to the death of [Grand Master] Adrien de Wignacourt, showed an improvement in affairs which varied largely with the actions of each Grand Master. In the third and final phase the relationship was at its most amicable.¹¹

This assessment gives rise to a whole host of questions. We can ask, for example, whether relations between particular individual members of different social groups should be taken as indicative of relations between those groups, and vice-versa. However, it is evident from the copious material that Montalto utilises in his study that this summary invites further elaboration. Thus far, this invitation has been only partially taken up and there are particular historiographical reasons for this that deserve to be examined.

Historians of early modern Malta, while noting the disintegration of the medieval Maltese elite after 1530, have subsumed this topic under the more general discussion concerning the magistracy's attempts to assert its sovereignty over the islands at the expense of native social groups, the bishops, and the inquisition. Socio-historical approaches to these developments fail to address the wider impact of these developments on sixteenth-century Maltese society except to affirm this loss of political control.¹² Cultural perspectives on this topic tend to characterize these developments in terms of the creation of separate cultural zones, one centred on the harbour area and the other on the former capital of Notabile.¹³ In this way, the change undergone by the Maltese nobility in the sixteenth century has been presented as part of the answer to other questions, rather than a question of its own.

This sidelining of the Maltese nobility is in part a consequence of the long shadow cast by the Order over the history of the islands. Historians of the Order have consistently linked any assessment of the Maltese nobility with the magistracy's attempts to assert its sovereignty over the islands at the expense of native elites, and with its various jurisdictional contests with the ecclesiastical authorities on the islands as well as the viceroys of Sicily. Elizabeth Schermerhorn's monograph on the Maltese period of Hospitaller history, for many decades the authoritative volume on the subject, only mentions the Maltese nobility when highlighting the 'despotism' of the Magistracy.¹⁴ Roderick Cavaliero's history of the Order in the eighteenth century, first published in 1960 and re-published several times over, makes the same connection.¹⁵ One recent

¹² See for example, A.T. Luttrell, 'Malta and Rhodes: Hospitallers and Islanders', in V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.), p. 279; and A. Bonnici, 'Maltese Society under the Hospitallers in the light of Inquisition Documents', in V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.), pp. 315–17.

¹³ See, for example, C. Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta*, Malta, 2000, ch. 2.

¹⁴ E.W. Schermerhorn, *Malta of the Knights*, London, 1929, especially pp. 38–42, 272–73.

¹⁵ R. Cavaliero, *The Last of the Crusaders: The Knights of St John and Malta in the Eighteenth Century*, London, 2008, pp. 23–4, 39–41.

history of the Order, by J.H.A. Sire, portrays its assertion of its control over the islands at the expense of the notables as something of a liberation for the rest of the Maltese population.¹⁶ These histories frequently refer to the Maltese nobility in disparaging terms when highlighting their loss of power, a practice that originates with Giacomo Bosio in the third volume of his history of the Order, first published in 1602.¹⁷

The long tradition of twinning native political exclusion with Hospitaller despotism has carried over into what little historical analysis has thus far been conducted on the process of state formation in early modern Malta. In his brief and speculative contribution to this topic, Adrianus Koster has emphasized the disenfranchisement of the native population and on this basis, and the dominance of the various Church institutions, characterizes the Hospitaller state as a type of clerical polis, or in his words a 'regular regime'.¹⁸ It has also served to relegate any discussion of the multiplication of noble titles in the eighteenth century to a subordinate role.

Anthony Luttrell's otherwise wide ranging and perceptive essay on the various historical problems that arise from the history of eighteenth-century Malta follows this convention in devoting only a couple of sentences to these 'new-nobles' and their tenure of offices in the Hospitaller state and the church, emphasizing their exclusion from the Order and lack of political influence.¹⁹ The equation between service to the Order and social advancement is accepted by other historians, who nevertheless lump together as one new social class all those who entered such service, whether subsequently titled or not, and highlight what are considered to be the foreign or rural origins of this new social group.²⁰ When placed alongside the established view of political disenfranchisement, this recognition of the emergence of new social elites in the eighteenth century leads to a somewhat contradictory characterization of Maltese society in this period as a 'one-class' society marked by internal distinctions based on social status.²¹

While there is no place here to discuss extensively this equivalence between social structure and political infrastructure, it is nevertheless necessary to point out that to characterize Maltese society as a one-class society, even in the above terms,

¹⁶ J.H.A. Sire, *The Knights of Malta*, New Haven, 1996, pp. 75–6.

¹⁷ G. Bosio, *Dell'istoria della Sacra Religione et ill.ma militia di S. Gio. Gerosolimitano Parte III*, Rome, 1602, pp. 89–90, especially p. 248.

¹⁸ A. Koster, 'The Knights' State (1530–1798): A Regular Regime', *Melita Historica*, viii/4, 1983, pp. 299–312.

¹⁹ A.T. Luttrell, 'Eighteenth-Century Malta: Prosperity and Problems', *Hyphen*, 3, 5, Malta, 1982, pp. 37–51.

²⁰ See, for example, C. Cassar, 'Popular Perceptions and Values in Hospitaller Malta', in V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.) *Hospitaller Malta 1530–1798*, Malta, 1993, p. 435.

²¹ F. Ciappara, *Society and the Inquisition in Eighteenth Century Malta*, Malta, 2000, pp. 35–6.

is at best idiosyncratic. Not only does it ignore differences in wealth, education, culture, and other factors that contribute towards social differentiation, it also fails to engage with the vast scholarly literature devoted to the subject.²² An important consequence of this for the historiography of the Maltese islands, and one that is more directly pertinent to this discussion, is that the ‘one-class’ model acts as a conceptual obstacle to historical investigations into changes in Maltese society during the Hospitaller period.

A more coherent framework for understanding social change in eighteenth-century Malta has been offered by economic approaches to the topic. It is now well-established that, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, Maltese society experienced a significant though gradual improvement in economic conditions, manifested in population growth, higher living standards and, for the eighteenth century in particular, a multiplication of trading opportunities.²³ It has been argued that these economic developments led to the creation of a new mercantile class who, through their wealth and entrepreneurial expertise, dominated the most important economic institutions on the islands and developed close ties with the Order.²⁴ Carmel Cassar has highlighted the example of the Rispolo family, one of whom, Bernardino Rispolo, was made a donat of the Order in 1603.²⁵ Alain Blondy gives prominence to families of French origin, such as the Poussiellgues, who through financial services to Grand Master Hompesch (1797–1805) secured positions as conventual chaplains of the Order and as officials of the Magistracy.²⁶ Neither Blondy nor Cassar, however, link the emergence of this social group to the increase in title-holders during the eighteenth century.

Towards a reappraisal

In all major fields of historical enquiry, then, the questions that arise from Montalto’s study on the Maltese nobility during the early modern period remain unaddressed. The existence of such lacunae in the historiography of the Maltese islands is a clear justification for further research on this topic. The task that remains to be considered is how to frame these investigations in the light of parallel research into

²² For the period under discussion, a good starting place would be M.L. Bush (ed.) *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification*, London, 1992.

²³ V. Mallia-Milanes, ‘Towards an Economic History of Eighteenth Century Malta’, *Hyphen*, No. 2, 1978, pp. 1–25. M. Fontenay, ‘Le développement urbain du port de Malte du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle’, *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, 71, 1994, pp. 91–108; C. Vassallo, *Corsairing to Commerce: Maltese merchants in XVIII century Spain*, Malta, 1997.

²⁴ Cassar, ch. 4; A. Blondy, ‘L’ordre de Saint-Jean et l’essor économique de Malte (1530–1798)’, *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, 71, 1994, ‘Le carrefour maltais’, pp. 75–90.

²⁵ Cassar, pp. 84–91.

²⁶ A. Blondy, ‘L’ordre de Saint-Jean et l’essor économique de Malte (1530–1798)’, *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, 71, 1994, ‘Le carrefour maltais’, p. 83.

the nobilities of early modern Europe. Here we find that, for the past half-century or more, the nobilities of early modern Europe have been a very productive topic for historians, to the extent that a comprehensive review of the literature has been deemed beyond the scope of specialist monographs.²⁷ The full breadth and depth of the changes in this field of historical enquiry, at least as far as Anglophone literature on the subject is concerned, can be gauged by comparing the volume edited by Albert Goodwin and published in 1953, with the two-volume collection of essays edited by Hamish Scott, recently published in a second expanded edition.²⁸

In the introduction to the two volumes of essays mentioned above, Hamish Scott and Christopher Storrs discuss what can be considered the main contribution of the previous decades of research in this field to the more general historiography of Europe; namely, that far from declining during the early modern period, the nobilities of Europe prospered and consolidated their position in society.²⁹ It follows from this that research into the nobilities of Europe should focus not on the decline of this social group but on their persistence and, as Montalto highlights at the beginning of his own study, this continuity also applies to the Maltese nobility.³⁰ Of course, research into different historical contexts, while benefitting from comparison with scholarship on similar topics for other regions and across different fields of enquiry, requires differences in emphasis and in orientation. It is all too easy to adopt a conceptual or theoretical framework developed by others, and thereby impose an historical model (a narrative of progress for example) on the results of separate research.

Following from this last point, there are two things that need to be addressed with regard to the Maltese nobility in the early modern period. First, in his contribution on the Italian nobilities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Claudio Donati includes the Maltese nobility among their number.³¹ Donati is not alone in considering the Maltese islands as part of an Italian 'historical space', as Gregory Hanlon also incorporates the archipelago in his history of early modern Italy.³² This immediately raises the question as to whether or not the developments outlined by Donati for the Italian nobilities also apply to the Maltese nobility. For example, Donati notes that during the eighteenth century French culture became

²⁷ See, for example, J. Dewald, *The European Nobility 1400–1800*, Cambridge, 1996; and J. Lukowski, *The European Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*, New York, 2003.

²⁸ A. Goodwin (ed.), *The European Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1953; H.M. Scott (ed.), *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, 2nd edn., 2 vols, New York, 2007.

²⁹ H.M. Scott and C. Storrs, 'Introduction', in H.M. Scott (ed.), *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries Volume I: Western Europe*, New York, 2007, p. 7.

³⁰ Montalto, p. xii.

³¹ C. Donati, 'The Italian Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in Scott (ed.), p. 287.

³² G. Hanlon, *Early Modern Italy, 1550–1800: Three Seasons in European History*, London, 2000, ch. 1.

increasingly dominant in Italian noble circles.³³ A similar trend has been noted for elite social groups in eighteenth-century Malta.³⁴ If confirmed by future research, the question arises as to whether this trend was a reflection of developments among the nobilities of Italy, or if a different set of parallel historical forces was at work. It is worth noting here that the French historian Jean Godechot, in one of the earliest contributions to Maltese economic history, described the Maltese islands in the second half of the eighteenth century as a commercial outpost of France.³⁵

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly for the purposes of this discussion, there is the question of the size of this social group. In his study Montalto does not offer any estimates for the number of Maltese nobles during the early modern period. Nevertheless, we can surmise from the data he supplies that, despite the number of new creations in the eighteenth century, the Maltese nobility during the Hospitaller period did not make up more than 1% of the population. Michael Bush has classified nobilities of this size as 'minute nobilities', and attributes their relatively small numbers to restrictions on ennoblement, namely, the inability to independently assume noble status, widespread peasant ownership of the land, and an infertile or inaccessible landscape.³⁶ The first and last of these factors apply very neatly to the Maltese case; further research is required into landownership in early modern Malta to assess the validity of the second.³⁷

The question of landownership is an important one as it had a direct bearing on social status in early modern societies, and on the role of economic factors in the acquisition of noble status in particular. Everywhere in Europe, landownership remained the defining economic characteristic of nobilities.³⁸ Thus, the 'aristocratization' of patrician elites in northern Italy was accompanied by a move away from commercial and industrial sources of revenue to more reliable income resulting from landownership.³⁹ This process is particularly evident in transitions from commoner to noble status, as Robert Forster has shown in his case study on the Depont family of La Rochelle in eighteenth-century France.⁴⁰

³³ Donati, p. 288–89.

³⁴ See, for example, A. Blondy, 'L'ordre de Saint-Jean et l'essor économique de Malte (1530–1798)', *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, 71, 1994, 'Le carrefour maltais', pp. 75–90; and N. Caruana Dingli, 'Felicissimo Antonio de Piro (1699–1738): A Francophile Maltese Nobleman', *Melita Historica*, xiv/3, 2006, pp. 283–302.

³⁵ J. Godechot, 'La France et Malte au XVIIIe Siècle', *Revue Historique*, 206, 1951, pp. 67–79.

³⁶ M.L. Bush, *Rich Noble, Poor Noble*, Manchester, 1988, pp. 21–3.

³⁷ Some starting points on this subject may be found in J. Montalto, *The Nobles of Malta 1530–1800*, Malta, 1979; A. T. Luttrell, 'Eighteenth-Century Malta: Prosperity and Problems', *Hyphen*, 3, 5, Malta, 1982, pp. 37–51; and F. Ciappara 'The Landed Property of the Inquisition in Malta in the Late XVIII Century', *Melita Historica*, vii/1, 1976, pp. 42–60.

³⁸ Scott and Storrs, pp. 24–5.

³⁹ Donati, p. 286.

⁴⁰ R. Forster, *Merchants, Landlords and Magistrates: The Depont Family in Eighteenth-Century France*, Baltimore, 1979, ch. 3.

Can similar economic factors account for the increase in titled persons in eighteenth-century Malta? This may well be a plausible hypothesis, especially in the light of Blondy's identification of a rising mercantile class, referred to above. In his study on the Maltese nobility, Montalto highlights the de Piro as one example of a wealthy mercantile family acquiring noble status.⁴¹ A closer look at the de Piro's sources of wealth, however, makes this assessment somewhat problematic. In the first instance, even prior to Giovanni Pio de Piro's ennoblement in 1716, the de Piro family drew considerable income from various properties in Malta and Gozo alongside the interest accumulated from personal loans, referred to as *partite bollali*.⁴² Secondly, while the de Piro undoubtedly drew some portion of their revenue from commercial activities, they did so primarily as owners of land producing cash crops such as cotton,⁴³ and as investors in agricultural enterprises in Sicily such as sugar production in Avola.⁴⁴ Finally, the de Piro's involvement in commercial exchanges also stemmed from their role as agents for high-ranking knights of St John and others besides.⁴⁵ In short, then, the diversity of the de Piro's economic interests in the first half of the eighteenth century means that their classification as 'merchants' should be revised.

This diversity in economic interests on the de Piro's part was typical of the nobilities of Europe. Recent scholarship has shown that nobles participated in all the major areas of economic life, even commerce and industry, without detracting from their social position.⁴⁶ The production of wine from vineyards on their fiefs was an important source of revenue for the Sicilian aristocracy.⁴⁷ Jonathan Dewald has shown how the French aristocratic clan of the Roncherolles drew revenues from all aspects of agricultural activity from their estate at Pont-St-Pierre, including the intensive production of timber.⁴⁸ Nor was the de Piro's investment in personal loans uncharacteristic, as this was a popular method of raising capital among the Italian nobilities, especially when directed towards the acquisition of more

⁴¹ Montalto, p. 279.

⁴² A[rchivum] d[e] P[iro] Man. 36 and Man. 66. I take this opportunity to thank the Depiro family for allowing me to conduct research in their private archive.

⁴³ See, for example, the letters of the Baron de Piro's agent Bernardino Casha of Zebbug in AdeP A3, bundle 6.

⁴⁴ See, for example, the letters of Giaochino Zahra, the Baron de Piro's agent in Palermo, in AdeP Man. 92.

⁴⁵ See, for example, AdeP Man. 66, f. 140 r-v.

⁴⁶ Bush, ch. 5; S. Clark, *State and Status: The Rise of the State and Aristocratic Power in Western Europe*, Montreal, 1995, pp. 225-27; and J. Lukowski, *The European Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*, New York, 2003, ch. 5.

⁴⁷ M. Verga, *La Sicilia de grani: gestione dei feudi e cultura economica fra sei e settecento*, Florence, 1993, pp. 50-1.

⁴⁸ J. Dewald, *Pont-St-Pierre 1398-1789: Lordship, Community and Capitalism in Early Modern France*, Berkeley, 1987, ch. 6.

land.⁴⁹ The de Piros issued these personal loans for amounts ranging between 40 to 3,000 *scudi*, either to individuals or groups, such as partners or families investing in land, at an annual interest ranging between 4 and 6%, and would continue to draw income from a loan until the complete amount was repaid on top of the interest. Repayments could be made in a set number of equal instalments over a stated number of years, while in other instances the loans were passed down from generation to generation, making them a stable source of income.⁵⁰ It is worth noting that in the various marriage contracts involving members of the de Piro family, such personal loans were included for the specific purpose of acquiring further property.⁵¹ This suggests that these personal loans were one means by which upwardly mobile families could create the economic basis for their social aspirations.

Giovanni Pio de Piro acquired his first title, that of baron of the fief of Budach, through his service as an official of the magistracy.⁵² One of his earliest official appointments was as procurator of grain in Licata for the *Università* of Malta.⁵³ After several years occupying various minor offices in the Hospitaller State, during which he was granted his first title by Grand Master Perellos, Giovanni Pio became *segreto* to Grand Master Zondadori in 1721.⁵⁴ Service in the Hospitaller state allowed the office-holder various privileges, and during the eighteenth century such service could lead to ennoblement.⁵⁵ Michael Bush has convincingly argued that noble status was based on privilege, an assessment that has been widely accepted by other historians of the European nobilities.⁵⁶ While Montalto's study does not contain any information on noble privileges, it would appear that the Maltese nobility enjoyed privileges that Bush classifies as 'honorific'.⁵⁷ This was the case with the de Piro, whose first title did not come with any substantive privileges attached.⁵⁸

⁴⁹ See, for example, S.J. Woolf, 'Economic Problems of the Nobility in the Early Modern Period: The Example of Piedmont', *The Economic History Review*, 17, 2, 1964, p. 282; and M. Benaiteau, 'Una Nobiltà di lunga durata: strategie e comportamenti dei Tocco di Montemileto', in Maria Antonietta Visceglia (ed.), *Signori, Patrizi, Cavalieri in Italia centro-meridionale nell'Età moderna*, Rome, 1992, pp. 208–09.

⁵⁰ The loans are listed, along with the rates of interest and conditions of payment, alongside income from properties in the de Piro books of revenue: AdeP Man. 2, Man. 36, Man. 66, Man. 83, Man. 84, Man. 90, Man. 102A, Man. 102B, and Man. 113.

⁵¹ See, for example, AdeP P4, *Matrimonio dell'Illmo Nobile Don Gio Pio De Piro Barone di Budach con Snra Anna Antonia Gourgion*; and *Matrimonio del Barone Don Ferdinando Ribera con Donna Eugenia De Piro*.

⁵² AdeP Man. 86, ff. 501–2.

⁵³ AdeP Man. *Lettere essendo io Ambasciatore in Licata*.

⁵⁴ AdeP A8. 5; Man. 98; Man. 108; and Man. 118. See also Montalto, p. 103.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 101–03; and C. Galea Scannura, 'The Duties of the *Segreto* during the period of the Hospitallers', *Archivum*, 1, 1981, pp. 126–46.

⁵⁶ Bush; Scott and Storrs, p. 9.

⁵⁷ Bush, ch. 5.

⁵⁸ AdeP Man. 86, f. 501–02.

The lack of information on privileges associated with noble status in Malta represents a great lacuna for historians of the subject and it is hoped that future research will shed more light on this topic. Should further research confirm the absence of substantive privileges for the Maltese nobility during the Hospitaller period, this would contribute towards an explanation as to why many Maltese nobles acquired clerical status, with its various juridical and fiscal privileges, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁵⁹ It would also go some way towards explaining the close ties between the Maltese nobility and the inquisition, which were particularly strong during the eighteenth century when many nobles acquired patents from the inquisition.⁶⁰ The privileges conferred by these patents were manifold and substantive, including exemptions from taxation and the right to have all lawsuits transferred to the inquisitor's courts.⁶¹ The inquisition, then, rivalled the magistracy as a source of privileges for those socially ambitious Maltese families seeking to convert their material prosperity into forms of social capital.

Several historians have noted how the increase in the number of those holding inquisitor's patents attracted the attention of the Magistracy, which made efforts to have their numbers reduced during the eighteenth century.⁶² According to the data supplied by Montalto, Grand Master de Rohan (1775–97) elevated 17 families to the ranks of the nobility, accounting for more than half of the new creations in the eighteenth century.⁶³ De Rohan's magistracy coincides with an acrimonious intensification of the contest between the magistracy and the local ecclesiastical institutions.⁶⁴ It seems likely that these two parallel developments were connected and can form the basis of a working hypothesis: the increase in title holders in Malta during the second half of the eighteenth century was a consequence, in part, of the contest between the magistracy and the inquisition. What historians have thus far characterized as a dispute over jurisdictions and privileges had direct social consequences in the creation of a new social elite as part of the magistracy's attempts to assert its sovereignty over the islands.

If confirmed by future research, the above hypothesis would suggest that in eighteenth-century Malta the processes of state formation and social differentiation were closely linked. The task remains to explain how this link was forged. Analysis

⁵⁹ Montalto, ch 7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* ch. 11.

⁶¹ A. Bonnici, *Medieval and Roman Inquisition in Malta*, Malta, 1998, pp. 90–6.

⁶² See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 218; and F. Ciappara, *The Roman Inquisition in Enlightened Malta*, Malta, 2000.

⁶³ Montalto, pp. 32–3.

⁶⁴ D. Borg Muscat, 'Reassessing the September 1775 Rebellion', *Melita Historica*, xiii/3, 2002, pp. 239–52; F. Ciappara, 'Gio. Nicoló Muscat: Church-State Relations in Hospitaller Malta during the Enlightenment, 1786–1798', in V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.), pp. 605–31.

of the ties between social elites and the state in early modern Europe has focused on relationships of mutual dependence and obligation, a conceptual framework borrowed from sociology and commonly referred to as patron-client relations.⁶⁵ There is no place here to delve into the controversies surrounding this particular field of historical scholarship, except to outline two contrasting, but by no means mutually exclusive, approaches to the topic. The first, put forward by Sharon Kettering in her account of patronage in seventeenth-century France, emphasizes material rewards and self-interest as the basis of patron-client relations.⁶⁶ The second, put forward by Kirsten Neuschel in her analysis of similar relations in sixteenth-century France, advocates a cultural approach that emphasizes contemporary notions of personal honour.⁶⁷

Historians have yet to undertake an analysis of patron-client relations in early modern Malta, and given what has been said above concerning the formation of social groups and service in the Hospitaller State, the Maltese nobility would appear to be a good starting point for such an account. Returning to the example of the de Piro. We find that, when Giovanni Pio de Piro was coming to end of his third term as procurator of grain in Licata, he wrote to the seneschal of the Order, with whom he had frequent correspondence, and ended his letter by asking the seneschal to 'continue towards me your most esteemed protection, and to that end I make you the most profound reverence'.⁶⁸ This reference to 'protection', in return for which the patron, in this case the seneschal Caraffa, could expect some kind of 'service', is a clear example of patron-client language.⁶⁹ It is in this light that references to 'protector knights' should be examined, rather than the somewhat scurrilous interpretation they have been accorded in the past, especially with regard to the participation of women in networks of clientage.⁷⁰

Ties of patronage between the Magistracy and the Maltese nobility did not necessarily impart homogeneity of allegiance of the latter towards the former. Ties

⁶⁵ An extensive treatment of this concept is given by S.N. Eisenstadt and L. Roniger, *Patrons, Clients and Friends: Interpersonal relations and the structure of trust in society*, Cambridge, 1984. See also R.R. Kaufman, 'The Patron – Client Concept in Macro – Politics: Prospects and Problems,' in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 16, 3, 1974, pp. 284–308.

⁶⁶ S. Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France*, New York, 1986.

⁶⁷ K.B. Neuschel, *Word of Honor: Interpreting Noble Culture in Sixteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, 1989).

⁶⁸ AdeP Man. *Lettere essendo io Ambasciatore in Licata; Al Signor Senescalco Caraffa*, 5 June 1706. '[C]ontinuar a me la stimatissima sua protezione e con tal fine le faccio profonda riverenza.'

⁶⁹ On questions concerning the language of patron-client relations, see K.B. Neuschel, *Word of Honor: Interpreting Noble Culture in Sixteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, 1989) ch. 4; and S. Kettering, 'Patronage in Early Modern France', *French Historical Studies*, 17, 4, 1992, pp. 839–62.

⁷⁰ Montalto, p. 80. For insights into the role of women in patronage networks see S. Kettering, 'The Patronage Power of Early Modern French Noblewomen', *The Historical Journal*, 32, 4, 1989, pp. 817–41.

of patronage are fragile, especially because of their interpersonal foundation.⁷¹ When Giovanni Pio de Piro's tenure of the office of *secreto* came to an end with the death of Grand Master Zondadori in 1722,⁷² the then Baron de Piro acquired a patent from the Inquisition, a move that incurred the displeasure of Grand Master de Vilhena (1722–36).⁷³ Writing in 1764, the knight of St John Camillo Spreti noted a division within elite circles:

In Malta there are Persons of Four degrees. The Barons, the Counts, the Citizens, and the Common Folk. The Barons are few and not amiable, finding it very hard to receive the Knights in their Houses, because they, having suffered various Wrongs and Discourteous Treatment from a few extravagant fellows among the Knights, do not wish to expose themselves again to similar Affronts, and thus it has come about that many Innocents must suffer for the bad behaviour of the Guilty Few. The Counts are – let me put it thus – more accessible than the above-mentioned Barons, receiving the Knights more readily into their Houses and in this rank, as in the first, there are Families – though few indeed – where one may pleurably pass a few hours of the day without offence to God.⁷⁴

Spreti's comments have been interpreted as evidence of poor relations existing between the Maltese elites and the Order of St. John by the end of the eighteenth century.⁷⁵ Alongside similar descriptions of Maltese society, these observations have also been understood as evidence of an incipient Maltese nationalism among the upper echelons of Maltese society.⁷⁶ However, Spreti's references to 'discourteous treatment' and 'affronts' received by members of the Maltese nobility from various Hospitallers indicates that frosty relations between the two groups resulted from disagreements over ceremonial and proper etiquette, which by the eighteenth century had assumed considerable importance in elite circles across Europe.⁷⁷ These problems regarding the niceties of social behaviour in relations between the nobility and the knights Hospitaller were noted by another observer of social life in Malta, the French travel diarist Carasi.⁷⁸ Similar considerations may offer a fresh perspective on the profusion of various titles in legal documents identified by Simon Mercieca.⁷⁹

⁷¹ S.N. Eisenstadt and L. Roniger, *Patrons, Clients and Friends: Interpersonal relations and the structure of trust in society*, Cambridge, 1984, p. 216.

⁷² Montalto, p. 103

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁷⁴ A. Mackenzie-Grieve trans., *Description of the Island of Malta & A Brief Treatise on Knightly Behaviour Written by the Noble Knight Camillo Spreti In the year 1764*, Library Committee, O.S.J.J. Historical Pamphlet: No. 10, Hertford, 1949, p. 36.

⁷⁵ Cavaliero, 23.

⁷⁶ Cassar, p. 267.

⁷⁷ The literature on this subject is growing and a good starting point is G. Sternberg, 'Epistolary Ceremonial: Corresponding Status at the time of Louis XIV', *Past and Present*, 204, 2009, pp. 33–88.

⁷⁸ M. Carasi, *L'Ordre de Malte Dévoilé ou Voyage de Malthe: Seconde Partie*, Cologne, 1790, pp. 18–19.

⁷⁹ S. Mercieca, 'The Possession of Titles and Forms of Address in Early Modern Malta', *Humanitas, Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, 2, 2003, pp. 41–60.

Conflicts over precedence may appear trifling to the historian living at a time when society no longer attaches great importance to them. However, they were important enough in eighteenth-century Maltese society to merit regulation by the magistracy, first in 1739 and then again in 1795.⁸⁰ These two codifications, along with the regulations on the use of titles issued in 1725,⁸¹ are indicative of the important social changes that occurred in Malta during the eighteenth century. That disagreement over similar questions surrounding precedence and the Maltese nobility arose again in the late nineteenth century may well indicate that such conflicts reflect a set of cultural assumptions that were much more fundamental in Maltese society than previously thought, and that were not limited to the early modern period of Maltese history.⁸²

Conclusion

This essay has identified and discussed a number of historical problems that arise from John Montalto's study of the Maltese nobility during the Hospitaller period and that have not been addressed in the subsequent historiography of the Maltese islands. In the course of examining these questions, I have advanced the hypothesis that the increase in the number of title-holders during the eighteenth century was connected to the magistracy's contest with the Inquisition over jurisdictions and privileges. This essay has also shown how recent approaches to the study of the European nobilities suggest new perspectives on some of the standard assumptions concerning the Maltese nobility during this period. In these ways, this paper highlights the need for a reappraisal of the Maltese nobility during the Hospitaller period: their economic activities, their participation in networks of power, their formation and internal divisions.

⁸⁰ Montalto, p. 74.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² See the *Report of the Commission appointed to inquire into the claims of the Maltese nobility*, Malta, 1878; and *Further papers relating to the claims of the Maltese nobility*, Malta, 1878. For some interesting contemporary Maltese perspectives on these issues, see the anonymous pamphlet, *A Short Sketch of the Maltese Nobility*, Malta, 1876; and V. Caruana, *Malta Nobile Illustrata*, Malta, 1903.