

Suppliche per l'Elemosina Frumentaria:
A set of 18th century petitions submitted by Maltese widows

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Abstract

The loss of a spouse invariably leads to changes in the life of the surviving partner. In late eighteenth century Malta, a widowed female faced numerous challenges in her struggle to adapt to a new existence. For a poor widow, the provision of assistance was vital. The governing Order of St. John of Jerusalem, the Catholic Church, private entities and familial sources contributed to alleviate some of the difficulties faced by widows in different manners. The Statutes of the Order of St John included stipulations in support of the poor, the infirm, orphans and widows. This paper examines one method that enabled widows to seek poor relief from the authorities through the submission of a supplica (a petition) and evaluates a number of original petitions submitted by widows between 1784 and 1788. These suppliche were specific requests to the governing authorities for an elemosina frumentaria.

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Introduction

The female figure in pre-modern Europe is an intensely studied topic, and ostensibly a controversial one. Numerous legal restrictions in most European countries governed the lifestyle of a woman. Her activities were restricted and controlled by the male figure; be this her father, her husband, her guardian, her employer or even her own son. However, within these constraints, the woman could still succeed in achieving some control of her life, even if this were temporary.¹ The state of widowhood could provide such an opportunity to a woman.

The loss of a spouse, particularly when this occurs through unforeseeable circumstances, invariably leads to an upheaval in the lives of the surviving partner and progeny. This statement is relevant now as much as in late eighteenth century Malta, but the consequences of widowhood upon women in that era were much harsher. The statutes of the governing Order of St. John of Jerusalem included provisions in support of disadvantaged widows. This brief study examines one process by which women could request poor relief based on their social status of widowhood.

The state of widowhood

A widow could be wealthy or poor, with child or childless, old or young, in health or infirm. Her survival chances depended on her circumstances. Not all women who became widows became poor; the change in their marital status realistically could lead to an improvement in their lifestyle. For some widows, losing their husband presented new opportunities – offering a form of independence that they had never possessed.² When the pharmacy owner, the *Aromatario*³ Paolo Zammit died in 1793, the authorities granted the widow, Anna, the permission to continue the commercial activity with the employment of another pharmacist. After two and a half years, her son Salvatore qualified as a pharmacist, and his mother asked the authorities for her son to work in their pharmacy.⁴

In another *supplica*, a pharmacist's widow, Maria Habdilla sought the settlement of credit owed to her husband for medicines he had supplied to a sick member of the Order. In this petition, the widow stressed the unfortunate circumstances of her existence, having seven young children.⁵

¹ A study by Mario Porri and Claudio Schiavoni in 1988 concluded that out of a sample of 2,700 households in 18th century Rome, 458 of these had a female *capo di famiglia*, the majority of which were widows, who acquired temporary control of their late husbands' commercial activities. Porri, Mario and Schiavoni, Claudio, "Aspetti della condizione femminile e del lavoro della donna a Roma fra XVII e XVIII secolo", *Genus*, vol.44, no.3/4, July-Dec 1988, 245-263.

² F. Ciappara states that the occupation of the husband was one factor that influenced a widow's need to remarry. If the widow could independently continue her late husband's activity there was less economic need for her to find another husband. Ciappara, Frans, "Marriage and the family in a Maltese parish: St. Mary's (Qrendi) in the eighteenth century", *Journal of Family History*, vol. 36, no.1, 40.

³ Both *aromatario* and *speciale* represented a person who was licensed to prepare and dispense medicines – a pharmacist.

⁴ National Library of Malta [NLM], Archives of the Order of Malta [AOM] 1198, f.151

⁵ Archives of the Cathedral of Malta [ACM], Sp. B, Vol. 2, N^o 16, f. 263 - ..*Maria vedova del fu' Benedetto Habdilla ... si ritrova col peso di sette figli minori non possedendo altro che qualche poco di credito che lascio doppo morte d' fu' suo Marito*. As quoted in the unpublished M.A.

Women usually married at an early age, frequently became widows, and lived longer than men did.⁶ The 1785 *Status Animarum* (S.A.) of St. Paul's Parish in Valletta provides significant information regarding widowhood in eighteenth century Malta.⁷ This S.A. comprises parishioners who lived in those quarters of Valletta that were under the jurisdiction of St. Paul's Parish, as well as those who lived in Floriana. This document names 648 widowed persons; ⁸ 530 (81.8%) were widows, and 118 were widowers (18.2%).⁹ This significant difference in numbers between widows and widowers (at a ratio of 4.5:1 in St. Paul's Parish) follows the same pattern observed in late eighteenth century S.A. of other parishes around the Islands.¹⁰ Women often married at an earlier age, and it was more likely for a woman to survive her husband. Depending on the circumstances of their individual situations, many women did not re-marry. An important factor, when considering the re-marriage of a widow, is the theological teachings of the Catholic Church that promoted the sacredness of widowhood and preached against remarriage. In addition, although the dire circumstances of a widow probably made her desperate to remarry at the first opportunity, the chances of a second or third marriage depended on various factors. Her age was crucial as was her economic and social status.¹¹ In considering the data from the 1785 S.A. of St. Paul's Parish, more than 75% of widows were older than 50 years (*vide* Table 1).¹² Most probably, having reached this age, these women remained widows until their death.

The consequences of the demise of the primary male component of a poor household in that era could be dire. Cassar states that 'if a family was broken up by the death of one of the spouses ... it meant immediate isolation, desolation, economic collapse and disaster'.¹³ How could a widow cope once the main breadwinner died? Would she succumb to desperation and destitution?¹⁴ Were there means of assistance she could depend upon?

Widows could count on the informal assistance provided by their immediate family – that of the wife, as well as that of the late husband; unless there had been disputes between them. The neighbourhood also provided a safety net for the grieving family, especially in the immediate few days after their loss. Authorities in Europe, including Malta, whether secular or religious, considered widows (and widowers) to be worthy of

(Bar. Stud.) thesis by Grima, Isabella C., 'An Investigation of l'Arte dello Speziale in Baroque Malta', University of Malta, 2005, 104.

⁶ Ciappara, Frans, "Marriage and the family in a Maltese parish: St. Mary's (Qrendi) in the eighteenth century", *Journal of Family History*, vol. 36, no.1, 39.

⁷ *Archiva Paroecialia (A.P.), Ecclesia Collegialis S. Pauli, Civitatis Valletta, Status Animarum (S.A.), 1785.*

⁸ Four widows included in this count were sick women from the parish of St. Paul and from Floriana who were in the hospital for women.

⁹ The number of widows in the Porto Salvo Parish, Valletta, in 1667 was 539 - Cassar, Carmel, *Daughters of Eve*, Malta, 2002, 100; C. Cassar, *Society, culture and identity in early modern Malta*, Malta, 2000, 134.

¹⁰ *Vide* Ciappara, Frans, , "Marriage and the family in a Maltese parish: St. Mary's (Qrendi) in the eighteenth century", *Journal of Family History*, 36(1), p.39. In addition, C. Cassar commented upon similar trends in the 1667 S.A. of the Porto Salvo Parish, Valletta - Cassar, *Society, culture and identity in early modern Malta*, 2002, 100.

¹¹ Cassar, Carmel, *Daughters of Eve*, Malta, 2002, 99.

¹² As calculated from data in the 1785 *Status Animarum* of St. Paul's Parish, Valletta.

¹³ Cassar, Carmel, *Society, culture and identity in early modern Malta*, Malta, 2000, 150.

¹⁴ A widow might turn to prostitution and criminal activities to sustain herself and her children. *Vide* Brogini, Anne, "Marginalités et contrôle social dans le port de Malte à l'époque moderne (XVI^e – XVII^e siècles)", *Cahiers de la Méditerranée [online]* vol.69, 2004. Ways and means in which a woman would preserve her household in different situations are described by Hufton, Olwen, "Women and the Family Economy in Eighteenth-Century France", *French Historical Studies*, vol.9, no.1, Spring 1975, 1-22.

assistance, particularly if the widow had young children. Such a household was a component of the ‘deserving poor’ and thus was ‘entitled’ to assistance. Moreover, private associations considered widows worthy of receiving charity; particularly if the husband had been a member of a guild – such as one of the various confraternities in Malta.¹⁵ In England, various private individuals bequeathed money to found charitable institutions such as almshouses. These often provided eligible poor widows with shelter and other forms of assistance. In late eighteenth century Suffolk, for assistance an almshouse established by a 16th century proprietor continued to provide employment and shelter to three chosen poor widows.¹⁶

Social welfare for widows in 18th century Malta

This short paper investigates a procedure provided by the authorities, and utilised by widows, to achieve a form of subsidy in late eighteenth century Malta. The study considers a limited number of original petitions found in a manuscript of the Archives of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem at the NLM. This manuscript, AOM 6569, *Suppliche Diverse*, forms part of the Miscellaneous Section of the Archives of the Order, and deals with several requests and reports.¹⁷ Thirty nine requests by widows, dated between 1784 and 1788, have been examined.

A cursory look at the politico-social situation in 18th century Malta confirms the intrinsic link between the Order of St. John of Jerusalem and the Catholic religion. The three roles maintained by the Order were religious, medical and military. In assisting the poor population of the Maltese Islands, the Order upheld its Christian values. The Order provided and administered various social welfare services.¹⁸ Similarly, governments in other contemporary European countries provided services for the poor.

The Code of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem as published in 1782 makes it clear that the Common Treasury was to *continue* giving alms in the form of grain or money to those deserving assistance – such as orphans, widows, and other ‘wretched but honest’ persons. The statutes also declare that preference in the allocation of assistance would be given to the wives and children of men who had died whilst serving the Order.¹⁹ Moreover, the laws of the land also provided for various situations in which a widow could find herself concerning her dowry and other possessions.²⁰ The dowry was fundamentally essential to a widow; either as economic support in her widowhood or an incentive for a quick re-marriage.²¹

Hence, the concept of social welfare within the Maltese Islands existed, and the poor exploited this network. It is most probable that the provision of such assistance by the

¹⁵ Chircop, John, “Old Age Coping Strategies of the Ionian and Maltese Poor, 1800–1865”, *Hygiea Internationalis*, vol.5, no.1, 2006, 62.

¹⁶ Loder, Robert, *The statutes and ordinances for the government of the alms-houses in Woodbridge.*, Suffolk, Woodbridge, 1792, 15

¹⁷ *Suppliche* by Maltese citizens can be found in many other manuscripts pertaining to the Order – not only at the NLM, but also in other archives around the Maltese Islands, and most probably abroad.

¹⁸ *Vide* descriptions of the different social welfare services provided by the Order (and by other institutions such as the Church) in Paul Cassar’s *Medical History of Malta*, London, 1964; and Charles Savona-Ventura’s *Knight Hospitaller Medicine in Malta[1530-1798]*, Malta, 2004.

¹⁹ *Statuimo la continuazione dell’elemosine solite darsi dal Comun Tesoro in grano, ed in danaro alle povere orfane, vedove, ed altre miserabili persone oneste, preferendo sempre quelle delle quali i padri, o mariti morirono in servizio del nostro Ordine ...*” - extract from *Codice del Sacro Militare Ordine Gerosolimitano ... de Rohan*, Malta, 1782, 128.

²⁰ *Dritto Municipale di Malta compilato sotto GM de Rohan ... Tomo II*, Malta, 1843, 4-15.

²¹ Cassar, Carmel, *Daughters of Eve*, Malta, 2002, 31.

governing authorities was a means to an end – that of control of the majority of the population to reduce destitution which would invariably lead to disease and rebellion.²²

As in other countries, the Maltese authorities took in consideration the status of widowhood and adopted a form of ranking for receipt of assistance. An old, sick, poor and widowed woman with young children must have ranked at the highest position. A poor woman who was young and childless would have a much lower ranking. Since a young childless widow had ample chances to remarry, she was considered less worthy of assistance.

This state of affairs in Malta was similar to that in other European countries, where governing regimes and the religious authorities took it upon themselves to assist, amongst others, widows. In Spain, at the end of the 18th century, the government provided social services for the “respectable” poor using town councils, by providing aid through public funding, taxation, and private contributions.²³

The suppliche

When a widow took up the opportunity to submit a petition – a *supplica* – to the authorities, she needed a declaration by a recognised and respected source to support her request.²⁴ In most of the petitions examined, the testimonial was always the same: the parish priest of the widow’s village, or his representative. This is indicative of the relevance of the Church in the everyday life of the Maltese population in the eighteenth century. The parish priest, who most probably was amongst the first to know of the husband’s demise, provided a crucial reference point for the widow in her attempts to survive and provide for her family. It was in the interest of the same priest that the authorities assisted the widow – lest she and her children became destitute and a bigger burden to the local Church.

In their recommendations, these clerics often added information with the purpose of assisting the widow in obtaining poor relief. One case, the recommender stated that the Order had employed the father and the uncle of the widow, the former as a sailor and the latter as a bombardier on the Order’s ships.²⁵ The parish priest of Mosta, described Maria Galdies as a *Donna onesta di Costumi, e di buona fama*, and stated that she was one of the poorest in his parish.²⁶

The thirty nine *suppliche* by the widows found in AOM 6569 all exhibit the same form of address to the authorities, but the contents of the request differ in personal details and description of their current lifestyle. As with similar archival documents, one cannot disregard the possibility that the petitioners embellished the information describing their circumstances to elicit a positive outcome. The 1785 *Status Animarum* register of St. Paul’s Parish in Valletta did provide additional information regarding some of the petitioners, and verification for some of the claims made by these widows. Further investigation of similar extant registers in the parishes, and other local sources, is

²² According to Porri and Schiavoni, *op. cit.*, in pre-modern Catholic Rome, a female – especially if not controlled within a household environment – was considered by the authorities in a paternalistic and protective manner. But the authorities were also wary, because women were considered a potential cause for moral and civil disorder.

²³ Carcamo, Juan G., “Women, Families and Social Welfare in Spain from the 18th Century to the Present”, *Hygiea Internationalis*, vol.9, no.1, 2010, 131.

²⁴ Similar declarations to obtain poor relief were issued by the parish priests – Ciappara, Frans, “Parish priest and community in 18th-century Malta: patterns of conflict”, *Journal of Early Modern History*, vol.9, no.3/4, July 2005, 345.

²⁵ NLM, AOM 6569, f.115 – the petition by Ubaldesca Almansa

²⁶ NLM, AOM 6569, f.117

necessary. These will undoubtedly disclose other details pertaining to the widows living in the other parishes, which will corroborate the veracity of their assertions and contribute to a more comprehensive investigation of these petitions.

In 38 out of 39 *suppliche*, the request made was for the provision of an *elemosina frumentaria* or a similarly named poor relief. The civil authorities appear to have specifically set up this form of charity for poor widows. In fact, Antonia Zammit requests an *elemosina frumentaria solia darsi a simili vedove ed orfani*.²⁷ Carla Scaglia similarly asks for an *elemosina frumentaria solita darsi a simili povere Vedove*.²⁸ It is probable that the *elemosina* was either in the form of bread, grain,²⁹ or otherwise as money.

In other, earlier, manuscripts of the Order, there are petitions by widows for a similar *elemosina* –referred to as the *elemosina del pan grande*. Apparently, the authorities gave this charity to widows, or other relatives, of men who had been in the service of the Order. Capo Maestro Giovanni Borg had served the Order for around thirty two years. He died during the shipwreck of the Order's flagship in February 1700³⁰ and left his widow Lorenza in poverty and with seven young children. Lorenza petitioned for the *pietanza del pan grande*. According to the information presented in this petition, the Order granted this provision to only a limited number of recipients at any one time. In fact, the petitioner requested the granting of this charity on the basis that the former beneficiary, the widow Anna Polladi had died a few days previously.³¹

The petitions in AOM 6569 offer an insight in the lives of these widowed women. Many of them describe the immense challenges that accompanied their change in status. Caterina Misura, widow of Felice explains how her husband was made redundant without a pension. This had led to impoverishment; with the consequence, that when he became sick he could not apparently afford private medical treatment. He died after entering the public hospital - *Sacra Infermeria*.³²

According to her petition, Vincenza Mallia's husband had died only a few days previously,³³ whereas other women had lost their husbands many years before.³⁴ Other widows described embarrassing situations. Bartolomea Grima explained how she and her daughter, besides suffering hunger on a daily basis, had to borrow clothes from their neighbours to hear Mass on feast days.³⁵

²⁷ NLM, AOM 6569, f.41

²⁸ NLM, AOM 6569, f.28

²⁹ In 18th century Modena, Italy, an institution for the poor is known to have distributed *pane delle Vedove* – as quoted by Fatica, Michele, “La regolarizzazione dei mendicanti attraverso il lavoro: L'Ospizio dei poveri di Modena nel Settecento”, *Studi Storici*, vol.23, no.4, Oct. - Dec. 1982, 779; other countries organised similar distributions of bread, ex. in Portugal, as described by Lobo de Araujo, Maria M., “Charity Practices in the Portuguese Brotherhoods of Misericórdias (16th – 18th centuries)”, in *European Health and Social Welfare Policies*, ed. L. Abreu, Blansko, 2004, 277, 282

³⁰ NLM, AOM 1186, f.120 ... *nel sinistro accidente del naufragio ultimam[en]te accaduto di d[et]ta Gal[er]ja.*

³¹ In June 1700 the widow Lorenza Borg was awarded a *quarta parte del pan grande*.

³² NLM, AOM 6569, f.35 - ...*di lui avanzata eta' licenziato senza verun' assegnazione di salario, o' sia piazza, percio consumo' quelle poche robbe che aveva per insino che visse, anzi in questi ultimi si era ridotto in miseria, defatto fini la sua vita in Spedale ...*

³³ NLM, AOM 6569, f.39 - ...*stato vedovile sin da pochi giorni ...*

³⁴ NLM, AOM 6569, f.115 – Ubaldesca Almansa of Senglea was a *ved^a da quarantta sette anni...*

³⁵ NLM, AOM 6569, f.96 - ...*e' ridotta in una tale estrema poverta, che non solo e' priva d'ogni soccorso per il mantenimento ma ancora per il necessario vestire, a tal che si ha medesima supplicante, come ancora la d^{ta} sua figlia passano le intere giornate senza ristorarsi ed alle feste*

Most of the *suppliche* include the age of the widow; the youngest petitioner being thirty eight years, the eldest seventy nine years old. Although the petitions do not all state the place of residence, most of the widows resided in Valletta. Of interest are the additional remarks added, either by the recommender or by the evaluator of the request that provide precise details regarding the petitioner's dwelling. In the case of Paola Farrugia, her residence was *nella Strada Stretta sotto li Paggi*, and Maria Xerri resided *su la Porta Reale*.³⁶ Such details were probably of importance when evaluating the petition, not only in ascertaining the veracity of the request, but also in deciding in which parish the widow resided.

Not all of the petitions state whether the widows were childless or not, but *povera* and *cieca* –poor and blind – Carla Scaglia, who lived in the Fort of St. Elmo was childless, whereas the widow Catarina Tonna had three children *ancor impuberi*,³⁷ similar to recently widowed Gioanna Schembri of Cospicua (Cospicua).³⁸ *Poverissima* Ursula Barbara of Zorrico (Zurrieq) had seven children.³⁹

In a number of petitions, the petitioner emphasised that she was not receiving any other form of charity - *priva d'ogni sussidio umano*⁴⁰ or *sussidio carittativo*.⁴¹ Maddalena Valentino who lived in Vittoriosa complained that the *elemosina* was no longer given to her because of *le mali informazioni* communicated to the authorities. The sick widow, who was sleeping on the floor, petitioned for her reinstatement as a recipient of this charity.⁴²

Some information regarding the dead spouses can also be obtained from these petitions. Giuseppe, the late husband of Ursula had been a *soldato con il vascello di S. Giovanni, anche fu' capo di caccia per anni quindecim in circa a servizio delli falconieri*. Fedele Zammit, the late husband of Antonia had worked at the Holy Infirmary *per il corso d'anni trenta* as a *Barberotto e Maestro*.⁴³ In 1777, Zammit's monthly salary consisted of 3 *scudi*, 1 *taro* and 10 *grani*.⁴⁴

After corroborating the contents of the petition, the authorities would then decide whether to sanction the granting of the *elemosina frumentaria*. In the case of Antonia Zammit, no recommender endorsed the petition. It is probable that since the position held by her husband was as a *Barberotto* at the *Sacra Infermeria*, the Order verified the details of the petition with the administrators of the hospital. Other petitions included more than one source for recommendation. Maria Franceschi included a statement by a medical doctor confirming her infirmities, together with the recommendation by the parish priest of Porto Salvo.⁴⁵

le conviene, per adempire il precetto d'ascoltare la Santa Messa, farsi imprestare dalle vicine, la robba da vestire...

³⁶ NLM, AOM 6569, f.54 – within the precincts of the parish of St. Dominic, Valletta.

³⁷ NLM, AOM 6569, f.73. Catarina, 45 years old, had three daughters, aged between 6 and 12, according to the 1785 S.A. of St. Paul's Parish, f.51.

³⁸ NLM, AOM 6569, f.107 – she had three *picciol figlie*.

³⁹ NLM, AOM 6569, f.81 – some of the children were of *minor eta*'.

⁴⁰ NLM, AOM 6569, f.32 – petition by Nicolina Grech

⁴¹ NLM, AOM 6569, f.63 – petition by Veneranda Gatt

⁴² NLM, AOM 6569, f.103

⁴³ A *barberotto* was a barber-surgeon, a subordinate of the qualified surgeon.

⁴⁴ NLM, AOM 1718, f.12

⁴⁵ NLM, AOM 6569, f.49

The allocation of funds for poor widows by the Order

The monetary resources of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem originated from a multitude of possessions and other interests across Europe, as well as from local assets and levies. The Order allocated substantial funds from their complex financial systems for the provision of alms. They also had a system of pensions for those who worked for the Order. The latter scheme was also available, within limitations, to their spouse or descendants in case of their death whilst in the service of the knights. Probably the authorities assigned these pensions following the submission of individual petitions by civilians to the authorities. As with the petitions by the widows in AOM 6569, the Order verified these requests, decisions taken, and then the petitioners informed of the outcome of their *supplica*.

A decennial financial statement of the Order's finances published by the knight Bosredon de Ransijat for the period between 1778 and 1788 is of considerable interest.⁴⁶ One title within the Expenditure accounts refers to the allocation of alms (*elemosine*) to the deserving poor, and the provision of funds for specific groups such as foundlings, and allocation of monies for the Hospital and other institutions.⁴⁷ The average annual expense of alms under this heading by the Order during this period was of 17,309 *scudi*. According to W.H. Thornton, Auditor General in British-ruled Malta, this amount included the cost of 'stipends in bread and money to certain poor individuals who had rendered some services to the Order', as well as yearly contributions to the poor in general as wheat and money.⁴⁸

Another expenditure heading within the same financial statement, of relevance to the subject in discussion, is the cost of pensions within the same period, at an average of 14,328 *scudi* per year. This included an average annual amount of 2,327 *scudi* allocated for the widows, and for the daughters of 'several clerks' and other persons 'who died in the service of the Order'.⁴⁹ The Order distributed other alms through the Holy Infirmary, and other institutions under their administration.

Two other manuscripts at the NLM - AOM 1010A and AOM 1010B - shed further light on the issue of alms by the Order in the eighteenth century. The titles of these manuscripts, which include details of expenses involved, are *Libro Dell'Elemosine Di S.A. Eminentissima De Rohan, Distribuite Dal Suo Elemosiniere A' Tenor Degli Ordini*. AOM 1010A is an account register for the period between 1775 and 1785; whilst AOM 1010B refers to the period between 1786 and 1797.⁵⁰

The main source through which the Order financed various beneficiaries listed in these documents was primarily the *Ricetta Magistrale* – the Grand Master's income. Bread and grain were provided, together with monetary resources, for a variety of causes – classified as the *Prima Classe* and the *Seconda Classe*. Appointed officials distributed, on behalf of the Grand Master, some of the funds to different churches for the celebration

⁴⁶ de Boisgelin, Louis, *Ancient and Modern Malta*, Vol. I, London, 1805, 307-308, and also Thornton, William H., *Memoir on the Finances of Malta*, Malta, 1836, 10, 13, 26; which disputed some of the figures presented by de Boisgelin.

⁴⁷ Descriptions of the various Charitable Institutions – of the Order, of the Church and of Private entities – can be found in various publications and articles; ex. Cassar, Paul, "The concept and range of charitable institutions up to World War I", *Malta Medical Journal*, vol.18, no.1, 2006, 46-49; Savona Ventura, Charles, 81-135.

⁴⁸ Thornton, William H., 13.

⁴⁹ Thornton, William H., 13.

⁵⁰ To note that at the end of AOM 1010B, there are further financial details concerning alms provided between 1801 and 1802.

of masses, or as a form of dowry to chosen unmarried women. The distribution of alms also took place on Maundy Thursday during the re-enactment of the *Sacra Cena* (Last Supper). The parishes of Malta and Gozo received the alms termed as *Seconda Classe* for distribution to the poor. This charity was in the form of money or bread (or grain). The *Seconda Classe* resource was probably a valuable source of charity, provided by the Order, for widows.

According to details in these manuscripts, the monthly expenditure of poor relief provided to parishes through this scheme varied over the period between 1775 and 1797. This although, the monthly sum provided during the period between 1784 and 1788 remained fixed at 240 *scudi* and 11 *tari*. Reports submitted to the Grand Master demonstrate that the sum allocated to the parishes formed the largest share of the total expense of alms provided by the *Elemosiniere* (Almoner). For example, in November 1789, the sum of 240 *scudi* and 11 *tari* distributed to the poor of the parishes, represented more than 70% of the total amount allocated.⁵¹

A detailed list of the amounts distributed to each parish also reveals that Valletta and particularly its Porto Salvo Parish received the largest share for a number of years. In July 1776, thirty two parishes were named as recipients. During that month, the Porto Salvo Parish received more than 40% of the total funds allocated to the *Poveri delle Parrocchie*.⁵²

Were these funds, distributed by the Almoner of the Grand Master to the parishes in Malta and Gozo, the only possible income targeted by these widows through their *suppliche*? Since the almoner provided these funds to be distributed to the poor, it is most likely that amongst these parishioners were the recipients of the *elemosina frumentaria*. This would explain the importance given to the declaration and recommendations by the parish priest. Moreover, in the case of Valletta, where more than one Parish existed, details of the whereabouts, and the residence of the poor were essential since this would determine which Parish would receive the alms.

Most of the *suppliche* found in AOM 6569 include annotations that refer to the monetary allocation approved to each widow. It is probable that the lowest sum granted was of 1 *scudo* every 4 months – which would work out to a monthly amount of 3 *tari*. If the widow had dependent children, or in other circumstances considered ‘of merit’, the allocated amount was higher. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the Order of St. John granted Antonia Zammit an *elemosina* of 2 *scudi* every 4 months – since she had two very young children and a husband who had been a *barberotto* at the *Sacra Infermeria*.⁵³ The widow Gaetana Debono, 71 years old, did not have young children.⁵⁴ She was given 1 *scudo* every 4 months.⁵⁵ The sum allocated to Ursola Barbara, widow of Giosepe and mother to seven young children, was 4 *scudi* every four months. Giosepe had been in the employment of the Order for around twenty four years.

Other considerations

The surprisingly numerous collection of such similar petitions in AOM 6569 leads one to ponder on the reasons why, between 1784 and 1788, such an appreciable number of

⁵¹ NLM, AOM 1010B, pg. 87

⁵² NLM, AOM 1010A, pg. 173

⁵³ NLM, AOM 6569, f. 41

⁵⁴ According to the 1785 S.A. of St. Paul’s Parish, Valletta, f.36, Gaetana Debono was 69 years old, and had two children, a daughter aged 29 years, and a son aged 50 years,

⁵⁵ NLM, AOM 6569, f. 37

widows submitted petitions for the same form of poor relief. It may well have been simply a sorting exercise.⁵⁶ Why were these particular requests bundled together? The Order updated the legislation, and its statutes during the reign of Grand Master de Rohan which spanned from 1775 up till 1797.⁵⁷ Possibly, the reiteration that widows could request poor relief made it somewhat easier for the widows to submit a petition. It is also possible that the circumstances prevailing in those years led to increased mortality and thus a higher incidence of widowhood. As F. Panzavecchia reported, Malta suffered a lack of rainfall in 1783, which led to a failure of the cotton crop and an ensuing negative impact on commerce. A famine in that same year has also been reported.⁵⁸ Unemployment, increased poverty, lack of food, and other factors⁵⁹ could be valid reasons for the increase in submission of *suppliche* by widows.

In late eighteenth century Malta, the causes of death were various and common.⁶⁰ Accidents, undernourishment, epidemics – such as small pox in the 1780s – as well as uncomplicated infections easily could lead to death. Few members of the lower classes would have had any possessions to leave as inheritance to their next of kin. Most of the widows stated that they did not possess any personal belongings.

A series of manuscripts and registers, extant within the archives of the Order contain hundreds of wills. These belong to members of the Order as well as common people admitted to the *Sacra Infermeria*. Hospital regulations required that patients drew up a will, assisted by hospital employees, lest they died there. Our research for this short study includes a catalogue search of wills written within a period of a few years, months or days before the date of the *suppliche*. The effort yielded only one name that perfectly matched the details found in the *suppliche*. One reason might be that the spouses died at home, or even abroad. However, the single will traced sheds some more light on the surviving widow's petition.

The will of Giuseppe Domenico Scaglia, dated August 1785, confirms that he lived in Valletta but was originally from Piedmont.⁶¹ He requested burial in the Church of Our Lady of Victory, leaving the funeral arrangements to his universal heir – his wife Carluzza. As executor and curator of his testament, he nominated the Chaplain of St. Elmo, the priest Filippo Vella. The latter was the same person who acted as recommender for Scaglia's widow when she eventually submitted her petition. Although there is no mention of money or possessions in the will, it appears that Scaglia was not indigent; and based on some annotations on the original *supplica*, it is probable that the authorities investigated what other income (such as a pension) the widow was receiving before deciding to accept or refuse the request.⁶²

Conclusion

⁵⁶ These requests were most probably reviewed by a committee set up specifically for *suppliche* concerning the *elemosina frumentaria*, as is evidenced on the back of most of the petitions.

⁵⁷ The de Rohan Legal Code was published in 1784

⁵⁸ Panzavecchia, Fortunato, L'ultimo periodo della storia di Malta sotto il governo dell'Ordine Gerosolimitano, Malta, 1835, 231; also commented upon by Ciappara, Frans, "Una Messa in Perpetuum: Perpetual mass bequests in traditional Malta, 1750-1797", *The Catholic Historical Review*, vol.91, no.2, Apr. 2005, 278. Moreover the earthquake in Sicily and Calabria of February 1783 had ripple effects on the economy of Malta.

⁵⁹ In 1783 and in 1784 the Navy of the Order took part in the attacks on Algiers, and suffered some casualties.

⁶⁰ Ciappara, Frans, 278-279.

⁶¹ NLM, AOM 1757, f. 81 – original will - and NLM, AOM 1726, 20 as registered, word by word.

⁶² NLM, AOM 6569, f. 29 - *Ha scudi cinque il mese per la piazza Piu ha danaro impiegato ... scudi 500 o piu'*

This research article has attempted to reveal the milieu behind the submission of the requests for poor relief by widows to the appropriate civil authorities in the late eighteenth century. However, it has to be kept in mind that this study has been based on a limited number of petitions submitted to the Order over a period of only five years. Other *suppliche* in other manuscripts within the AOM mention other types of poor relief reserved for widows – for instance, in 1697 Argenta, widow of Captain Matteo Psinga, petitioned for the *Limosina della quarta parte del pan grande*.⁶³ Vittoria Paulucci, the daughter of a widow, petitions for the *Elemosina del Pane grande* in 1698.⁶⁴ More in depth research will undoubtedly reveal more evidence of the bureaucratic processes set in place to manage the many requests for assistance by widows and other relatives. The rich archives preserved at local parishes will also provide ample material to supplement and validate the recourses made by these women to the authorities. This paper, with its limitations of documentation and time span, attempts to offer further evidence of the official routes available to the poor for the provision of assistance.

The discussion about widowhood under Hospitaller rule underscored the reliance that poor widows placed on assistance from diverse sources in order to survive. The change in their status could lead to appalling circumstances, where a widow might necessarily, and easily, resort to begging, prostitution, theft and other illegal activities. Many factors influenced the eventual fate of the widow.

The significant number of widows in St. Paul's Parish in Valletta suggests a lower probability that older widows re-married. One reason being that younger widows and unmarried females would have provided a better choice for unmarried men and widowers.⁶⁵ Therefore, it is not surprising that upon considering those petitions that gave an indication of the widow's age, all but one petition were submitted by widows over 50 years of age. The 1785 S.A. of St. Paul's Parish mentions 128 widows below the age of 50 years (the youngest aged 21 years) while there were 391 widows aged upwards of 50 years (the eldest aged 98 years).⁶⁶

True to their Christian values, the statutes of the Order of St John provided for the provision of allowances and other forms of charity for deserving widows. The submission of formal petitions by widows to be provided with some form of grain allowance – *elemosina frumentaria* – implies that the level of poverty in late eighteenth century Malta dictated that poor widows were directly dependent on the provision of primary necessities by the authorities. If the authorities did not provide assistance, the chance of survival of the family could be compromised, and destitution would reach alarming levels. Based on the financial status of the widow the authorities could deny this allowance. The sanctioning of the petition also depended whether the widow 'deserved' to be supported by the authorities. It is evident that the authorities conducted their own investigations and did not rely solely on the recommendation provided by the parish priest or any unofficial supporting source.

The role of the parish priest was nevertheless decisive. He was the intermediary between the poor widows and the authorities. In the initial stages of the process, he was a trusted recommender. Furthermore, the civil authorities delegated the parish priest as the administrator and distributor of the poor relief granted to the poor, grateful, recipient. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that in carrying out this role as part of his pastoral work, the poor perceived the parish priest, who represented the religious authorities, as their

⁶³ NLM, AOM 1186, f.93.

⁶⁴ NLM, AOM 1186, f. 109.

⁶⁵ In comparison, the number of widowers in the same S.A. is 118.

⁶⁶ In the 1785 S.A. the age of eleven widows are not recorded. The age of parishioners as stated in a S.A., and similar documents where there is no proof of birth, need to be treated with circumspect.

true benefactor rather than the civil authorities. Thus, the poor relief funded by the Order essentially enhanced the ascendancy of the Catholic Church upon the poor population in the Maltese Islands.

Table 1- Number of widows in St. Paul's Parish, Valletta, in 1785, grouped according to age brackets⁶⁷

Age bracket	21 – 29 years	30 – 39 years	40 – 49 years	50 – 59 years	60 – 69 years	70 – 79 years	80 – 89 years	90 – 98 years	Total number of widows ⁶⁸
	11	37	80	131	136	83	35	6	519

⁶⁷ As calculated from the 1785 *Status Animarum* of St. Paul's Parish, Valletta

⁶⁸ The age of eleven widows has not been recorded in this S.A.

