

# MALTA

## *Roots of a Nation*

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MALTA FROM  
AN ISLAND PEOPLE TO AN ISLAND NATION

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## THE SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF MALTA: 1530-1798

**The Advent of the Order of St John**

Until the advent of the Order of St John in 1530, Malta was considered as one of the many communes of Sicily, a state of affairs that was not altered in the first part of the sixteenth century. This explains why in 1536, Jean Quintin d'Autun, a priest and a French member of the Order of St John, described Malta as,

...part of Sicily and has its same customs, Malta became Roman along with Sicily, and since that time it has always had the same rights and the same government.<sup>1</sup>

In what ways can we say that the drastic changes brought about by the Knights effected the everyday life of the inhabitants? Anyone who browses through the rich archival records of the time cannot help noticing that continual transformations were taking place in the lives of the Maltese throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The first Grand Master L'Isle Adam established the Magisterial Law Courts in 1533 and by the time of Grand Master d'Homedes (1536-53) the Order was allowed to enjoy the sovereign prerogative of coining money.<sup>2</sup> However the Grand Master continued to exercise very limited authority at first, and it was only with the passage of time that the Grand Master became conscious of his dual position. On the one hand, as head of the Order of St John, he was subject to the Order's statutes and was considered a *primus inter pares* by the other members of the Order. In such circumstances, a Grand Master was expected to rule according to the advice of the Grand Council. At the same time, the Grand Master ruled Malta as feudal overlord.<sup>3</sup> The Maltese became so dependent on their ruler that by the time of Grand Master La Valette (1558-68), the areas that remained free of his control were

indeed very limited. In fact, the more intensively the Grand Master dominated the local administration, the more the Maltese shifted their allegiance from their *Università* to the Grand Master.<sup>4</sup> The more energetically the Grand Master's sovereign rights were exercised, the more restrictions there were on all sorts of common customary rights.<sup>5</sup>

Little heed was paid to the ancient privileges and liberties of the Maltese. In exercising its functions, the *Università* continually appealed for justification of its position. This argument was often based on antiquity, custom and traditions as a source of authority, and intended to hedge the encroaching demands of the Grand Masters.<sup>6</sup>

By the late sixteenth century, the *Università* became so weak and enfeebled, that it busied itself with small measures, particularly the distribution of grain, and generally played second fiddle to the Grand Master's rule.<sup>7</sup> Yet it remained the organ that vested the Maltese elite with oligarchic pretensions. It also served as a symbol of Maltese traditions of liberty.<sup>8</sup>

In order to survive and grow, the *Università* had to depend on its usefulness as an instrument of the Grand Master's government. As such, the latter did not wish to get rid of the 'people's representatives', but he expected them to be cooperative and acquiescent, consenting to money grants when asked, offering constructive counsel, and not directing their energies to criticism or obstruction.<sup>9</sup>

### **Work and Social Life**

It may be said that the siege of 1565 brought about a radical transformation to life in the island. For most people it marked the end of an old era and the beginning of wider horizons. This break with the past manifested itself at all levels. Immediately after the siege, increased migration to Sicily coupled with the continual abandonment of the countryside by a peasantry attracted to city life, led to extensive rural depopulation. The widespread destruction of houses, fields, and livestock changed the villages physically. New buildings and churches in a different style were set up.<sup>10</sup>

The new system created a dual social structure that becomes sensible immediately after the Knights Hospitallers set foot on Malta and becomes even more apparent after the siege of 1565 and the building of Valletta. This duality did not exist at the social level only, but it also pervaded the mental and cognitive structures of Maltese society. Two different cultural blocs, strictly separated from each other, formed two opposing camps, namely, Mdina and its suburb of Rabat at the head of the countryside; Birgu (Vittoriosa after 1565) - and later Valletta - the seat of the urbanised harbour area.

On the one side there were the typical classes of an agrarian society, consisting of landowners, a small class of notaries, priests and clerks, and a mass of peasants. These had their own 'cultural traditions', to which they were strongly attached.

On the other side, there were the new town dwellers and other settlers, often in the direct employment with the Order, who were 'alien', lived in the city, cosmopolitan in their orientation and with no 'ancient culture' of their own. Yet in the harbour towns social distinctions prevailed, the fundamental difference based on economic affluence. The property owners and independent members of the town such as merchants, craftsmen, shopkeepers and professionals spurned those who were subservient or economically dependent by virtue of being labourers, apprentices and servants.<sup>11</sup>

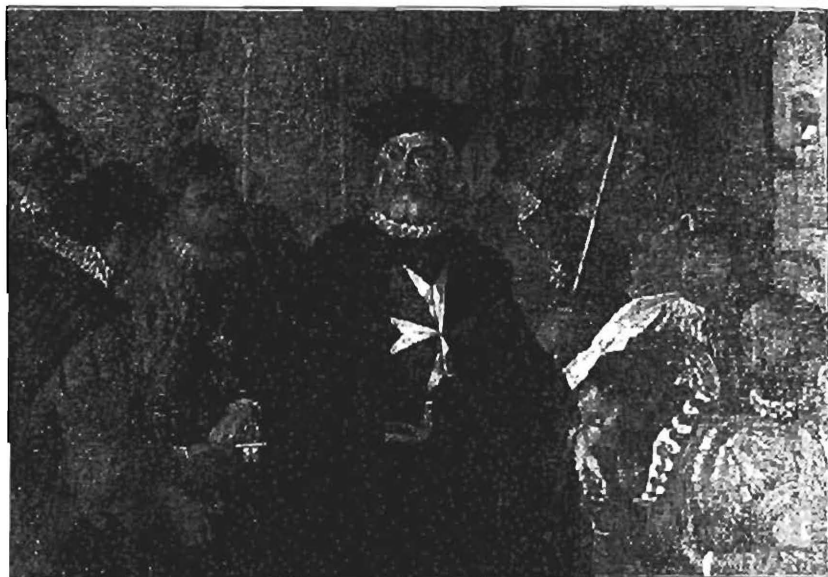
The Order came to represent a concentration of international capital, which coupled to an incredible reserve of human resource, made possible a vast programme of urbanisation, successfully carried through from the moment the Order set foot on Malta in 1530. Even so, it is surprising to realise that all this could be achieved from an island with a population-base of merely 30,000 in 1590.<sup>12</sup>

The creation of a new urban area around the Grand Harbour had effectively revolutionised the human geography of Malta and the life of its people. But the factor that dominated and conditioned Maltese life after 1565 was the emergence of Valletta as the administrative capital of the Maltese islands. Urban theory recognises cities to be, not merely dense concentrations of people, but above all, concentrations of people doing different things, where the urban character derives more from that variety of activity than it does from sheer numbers.<sup>13</sup>

In reality, to speak of the harbour area is to speak of a conglomeration of four towns: Valletta was the political and economic capital. In the upper part of the city, the Grand Master, the Grand Council and high society lived and exercised their authority. The common people lived mostly in the lower districts. On the south bank of the Grand Harbour, there were the 'Three Cities' of Vittoriosa (known as Birgu before 1565), Senglea (or Isola) and Cospicua (previously known as Burmola). Between them the four towns had a population of around 10,000, that is, approximately one-third of Malta's population in 1590.<sup>14</sup> The 'Three Cities' eventually came to form part of the popular district, together with lower Valletta with their narrow streets packed with foreigners, merchandise, sailors and slaves.

The entire economy of Malta was orchestrated from Valletta. The political influence of the harbour towns on the countryside, the power of the Grand Master, the highly concentrated nature of trade, all combined and contributed to the vast development of the harbour area. This growth imposed an order on the area it dominated, and established a wealth of administrative and trading connections. As well as being a very busy area, handling practically all Malta's foreign trade, the harbour zone had by the early seventeenth century developed into a cultural centre of some value.<sup>15</sup>

The harbour towns were multifunctional and together they performed roles that were essential for the whole society. The creation of an efficient and well-organised bureaucracy was to form the basic organ for the economic and political dependency of the countryside. Thus the more technically efficient the harbour towns became, the more they increased the potential dependency of the countryside.<sup>16</sup> The virtual



*Grand Master L'Isle Adam (1530-34) welcomed at Mdina in 1530 (Photo: MTA)*



*Grand Master La Valette (1557-68) the victorious leader of the Great Siege (Photo: MTA)*

monopoly of Valletta, over importation of all commodity items and over exports including that of cotton (the major cash crop) enabled the new capital, from very early on, to control all the production and redistribution within the Maltese islands: it was, above all, the central sorting station.<sup>17</sup> Whether bound inland or abroad, everything had to filter past through the Valletta harbour.

The harbour town dwellers were well aware of the influence that the state had on their daily existence. The intensification of traffic and trade, the new technical possibilities of administration, and the economic development of the harbour area, is part of the picture of the systematisation of authority and the strengthening of the Grand Master's political role.

### Urban Culture and the Influx of Migration

The heavy influx into the new urban areas of foreigners and people from the countryside, starting from the sixteenth century onwards, altered the ethnic character of the population of Malta. Even if the newcomers did not bring a distinctive culture of their own, as the case seems to be, their physical preponderance managed to transform the distinctiveness of the Maltese lifestyle. One may rebut that cultural patterns, exclusively attached to urban dwellers, may be grouped together and defined as urban culture.<sup>18</sup> After all, what is essential here are not the internal contrasts of urban culture, but its different character from peasant mentality. It was common for the early modern middle classes to mingle with the ordinary folk on account of the ever-growing demographic pressures. Thus, both wealthy Maltese and the Knights often occupied sumptuous buildings, while the workers were housed wherever space was available. The ground floor of these imposing edifices usually contained stables, stores and workshops with an entry from the street, sometimes with displays extending into the street itself.<sup>19</sup>

Very often a number of families had to share the same dwelling in order to be able to pay the rent bill. Matrimonial contracts indirectly refer to the shortage of space within the harbour towns. Thus, whereas it was normal for peasants to own a normal house, maybe consisting of some rooms at ground floor level,<sup>20</sup> it was common for poor artisans to live in one-room cellars, whose only means of light and air was the street door. The *mezzanini*, constructed above them, were likewise small and ill-ventilated.<sup>21</sup> Except for the houses of the rich, tenements in the harbour area were economically planned. Such an atmosphere made family life difficult, and therefore most of the socialisation processes took place not in the family, but at public levels.

Urban culture did not simply renew or transform earlier cultural practices, but organised them according to fundamentally new principles based on a 'market economy'. Obviously city life was looked upon as 'alien' by the indigenous population right from the very beginning of the Order's rule, independently of class attachments, ethnic identity and other traditional prejudices. The immense

surge of activities generated both by the foundation of Valletta and by the Order's presence, with its manifold interests, made the island one of the busiest centres of the Mediterranean. It served to create a cosmopolitan atmosphere that impressed itself on the character of Valletta and helped to enrich the country especially in the more creative activities.<sup>22</sup> The Order of St John had thus managed to establish a ruling system that seeped down the social scale and gave character to the harbour area.

But these dominant cultural patterns failed to infiltrate the entire structure of peasant society. Philip Skippon, writing in 1664, could visibly distinguish city dwellers from villagers. He sums up the situation, by noting that while most city dwellers speak Italian well, the natives of the countryside speak a kind of Arabic.<sup>23</sup> Godfrey Wettinger tends to agree with Skippon's view. He argues that,

...Gradually the townspeople became largely indistinguishable in outlook from the inhabitants of other towns in southern Europe ... In the countryside, however, old forms of cooking, old musical instruments, much of the old types of houses ... remained very much in use. There they still repeated the same old Maltese proverbs ... worked the land in largely the same old way, hunted ... and held homely festivities.<sup>24</sup>

In practice, however, the Great Tradition certainly influenced village life that went on to absorb and adopt elements of city life in a way to make it its own. The cosmopolitan character of Valletta helped enrich the island-state, especially in the more creative sectors. The architectural boom spilled from the new city into the surrounding countryside and by the early seventeenth century, the parish churches of larger villages like Qoruni and Birkirkara, as well as, smaller ones like Balzan, Lija, and Attard, could boast of a parish church that was built on a magnificent scale.<sup>25</sup> Thus one could say that urban culture possessed such a great integrating force that it quickly achieved hegemony. It was able to create a mode of behaviour and a way of life by and largely acceptable to the whole society.

The cultural magnetism of the city was underlined by its political centrality. Functioning as an administrative capital, Valletta broadcasted the fashions and values of the Grand Master's court.

Ideas and styles, fashions, manners, and habits, artists, architects, and Belgian tapestries, were all imported from 'trading Europe', and paid for by the Order's accumulating capital.

It attracted litigants to its Law Courts, and passed on the government's proclamations to the rest of the island. In the economic field, the city became the harbinger of modernity with markets that

...were as much a meeting place for social intercourse as they were for business transactions.<sup>26</sup>

Artistic and cultural influence, information, and news were thus disseminated to the country. Valletta, like any other early modern European capital, was the power house of cultural change. Together with the other towns of the harbour

area, it monopolised the economic and administrative resources of the new state. The influence of the new capital was so strong that the rural way of life in all its manifestations became symbolically equated with a lack of cultural accomplishment, a view particularly diffused among the intellectual elites.

In short the aggressive policies of the Order of St John vis-à-vis the neighbouring Muslims, coupled with the cosmopolitan atmosphere created in the harbour area, had drastically transformed Maltese socio-cultural values. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Vice Chancellor of the Order Gio. Francesco Abela (1582-1655) could point out that apart from being overpopulated Malta was frequented by a multitude of foreigners who eventually settled there.<sup>27</sup> These settlers often declared themselves to be citizens of Valletta or inhabitants of Malta, suggesting that early modern Malta was a haven teeming with foreigners.

Meanwhile many Maltese, attracted by the good work opportunities, the abundance of food, and the relative safety of nearby Sicily from Turkish incursions, were induced to settle there before and after the siege of 1565. This tendency often verged on mass migration, especially in times of danger, and it was only during the reign of Grand Master Lascaris Castellar (1636-57) that special measures to check the outflow were enacted. Lascaris decreed that a special licence had to be sought by those intending to emigrate from Malta. The Grand Master even enacted regulations prohibiting the continued ownership of landed property by Maltese living abroad and who showed no intention of returning to Malta.<sup>28</sup> Yet this phenomenon of native Maltese leaving their island home was more than compensated by the uninterrupted inflow of foreigners and returning migrants.

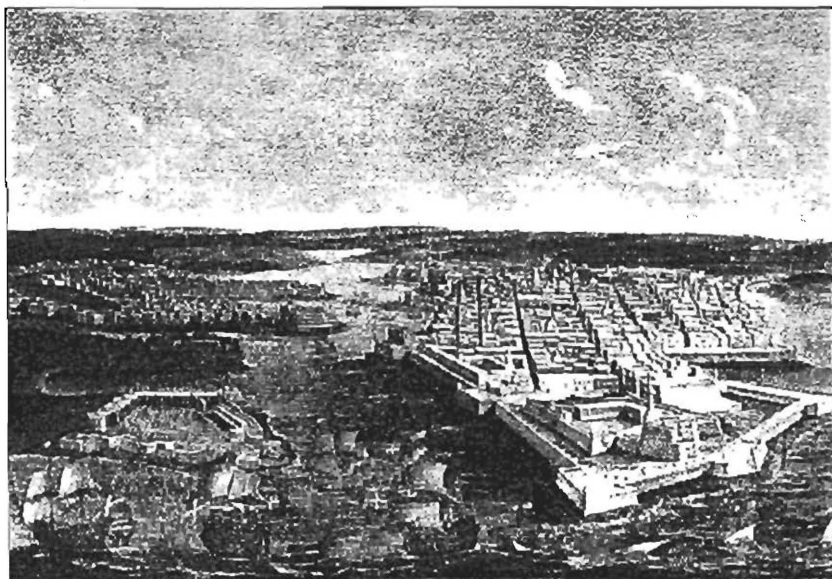
When the Hospitaller Order of St John set up their convent in Malta, it found a population who considered the Sicilian communes as sister-entities, in which it was therefore natural for Maltese to set up home if so inclined.<sup>29</sup> At the time, the majority of individuals viewed their commune with a loose transferable sense of loyalty. This attitude facilitated the movement of people to and out of Sicily. It seems that, even until the early seventeenth century, there was little feeling among the Maltese themselves that their commune was in any way distinct or unique from others in Sicily. Malta kept its representatives or consuls in the principal Sicilian towns, whose job was to ensure a regular supply of goods, particularly commodities, to the island. On the other hand, Sicilian businessmen had their representatives in Malta, and artisans were engaged side by side in all activities.<sup>30</sup>

Human traffic continued to flow into Malta from Mediterranean Europe, coupled with enforced settlers or slaves throughout the Order's rule. Slaves were captured in warring and corsairing activities, mostly during swift raids carried on the coasts of North Africa, and came to form an important labour force, employed especially as galley-rowers, stone-carriers, builders and domestic servants. Slaves were relatively free to mix with all strata of Maltese and resident society and were allowed to take part-time jobs in order to gain money for their eventual redemption. Yet, it was not uncommon for some of these slaves to accept





*Contemporary and early modern views of Valletta and the harbour area, which developed into a cosmopolitan centre during the Order's rule (Photo: MTA and the National Maritime Museum)*



Christianity, marry locally and in their turn become integrated within Maltese society.

Population shifts, and the continual increased rhythm of trade and communications made it necessary for the urban dwellers in the harbour area to acquire the *lingua franca* which, in the early modern Mediterranean, consisted primarily of Italian words.

### The Spoken Word and Literacy

The Knights kept strong communications with Europe and strengthened both the merchant fleet and the navy. At the same time, Malta served as a base for corsairs against the Muslims of the Maghreb and the Turks in the Levant. Finally, one should include the multitude of foreign men who contracted marriages with Maltese women, notably in the harbour towns. It was therefore natural for Margarita Bonnici of Vittoriosa, to refer to a herb she used for a love potion both in Maltese and in *franco*.<sup>31</sup> Concurrently Minichella de Patti from Vittoriosa apparently communicated with her French husband Antonio Gontier in Italian.<sup>32</sup> 'Italian' was then the language of trade in the Mediterranean<sup>33</sup> that Godfrey Wettinger argues to have spread in the Maltese harbour towns at the expense of Maltese, then reduced to the status of a local dialect spoken by servants, peasants and the lower orders of society.<sup>34</sup>

Yet it seems that up to the end of the eighteenth century, the Maltese language was practically the exclusive language for daily communication used in the countryside, and to a large extent it continued to be employed by the townspeople too. People of all social conditions, including the learned and the rich, spoke Maltese.<sup>35</sup> The evidence of Giorgio Scala given in September 1598 further confirms this view. Scala went to confess at the chapel of the Grand Master at the crypt of the Conventual Church of the Order in Valletta and then went to receive communion at the church of the Franciscan Minors. There he met a friar whom Scala assumed to be a foreigner because he spoke Italian rather than Maltese.<sup>36</sup> The case of Dr Melchior Cagliares, a well-known judge of the Grand Master's court, who took the Grand Master's side in a quarrel between his master and Bishop Gargallo, strengthens this point further. In 1579 the Bishop excommunicated Cagliares, so that no good Catholic was supposed to have dealings with him. The Inquisition records refer to Cagliares' reaction to the sentence. When the Rector of St Paul's Parish Church in Valletta, presumably a friend of his, one day failed to greet the Judge whom he encountered in the town-square, Cagliares called out in Maltese,

*Le hbzax hecde kif fexxill lohrayn infexxil lilik*

[Do not worry, I will confound you as I did others].<sup>37</sup>

Thus, even the Maltese educated elite communicated in the local tongue between them. At the same time, Maltese was often associated with ordinary people and popular culture.

By the late eighteenth century, this jargon seems to have developed into what M. A. Vassalli labelled, *dialetto della città* (city dialect), which he considered as the most corrupt dialect of Maltese, due to the large number of foreign words it contained. The presence of a great number of foreigners, as well as the use of foreign languages, notably Sicilian, Italian, French and other European vocabulary, led to *barbarizzare l'idioma nativo* (the 'barbarization' of the native idiom).<sup>38</sup>

This development induced Vassalli in 1796 to insist on the social need to cultivate *la lingua nazionale* (the national language). Vassalli reflected upon the attitudes of his times and admitted that Maltese seemed undignified and abounding in 'barbarisms' which, he concluded, were the result of the long neglect of the language.<sup>39</sup> Vassalli's ideal perspective of a defined Maltese culture and language was to take root over a century after his death. His dream of Maltese consciousness could only materialise with the widespread use of literacy.

At the end of the eighteenth century, a little before Vassalli put ink to paper, very few Maltese could read and write and this seems to have been more evident in the rural areas. For instance, at Qormi in 1773, out of 226 heads of households, only 22 or 9.7 percent could sign their name.<sup>40</sup> And a signature does not qualify an individual as literate. Written works were accessible only to the educated few, the majority of whom were clerics. Hence, in spite of the theoretical existence of writing and printing, only a limited elite could fully utilise the written word. The net result was that oral culture continued to dominate the scene at least until the early nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup> Malta, like the rest of the Mediterranean, possessed a definite literary class whose compositions were often transmitted to the illiterate mass of the population in oral form.

Several authors have stressed the idea that writing could be an instrument in the hands of the powerful, and employed to control and communicate. It has been argued that in early modern Europe, writing was used to bolster up the power of the clergy, the administrative class that exercised power, and a small cultural elite.<sup>42</sup> It all becomes evident when one realises the importance that was attached to notarial deeds. Indeed the Maltese, from all walks of life, had ever since the fifteenth century resorted to the notarisation of all-important acts in both private and public life.<sup>43</sup> Notaries, who were experts in legal formulas and terminology, drew up a great mass of documentation, ranging from marriage contracts and powers of attorney to official ordinances and petitions.

The differentiation into high culture (written) and low culture (oral) was not simply a cultural division that created also a distinction between two kinds of work. Administrative, academic and professional work could only be aspired to through the acquisition of a literary education; manual work required considerable experience in the craft performed. This means that manual workers generally had no motivation whatsoever to learn how to write. This seems to have applied to the

gifted like the local engineer Mastro Thomaso Dingli, engineer in church architecture of several important parish churches during the first half of the seventeenth century. Dingli concluded his deposition in front of the inquisitor by marking the sign of the cross rather than signing his name.<sup>44</sup> Thus writing created a radical distinction between the literate and illiterate elements of society.<sup>45</sup>

In the end, the kind of knowledge obtained from the literary tradition tended to be more highly valued than the practical knowledge and experience acquired by some form of manual participation.<sup>46</sup> Hence written literature was considered to be the highest form of expression, even though oral culture remained the only accessible form of expression for the majority of the people. The frequent promulgation of *bandi* (edicts), which were read out aloud in town and village streets for the information of those present, was the only official way news filtered to the masses.<sup>47</sup> In such circumstances, literacy comes to be considered as the established and respected tradition, while orality is transformed into a living art. Nonetheless, there is a constant interplay between oral and written forms.<sup>48</sup>

### Official Religion and Popular Religious Beliefs

Another influential literate group were the clergy. They had long been expected to be literate in order to celebrate mass, since this oral performance was in fact 'a public reading from the service book, the Missal'.<sup>49</sup> The clergy were obliged, or at least expected, to recite other daily prayers, mostly readings from the Breviary. They had to keep themselves up to date in their pastoral care by reading other books as well 'whether they were theological, devotional, or practical'.<sup>50</sup> Occasionally priests could be insufficiently educated, at times even illiterate, a situation revealed by Dusina's Apostolic Visitation Report of 1575, that brings out clearly the poor state of education among a large number of sixteenth century Maltese clerics.<sup>51</sup>

Most of those examined by the apostolic visitor had received their education a generation or so before the closing of the last session of the Council of Trent (1564). On several occasions Dusina had to remark that the priest concerned knew no grammar, or that he only had a smattering of Latin, or that he could read, but understand Latin very imperfectly. The priests' knowledge of theology was just as bad, so that in the end the apostolic visitor could express satisfaction with a mere ten out of the forty priests he examined.<sup>52</sup> Access to the ranks of the clergy appears to have been rather effortless since candidates did not seem to require anything more than a 'right intention' and a minimum capacity needed to fulfil the appropriate duties.<sup>53</sup> Low standards were required from the candidates and many clerics received their rudimentary clerical apprenticeship from their own parish priest.

Dusina was sent to Malta expressly to reform the diocese, and to upgrade the standards according to the instructions of the Council of Trent. He therefore



*Grand Master Pinto (1741-73) (above), Grand Master Vilhena (1722-36) (bottom left) and Grand Master Hompesch (1797-98) (Photo: Heritings Collection)*



insisted that a seminary be set up to train the secular clergy. Nevertheless, the proposal of the apostolic visitor was not discussed prior to the meeting of a Diocesan Synod called in 1591. On that occasion Bishop Gargallo decreed the foundation of a seminary, but the proposal got temporarily shelved. Instead, a Jesuit College was established in Valletta on the insistence of the bishop himself. Early evidence of the services provided by the Jesuit College is provided by the cleric Andrea Caruana of Qormi who was summoned before the Inquisition on New Year's Eve of 1603. In his evidence Caruana declared his ignorance of village matters since he attended the Jesuit College and only returned to the village at night time.<sup>54</sup> The Jesuit College must have served the diocesan requirements well since it took more than a century before Bishop Cocco Palmieri finally set up a seminary in 1703.<sup>55</sup>

Until the eighteenth century the priesthood often constituted the only literate system of the community at village level. The clergy also served as a link between the government of the Order of St John and the mass of the villagers. The position of the parish priest was so strong that sometimes he took the place of the notary when a will had to be drawn. It also shows the social control exerted by the Church over the majority of illiterate inhabitants.

In spite of this, there existed a fundamental tension between written and oral cultures. The literate elite was increasingly inclined to have recourse to the written word both in the public and private spheres; oral traditions were based 'on nostalgic and utopian esteem for a society without writing, governed by words that everyone could hear and signs that everyone could understand'.<sup>56</sup>

Inquisition records in Italy likewise reveal the importance of the written word in the equipment of the cunning men and wise women in town and countryside alike, and the belief in its power to cure the sick. Amulets, with writings on them, were so common, that diocesan synods frequently denounced the 'superstitious words' inscribed on sheets of paper.<sup>57</sup> The inquisitors frequently admonished people who believed in such practices, but apparently they were very much aware that old habits die hard. In 1625 in an attempt to eliminate these beliefs, the clergy were obliged to denounce anyone who practiced magic either to the bishop or the inquisitor - a directive that was repeated in 1646.<sup>58</sup>

This approach explains why techniques employed by witches in sixteenth and seventeenth century Malta were still in use till 1798 and perhaps beyond. Muslim slaves and wise women were still preparing concoctions, reciting prayers and other rites and formulas, making ointments, and suggesting the use of talismans and amulets for protection against the evil eye.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, some forms of magic still persist among some sections of the population.<sup>60</sup> While the literate public had to be guided and kept under control in order to avoid any incipient 'heretical behaviour', the illiterates presented a different problem due to their propensity towards and belief in popular religion.

Some Inquisition cases refer to the writing of books on magic, some of which appear to have been manuals on magical practices, like the one found by two

priests when still aged sixteen. Among other recipes, the book in question contained suggestions on how to acquire immunity against fire-arms, and others on love magic which the two accused tried to procure for themselves.<sup>51</sup>

Books on magic could also be found in the libraries of learned gentlemen like Notary Jacobo Baldacchino, who owned a collection of books on necromancy. His accuser recalled some six of them with titles as: *Censura Regnum*, *La Clavicola di Salomone*, *il Ragiel*, *il libro dell' esperimenti Cornelio Agrippa*, *Li Prestigii*, and *La compositione di quattro anelli*; the denouncer was positive that Baldacchino possessed a much larger collection.<sup>52</sup>

The existence of books on necromancy suggests, not only that the literate were keen on witchcraft, but they also found time to risk writing on prohibited topics. Among such individuals, we learn about a certain Dr Galeazzo Cademusto, a resident of Valletta, accused in 1579 of witchcraft practices, and even of having written a book on necromancy described as *libro di diavoli* (book of devils).<sup>53</sup>

Evidence from the Inquisition archives suggests that oral and literate cultures not only coexisted, but they also interacted. Thanks to the widespread general illiteracy, books and written papers were attributed an aura of mystery. Yet it would be misleading to assume that the uneducated were the only ones who resorted to such practices. Whereas a sound education could control excessive credulity, it did not completely destroy faith in popular beliefs. Thus, the literate were sometimes so keen about magical practices that they possessed whole sections of their private libraries dedicated to the topic. In a general overview of the Reformation sympathisers in Malta the Cambridge anthropologist Jack Goody points out that the dissemination of ideas, contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church, was only partly aided by the advent of printing and the circulation of the book. He argues that the radical ideas themselves 'struck chords in the minds of the inhabitants because they corresponded to existing doubts'.<sup>54</sup>

### The Makings of a Maltese Culture

The developments which took place in Malta in the century following the advent of the Order of St John, and especially after the siege of 1565, can be said to have profoundly transformed Maltese society, as well as the cultural values of its inhabitants.

Around the harbour area, the Order created a new urban environment within which was concentrated most of the Order's attention and activity, intensified after the foundation of Valletta in 1566. The division between the urban centres around the harbour and the *campagna*, as the rest of rural Malta was called, was to remain a permanent feature throughout the Order's rule and after. These drastic and rapid changes were accompanied by the rise of a social class of subjects or *familiari*, on whom the Order tended to rely heavily for the running of its bureaucratic machine. Undoubtedly, events were able to take this determinate course because

the geography that really counted was the one established by the lanes of communication. As a consequence, Malta was drawn nearer to Europe, simply because it happened to lie nearer to the communication lane running along the southern coast of Europe. Its old and intimate ties with Sicily are an inevitable corollary of this situation.

The old isolation of Malta melted into thin air, when in 1530 the Hospitaller Order of St John were granted the Maltese islands - originally together with Tripoli - as a fief on such generous terms that the Order turned the island into a sovereign state in all senses of the word. Various categories of foreigners, attracted by good work opportunities, settled in Malta, importing social, cultural and ideological components, which were different from those originally predominating in the island.

Consequently early modern Maltese culture cannot be considered as some kind of uniform, homogeneous structure. Rather one has to think in terms of various culturally distinct groupings, that simultaneously managed to create a cultural hegemony under a dominant elite on the lines propounded by Roland Mousnier for seventeenth century France. Mousnier argues that, in a society of orders, social groups are arranged hierarchically, in a descending scale of status and privilege. The organising principle in such societies is the social esteem accorded to the group's economic role. This system, points out Mousnier, is different from a 'society of classes' in which individuals are legally equal, formal privileges do not exist, and social stratification follows one's function in the economy.<sup>63</sup>

By contrast medieval Malta had essentially been a peasant society. Mdina served primarily as a small fortified 'urban' centre that carried on the whittled-down function of the old *ciuitas*, where the old municipality met, where it held its law courts, and where most of the notables kept an official place of residence. Farming was practically the sole capital resource of the islands, coupled with some shipping activity, and corsairing on the side. The land was roughly equally shared out between the Church, the landowners, and the peasants themselves.

With the establishment of the Order of St John in Malta in 1530, the island immediately entered a phase of transformation. Overnight, the texture of society took on a cosmopolitan character with the insertion of more refined social standards, and of a more numerous class of highly skilled artisans. The Order kept a small but highly efficient navy; so that the overall effect of vastly increased maritime exchanges, together with the flourishing practice of corsairing, exerted a beneficial influence upon the backward rural economy of tiny Malta. In short the Hospitallers had introduced a European style urban civilisation into Malta.



## Notes

- 1 J. Quinon d'Autun, *Insulae Melitae descriptio. The Earliest Description of Malta (Lyons 1536)*. Translation and notes by H. C. R. Vella (Makfa, 1980), 19.
- 2 M. Sant, 'Mining and attempted recalling of fiduciary copper coinage in Malta', *Melita Historica*, VI, 1 (1972), 60.
- 3 D. Goujar and C. Cassar, 'Malta and the sixteenth century struggles for the Mediterranean', in *Mid-Med Bank Ltd., Reports and Accounts 1985* (Malta, 1985), 51.
- 4 G. Westinger, 'Early Maltese popular attitudes to the government of the Order of St John', *Melita Historica*, VI, 3 (1974), 261.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 269.
- 6 NLM, Lib. 1220 is a treatise by notary Vittorio Grisci, member of the Harbour *Università* in the late 1740s, 191-93; see also NLM, Lib. 148, ff.32v, 55.
- 7 NLM, Lib. 148, ff.35v, 55; Dal Pozzo, *Historia della Sacra Religione Historica della Sacra Religione Militare di San Giovanni Gerusalemitano, detto di Malta*, I (Verona, 1703), 241-42; NLM, ADM 453, f.277.
- 8 G. F. Abela, *Della descrizione di Malta Malta isola nel mare siciliano, con le sue antichità ed altre notizie* (Malta, 1647), 260, 262; NLM, Lib. 1220, 197-98.
- 9 An insight of this kind is found in I. Bosio, *Dell'istoria della Sacra Religione Religione et di sua militia di S. Gio. Gerusalemitano*. Tome III (Rome, 1602), 516. On its arrival in Malta on 18 May 1565 the Ottoman armada was anchored off Mgarr for the night. The country people who had found refuge at Mdina jumped to the conclusion that the Ottomans' first objective was Mdina. The result was a concerted move by the country people to seek refuge in the harbor enclave that seemed to offer better security. In a state of panic, the *Università* despatched an envoy to the Grand Master choosing for the delicate task Luca de Armenia. He travelled in the night of 18 May to Birgu and presented to the Grand Master the views of the municipality, namely that if Mdina was going to be abandoned, he asked for shelter to be provided for the people then at Mdina; if on the other hand, the Old City was to be held, then the *Università* felt it ought to be garrisoned by a contingent of professional soldiers and be supplied with arms and ammunition. The mental anguish of the Maltese at the fate of Mdina can be gauged from the intense melancholy evinced by a Latin poem written by Luca de Armenia himself in the interval between the Ottoman fleet's appearance and La Valette's reply to de Armenia's embassy. Luca de Armenia's poem *Ad Patrem* was discovered by C. Cassar in NAM, MCC, CST, 11 (1565-1566), unpaginated, and published as 'O Melita Infelix' in *Melita Historica*, VIII, 2 (1981), 149-55. A more recent discussion of de Armenia's poem is to be found in C. Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta* (Malta, 2000), 301-203, 289.
- 10 L. Mahoney, *A History of Maltese Architecture* (Malta, 1988), part iii.
- 11 Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity*, 237-53.
- 12 NLM Univ. 1, ff.187-88; C. Trasselli, 'Una stansjona maltese del xvi secolo', *Economia e Storia* (1966), 477.
- 13 E. Lampard, 'Historical aspects of urbanisation', in P. M. Hanser and L. E. Schinore (eds), *The Study of Urbanisation* (New York, 1955), 520-23.
- 14 NLM Univ. 1, ff.187-88; Trasselli, 477.
- 15 Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity*, 91-94.
- 16 J. Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* (New York, 1974), I, 102-03; C.K. Wäber, 'Introduction: Economic development and underdevelopment in historical perspective', in C. K. Wilber (ed.), *The Political Economy of Development and Underdevelopment* (New York, 1972), 57-59.
- 17 V. Mallia-Milanes, 'Valletta: 1566-1798. An epitome of Europe', *Bank of Valletta Annual Report and Financial Statements* (Malta, 1983), xxiv-xxx.
- 18 Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity*, 106-25.
- 19 P. Cassar, *Medical History of Malta* (London, 1964), 328-29; C. Cassar, 'Popular perceptions and values in Hospitaller Malta', in V. Mallia Milanes (ed.), *Hospitaller Malta, 1530-1798. Studies on Early Modern Malta and the Order of St John of Jerusalem* (Malta, 1993), 459.
- 20 Mahoney, 82.
- 21 P. Cassar, *Medical History*, 328-29.

- 22 Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity*, 91-94, 106-119, 131-140.
- 23 Ph. Skippon, 'An Account of a Journey thro' part of the Low Countries, Germany, Italy and France [c.1664-1660]', in J. Churchill, and A. Awnsam and John (eds), *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* (London, 1732), 632.
- 24 G. Wettinger, 'Aspects of Maltese life', in G. Mangion (ed.), *Maltese Baroque* (Malta, 1989), 62.
- 25 Mahoney, ch.8.
- 26 Malha-Milanes, 'Valleta 1566-1798', xxxii, xxv.
- 27 Abela, 75.
- 28 NLM Lib. 148, f.77v.
- 29 Antonio Coniglio alias Fenech a Maltese resident of Licata, who dictated his will on 21 December 1630, declared himself *fidelissimo cristiano, cittadino di questa città della Licata* (Most faithful Christian, citizen of this town of Licata). G. Bonello, 'The last will of Antonio Coniglio', *The Sunday Times* (Malta), 7 February 1993, 32.
- 30 R. Valentini, 'I cavalieri di S. Giovanni da Rodi a Malta. Trattative diplomatiche', *Archivum Melitense*, IX (1935), 177.
- 31 In August 1617 Margarita Bonnici, sive La Bruca, stated that among other remedies for love magic, Margarita Bertone advised her to mix four pepper grains and a herb called *reheusa* in Maltese or *musco marino in franco* (i.e. *lingua franca*) or Italian. CAM, AIM, Crim. Proc. 40A, f.161v. Such indications help to confirm the widespread use of *lingua franca* among the lower echelons of the Harbour area at least since the early seventeenth century.
- 32 Caterina wife of Vincentio Xerri reported that *Mimichella con furia et collera criuro a decio suo marito dicendoli cornuto... et molti altri injuri quali io non posso sapere perchè non intendo della lingua Italiana sendo che lei parlava Italiano*. (With fury and anger Mimichella offended her husband by calling him 'horned'... and many other insults which I could not know because I do not understand the Italian language since she spoke in Italian). CAM, CFM, AO 480, f.115: 21 October 1602.
- 33 K. Whinnom, 'Lingua franca: historical problems', in A. Valdian (ed.), *Fidgim and Creol Linguistics* (Bloomington and London, 1977), 227.
- 34 Wettinger, 'Aspects of Maltese life', 61.
- 35 Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity*, 159.
- 36 AIM, Crim. Proc. 16A, case 5, f.112.
- 37 AIM, Crim. Proc. 14A, case 7, ff. 94v-95. See also Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity*, 160; C. Cassar, 'The first decades of the Inquisition: 1546-1581', *Hyphen - A Journal of Melitensis and the Humaniter*, IV (Malta, 1985), 225.
- 38 M.A. Vassalli, *Keyb-ol-lym malis-uffner-byl-Latin u-byl-Taljan... sive liber dictionum Melitensium... lexicon Melitense Latino-Italianum* (Rome, 1796), xvi.
- 39 Ibid., xix.
- 40 CAM, AIM, Civ. Proc. 5, ff.190-208; F. Ciappara, *Marriage in Malta in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Malta, 1988), 16.
- 41 W. J. Ong, 'Is literacy passé?', in D. Potter and P. Sarre (eds), *Dimensions of Society: A Reader* (London, 1974), 97.
- 42 P. Burke, 'Introduction', in P. Burke and R. Porter (eds), *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge, 1987), 2.
- 43 G. Wettinger, 'The village of Hal-Millieri', in A. T. Luttrell (ed.), *Hal-Millieri: A Maltese Casale, its Churches and Paintings* (Malta, 1976), 58-59.
- 44 K. Gambin, 'Fabio Chigi: Inquisitor-Missionary and Tridentine Reformer. A man of culture in Malta 1644-1639', (MA unpublished thesis, University of Malta, 1997), 22. Cf. AIM, Crim. Proc. 51, case 14, f.40: 19 December 1634.
- 45 J. Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge, 1986), 121.
- 46 Ibid., *The Interface between the Oral and the Written* (Cambridge, 1987), 162-63.
- 47 Collections of *bandi* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been preserved. See for example: NLM Lib. Ms. 149, 429, 430 and 641.
- 48 H. J. Chaytor, *From Script to Print* (Cambridge, 1945), ch. 6. When referring to post war peasants of Locorotondo in Apulia (Italy), H. Gal points out that, 'Many peasants lack of language facility and literacy limited their access to information emanating from administrative centres, such as

- the municipal and provincial levels of government. Information was diffused by word of mouth, often subject to distortion, as it passed from family to family through faulty understandings. Participation in town events, such as saints festivals and the Sunday mass, brought country folk closer to sources of information like posters, but these were written in Italian "bureaucratese", and not always accessible'. *Far from the Church Bells: Settlement and Society in an Apulian town* (Cambridge, 1991), 205-06.
- 49 P. Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987), 120.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 NLM Lib. Ms. 643, 507-30; The Visitation Report has recently been published by G. Aquilina and S. Fiorini (eds), *Documentary Sources of Maltese History. Part IV Documents at the Vatican. No.1 Archivio Segreto Vaticano Congregazioni Vescovi e Regolari. Malta: Visita Apostolica no.51 Mgr Petrus Dusina, 1575* (Malta, 2001).
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 A. Torre, 'Politics cloaked in worship: State, church and political power in Piedmont 1570-1770', *Past and Present*, 134 (1992), 46.
- 54 Ibid., f.173: 31 December, 1603.
- 55 V. Borg, 'Developments in education outside the Jesuit "Collegium Melitense"', *Melita Historica*, VI, 3 (1974), 216.
- 56 R. Chartier, 'The practical impact of writing', in R. Chartier (ed.), *A History of Private Life*, III. Eng. trans. (Cambridge Mass and London, 1989), 123.
- 57 Burke, *Historical Anthropology*, 121-22.
- 58 P. Cassar, *Medical history of Malta*, 426.
- 59 Cassar, 'The first decades of the Inquisition', 207-38; A. Bonnici, *Il-Maltin u l-Inkizizzjoni f'Nofs is-Sektu Sbalax* (Malta, 1977), 71-122; F. Ciappara, 'Lay healers and sorcerers in Malta (1770-1798)', *Starja '78* (Malta, 1978), 60-76.
- 60 J. Cassar-Pullicino, *An Introduction to Maltese Folklore* (Malta, 1947), 35.
- 61 CAM, AIM, Crim. Proc. 61A, case 45, f.219.
- 62 Ibid., 2B, case 31, f.338v: 19 September, 1574.
- 63 Ibid., 6C, case 48, f.1037: 2 November, 1582.
- 64 Concluding remarks by J. Goody on C. Cassar, 'The Reformation and sixteenth century Malta', *Melita Historica (New Series)*, X, I, 65 in J. Goody, *Representations and Contradictions. Ambivalence towards Images, Theatre, Fiction, Relics and Sexuality* (Oxford, 1997), 267-69.
- 65 R. Mousnier, *Les hiérarchies sociales de 1450 à nos jours* (Paris, 1965), esp., chs. 1 and 2.