

HOPES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS IN THE HISTORY

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НАДЕЖДИ И РАЗОЧАРОВАНИЯ В ИСТОРИЯТА

СБОРНИК В ПАМЕТ
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THE CULTURAL ROOTS OF MALTESE IDENTITY. CHRISTIAN MYTHS AND SOCIAL MEMORY IN A MEDITERRANEAN FRONTIERS SOCIETY¹

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Malta and the Hospitaller Order of St John

Christianity was deeply rooted among the Maltese well before the advent of the Order of St John in 1530. By the late Middle Ages Malta had developed into a diocese run by an absentee Bishop and an Inquisition tribunal that was usually presided over by the Vicar-General who was generally responsible for the island's spiritual needs.² Despite the advent of the elitist, aristocratic and powerful Order of knights, the diocese of Malta continued to play a dominant part in Malta and acted largely as a separate, if not an independent entity – a role, which the Catholic Church could play largely thanks to the strong attachment of the Maltese community towards religion. The position of the diocese of Malta follows rather closely the theory proposed by the sociologist A.D. Smith who noted that over the millennia organized religions have served as a symbolic code of communication and a focus for social organization.³ The unity of the various strata of the population of Malta was possible through the profound ties of all the inhabitants – except the Muslim slaves – to the Roman Catholic Church. Malta was close to a theocracy as the three separate jurisdictions on the island – the Grand Master's, the Bishop's, and the Inquisitor's – all considered the Pope as their ultimate earthly head. The net result was that religion seeped deeply into all sectors of society with the priesthood serving as the focus of social organization.

When, after considerable hesitation, the Hospitaller Order of St John agreed to take on the defence of Tripoli and Malta, they soon realized that finance wise they had made a bad bargain. But this negative aspect was compensated by political considerations, for the terms were so generous that Grand Masters would soon act as *de facto* sovereigns rather than as feudal tributaries as originally required by the terms of Charles

¹ An earlier version of this paper was written as a chapter for my Ph.D dissertation submitted to the Faculty of History at the University of Cambridge in 1994 and published as chapter 8 [The Foundations of an Ethnic Community] in my book entitled *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta* by Mireva Publications (Malta, 2000). More recently another version was published in *Studi sull' oriente cristiano*, (Rome, 2004), vol.8 no.1, pp.101-130.

² By the late Middle Ages several religious orders like the Dominicans, Franciscan Minors, Carmelites, and Augustinians had set up friaries at the old town of Mdina, or in its suburb, Rabat. Benedictine nunneries established in the fifteenth century, and other institutions like the Santo Spirito hospital, were partly religious in character.

³ A.D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. (Oxford, 1986), pp. 26-29.

V's charter. But in order to comprehend the internal situation of Malta in the sixteenth century it is necessary to provide a brief general background on the effects of the change brought about by the arrival of the Order. Indeed soon after its arrival the Order became guarantor of political stability in Malta and champion of the Christians on the fringes of Europe. The transfer of the Order to Malta thus meant, in real terms, that Malta and the Knights of St John became the major objectives of on going Ottoman offensive to seize control of the central Mediterranean.

It is at this point vital to look briefly at the earliest description of Malta published in Lyons in 1536 by a French chaplain of the Order of St John, Jean Quentin d'Autun, who gives an interesting, if unflattering, account of the Maltese at that time.⁴

The people have a Sicilian character with a mixture of African, they are not strong enough for nor adapted to warfare... The women are not at all ugly, but live very much as if they are uncivilized (sed persimilis feris); they do not mix with other people and go out covered in a veil as if to see a woman is here the same as to violate her.

The author goes on to describe that apart from Mdina

...and some houses in the suburb, ...the people lived in makeshift houses, roofed with tiles or reed ..., which one would take... for African huts.

Agriculture practised crop rotation - barley followed by cotton - that appears to have been the chief cash crop. In fact cotton and curin were the only exports mentioned, although the local women weaved cotton sheets and clothes (*mappalia et vestes*) as well as ship-sails. Horticulture was practised too with particular care to olive-trees and vines - reflecting the people's staple diet - as well as figs. The Maltese depended on Sicily for grain and used thistles and cow's dung as fuel, as all timber requirements had to be imported then, as now.

D'Autun adds that Fort St Angelo was found by the Knights

...to be falling into ruins, outside which on a hillock stood a ramshackle hamlet...

About the latter he goes on to state that

...to-day on account of its population and walls, it may be called a town.

⁴ Jean Quintin d'Autun, *Insulae Melitae descriptio*. (Lyon, 1536) several editions were issued. The translation follows the English version published in Malta by H.C.R.Vella, *The Earliest Description of Malta*. (Malta, 1980).

In fact Grand Master L'Isle Adam had *set* up his headquarters in Fort St Angelo, overlooking the Grand Harbour, which he proceeded to rebuild completely, cutting a deep ditch on the landward-side to separate the Fort from the Birgu as the former 'hamlet' came to be called, once it was defended by the newly-built walls. These were in fact the first measures taken by the Order to improve the Island's defences.

The arrival of the chivalric Order, and the catastrophic Ottoman Siege of Malta of 1565 affected the style and tenor of life of the Maltese. The extensive building programme introduced Malta to an urban civilization with all that this transformation implied. Around the Grand Harbour, the Order developed an urban environment in which it came to concentrate most of its attention and activity. The division between the urban centres clustered around the harbour area, and the '*campagna*', as the rest of rural Malta came to be known, remained total during the Knights' rule. This social and cultural barrier was to break down slowly, very slowly, through the nineteenth century. In the years following the Ottoman Siege of Malta of 1565 a whole process of urban development had unfolded itself, all inspired by the desperate defensive needs that the Order of St John tried intermittently to remedy. Urbanization was in fact the net result of the need to afford better security, as the people tended to concentrate in localities where the degree of safety was improved by defensive walls and bastions. By acculturating the middle and lower urban strata, the Order managed to broaden its base and prolong its social life with myths, symbols, values and memories cultivated over generations and which by the seventeenth century had become the heritage and cultural repository of a Maltese proto-nation.⁵

However the Maltese remained strongly attached to the Pauline cult. Quintin D'Autun dedicates a few pages of his brief report to it

The people are very devoted to their religion. Malta is consecrated to St Paul, and the people of this place once believed that he was God. Its religion is wonderfully practised in the whole island, both privately and publicly... Shrines are found all over the island. The people (guided as they claim by the annals of Luke) believe as firmly and with certainty that Paul has been in Malta just as much as they believe that Peter has been in Rome.⁶

Quintin D'Autun relates the story of St Paul's Shipwreck caused by the strong northeasterly wind, basing himself on the Acts of the Apostles. But he casts doubts on the eventual shipwreck of the saint on Malta:

⁵ See for example I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*. vol.i, (New York, 1974), p.353.

⁶ Quintin D'Autun, *Insulae Melitae Descriptio*, pp.43-45.

Others take with a pinch of salt this north-easterly wind which one knows not what it is, and which (they say) is quite unknown to our sea and to our lands; and they wonder what new land in the whole world should be the one towards which, according to the interpreters of the account given in the Acts, this wind should have on that occasion blown.⁷

The descriptions provided by Quentin D'Autun suggest that the Knights of St John found an island population, which officially shared the same Catholic beliefs of the rulers, but who practised their own set of religious values. As such, Quintin D'Autun's description confirms that in the 1530s the term 'Maltese' evoked connotations with St. Paul and Christianity from both a cultural and a historical perspective. Essentially, these elements constituted the 'grand solidarity' of the Maltese community as a distinct people, a latent force lending itself to an unrealised potential. But the slow painful process of its realization had in fact been set in motion, perhaps unnoticed, in the course of the late sixteenth century, and it was only to gather momentum during the latter half of the eighteenth century. These distinctive traits and characteristics came to be associated with 'the Maltese' both in the minds of ethnic inhabitants, as well as the resident outsiders. It is at this point opportune to explore and review how religion, the cult of St Paul, and crusade, began to relate with Maltese conceptions and images of cultural identity and how these themes came to play a fundamental role in the development of Maltese ethnic awareness based on collective memory.

The shipwreck of St. Paul and the advent of Christianity, the Norman conquest of Malta from its Arab rulers, and the Christian victory in the Ottoman Siege of 1565, came to be considered as events of vital significance, bequeathing a legacy of memories and cultural achievements that helped to create a distinctive Maltese community. By the nineteenth century, the concepts of history and national consciousness had become clear cut, crystallizing around ideals embodied by such 'national heroes' as St. Paul, Count Roger the Norman, and Grand Master La Valette. In the centuries after the expulsion of the Order from Malta the list of 'heroes' was extended to reinforce the polarization of this ideology. But the cults of St. Paul, together with that of the Virgin, formed part of the prevailing ideology of the Church of Malta, which set itself the task of making the state homogeneous in terms of religion.

The Impact of Christianity

Christianity may thus be singled out as the vehicle that reinforced a sense of community among the Maltese. But as there is nothing automatic about ethnic survival, the same can be said of other traditions that are deeply connected to religious beliefs. The propagation and transmission of religion requires continual activity, and here symbolism plays a considerable role. More important for the development of cultural identity was the implicit idea of divine selection

⁷ Ibid., p.45.

...the idea that 'we' are the special beneficiaries of divine activity, and that we are enjoined to lead a special life under the dispensation of a divinely ordained law-code... this lends to ethnic consciousness, a sense of separation and superiority over other peoples.⁸

In Malta the figure of St. Paul has over the centuries been invested with this role. It has been argued that the Maltese people's lifestyle has been impressed forever by the arrival of St. Paul, since throughout his lifetime every Maltese hears the story of the saint's shipwreck on the island a number of times. The influence of this event has therefore assumed prime importance for the Maltese sense of identity as a separate community.⁹ The Maltese historian Henry Frendo not only concurs with this view but goes on to argue that 'collective memory' has come to incorporate St. Paul's stay in Malta, after his shipwreck, irrespective of its historicity or not. In this fashion, legends take on real life,¹⁰ although Maltese Christianity, which may not have survived during the Muslim period, seems to have been re-introduced, perhaps in the twelfth century, when the Maltese islands were

*Latinised and christianised... and thereafter religious fervour became increasingly strong.*¹¹

The Christian Maltese of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and especially, seventeenth centuries were seeking coherent justification for the manner in which their community had been formed and developed. The principal elements that came to be included were: a small compact archipelago, decidedly situated within a European cultural sphere of influence; an indigenous common language of Semitic origins, that modern research shows to have been employed in some form of literary exercise since the fifteenth century;¹² a profound attachment to Roman Catholicism, the focus of their ethnic unity whose cults, catacombs, shrines, clergy, and church-bells left an indelible imprint on the indigenous mind; common institutions which were associated in the popular mind with a modicum of political freedom and civil liberties; ancient customs, traditions, and heroic folk memories.¹³ In short, the Maltese had a shared common past that recalled a collection of historical experiences, involving great sac-

⁸ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, p.36.

⁹ P. Serracino-Ingloft, 'Kattolicita Maltija: Jew il-Vokazzjoni tal-huttaba', T. Cortis (ed), *L-Identita Kulturali ta Malta*. (Malta, 1989), pp.265-267.

¹⁰ H. Frendo, *Malta's Quest for Independence: Reflections on the Course of Maltese History*. (Malta, 1989), p.22.

¹¹ A.T. Luttrell, 'Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela: Tradition and invention in Maltese historiography', *Melita Historica*, vol.viii (1977), p.128.

¹² G. Wettinger, *Peter Caxaro's Cantilena. A Poem in Medieval Maltese*. (Malta 1968), p.38; G. Wettinger and M. Fsadni, *L-Ghanja ta Pietru Caxaru. Poezija bil-Malti Medjevali*. (Malta, 1983), p.47.

¹³ C. Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta*. (Malta, 2000), esp. pp.xxi-xlix.

rifices and epic moments of patriotism. In Malta the figure of St. Paul has over the centuries been invested with this role.

An indirect insight into the widespread homage paid to St. Paul can be gleaned from a study of Christian names in Malta current in the early part of the fifteenth century. An analysis of the Militia List of 1419-1420 indicates a total of 1,667 adult males in Malta, excluding Birgu, and includes some eighty Christian names of which the more popular are: Antoni (104 examples); Johanni in its various forms (94); Nicolau or Cola (94); Gulliellmu (76); Thumeu (58) and Paulu (58).¹⁴ The myth of the Apostle's shipwreck served above all else as a symbolic testimony that the Maltese did not owe their religious sentiments to the presence of the haughty Order of Knights. It should rather be appreciated against the background of Malta's geographical position, on the front-line of Latin Christianity, in dangerous proximity to Islamic North Africa, and perhaps unconsciously, as a form of compensation for the persistence of its Semitic language among the native inhabitants. The latter consideration may account for Jean Quentin D'Autun's disbelief regarding the identification of Malta with the site of the shipwreck of St. Paul.¹⁵

However, it is thanks to Gerolamo Manduca, a Maltese sixteenth century Jesuit priest, that most myths regarding the Pauline tradition and the uninterrupted Christianity of Malta gained currency. Manduca wrote and worked extensively to cultivate popular veneration for the Apostle Paul and other saints, fabricating a network of pious legends on which the Jesuit trained Gian Francesco Abela, Vice-Chancellor of the Order and author of *Della descrizione di Malta* published in 1647, leaned heavily. Manduca could cite earlier enthusiasms, such as that of Matteo Surdo, Arch-priest of the Cathedral, who in 1549 attempted to restore the Pauline cult at St. Paul's cemetery in Rabat.¹⁶ We are further told that

*...the first Maltese Christians used St. Paul's grotto as a Church, a practice which was followed by untold generations.*¹⁷

This hypothesis strengthens the general belief that the Pauline cult, with its convergence with the Rabat grotto, is by far Malta's most rooted tradition, repeatedly recounted by innumerable subsequent writers. When in 1608 four aged clerics gave evidence, concerning the devotion towards the grotto, one of them declared that

*...ho sempre inteso per tradizioni dei nostri antichi Maltesi.*¹⁸

¹⁴ G. Wettinger, 'The militia list of 1419-1420: A new starting point for the study of Malta's population', *Melita Historica*, vol.v (1969), pp. 83, 86.

¹⁵ Quintin d'Autun, *Insulae Melitae Descriptio*, p.45.

¹⁶ Luttrell, 'Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela', p.114; G. Gatt Said, *Risposta del sacerdote Giovanni Gatt Said*. (Malta, 1868), pp.52-53, n.(b).

¹⁷ L. Mahoney, 'The church of St Paul at Rabat', J. Azzopardi (ed), *St Paul's Grotto, Church and Museum at Rabat, Malta*. (Malta, 1990), p.85.

¹⁸ 'I have always known this as tradition of our Maltese ancestors'. Gatt Said, *La grotta di S. Paolo a Malta*. (Malta, 1863), pp.67-69.

Devotion to the grotto and the Pauline tradition continued to play a central role in traveller's reports. In 1582, for example, Giovanni Battista Leoni referred to the great devotion of those visiting the site, especially the grotto, where according to pious traditions St. Paul sheltered during his stay in Malta. Leoni also refers to the miraculous limestone used to heal snakebites.¹⁹ The property of the limestone from St. Paul's grotto was already remarked upon in a book published in Venice in 1554.²⁰ The Maltese palaeontologist George Zammit-Maempel refers to written certificates being issued, as early as 1571, to accompany pieces of stone that were distributed, and perhaps sold, to the faithful.²¹ Belief in the healing properties of this limestone seems to have been widespread. As the cultural historian Peter Burke has pointed out, sufferers from snake bites in early modern Italy could have recourse to the wandering *pauliani*, who claimed descent from St. Paul, referring to the Apostle's experiences in Malta where

*...there a viper came out of the heat, and fastened on his hand... and he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm.*²²

We are told that these *pauliani* sold what they called 'Maltese earth', accompanied by herbs and a healing formula.²³ The *pietra* or *terra di San Paolo* (Maltese earth) consisted essentially of chippings of cave-rock, or powdered limestone from St. Paul's crypt. It was popularly believed that, by a special miracle,

*...the rock of this cave is continuously regenerated, so that no matter the amount of material quarried from its walls, the cave's dimensions remained always unaltered.*²⁴

¹⁹ P. Falcone, "Una relazione di Malta" sulla fine del cinquecento', *Archivio Storico di Malta*, vol. iv Fasc.i, (1933), p.38; C.A. Vianello, 'Una relazione inedita di Malta nel 1582', *Archivio Storico di Malta*, vol. vii (1936)', p.293; *National Library of Malta*, vol.23, fols. 262-276 and published in the nineteenth century newspaper *L'Ordine* no.18 dated 26 April 1861. The crypt of St Paul has also been referred to by G. Bosio, *Dell' Istoria della Sacra Religione Religione et ill.ma militia di S. Gio. Gerosolimitano*. Tome iii. (Rome, 1602), p.95 and G.F. Abela, *Della descrizione di Malta isola nel mare siciliano, con le sue antichità ed altre notizie*, (Malta, 1647), pp.222, 348. Furthermore, G. Semprini, 'Malta nella seconda metà del seicento', *Archivio Storico di Malta*, vol. iv (1933), p.103, points out that 'the stone (from the crypt) is sent to all parts of the world'.

²⁰ A. Stilon, 'Alcuni nostri amuleti', *Archivum Mclitense*, vol. vii (1926), p.103.

²¹ G. Zammit Maempel, 'The magical properties of rock from St. Paul's grotto, Malta', *Studies in Speleology*, vol. iii (1977)', p.29.

²² Acts of the Apostles, xviii, vv.3-5.

²³ Ponzetti, *Libellus de venenis*, ii, Tract i, ch.5; A. Di Nola, *Gli aspetti magico-religiosi di una cultura subalterna italiana*. (Milan, 1976), p.75; P. Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy*. (Cambridge, 1987), p.209. Ponzetti, a physician, who entered the church and became a bishop, claimed to have acquired his information by questioning the healers themselves. Possibly the visitors to Malta were *pauliani* healers or merchants in 'Maltese earth' who would then sell it to the *pauliani*.

²⁴ G. Zammit Macmpel, 'The magical properties', pp.29-32.

As a result of this belief it as reported that visitors, even into the eighteenth century, carried off shiploads of stone from the grotto.²⁵ It was thanks to a Spanish nobleman turned Jesuit from Cordoba, Juan Beneguas, that veneration for the crypt underwent a more systematic revival in the early seventeenth century. Indeed the growing importance of the grotto was at the time evidently becoming symbolic of Maltese ethnic consciousness, as well as an important landmark of the island's Christian devotion.²⁶ The devotion towards the grotto was so strong that on 13 May 1617 the Cathedral Chapter of Mdina felt duty-bound to declare St. Paul's grotto as

... the foundation stone of the Church in Malta.

The statement gains more weight if one considers that soon after the declaration the Cathedral Chapter felt the need to appoint Notary Andrea Allegritto as its emissary in Rome to propagate the pivotal role played by the grotto for Malta's Christianity.²⁷ In the writings of the seventeenth century, St. Paul's grotto became the focus of this new devotion. The same theme recurs in another treatise, presumably written under the influence of Beneguas, by the Maltese galley surgeon, Marc' Antonio Axac. It refers to the miracles, indulgences, feasts and stories of pilgrims who arrived in Malta to secure the miraculous limestone. In the opinion of Anthony Luttrell, Axac's tract demonstrated a straightforward, descriptive brand of religiosity.²⁸

The arrival of pilgrims to Malta between 1613 and 1616, presumably at the instigation of Beneguas, evinces the spread of the Pauline cult over most of Catholic Europe.²⁹ It includes declarations by various individuals who arrived in Malta as visitors, a few of whom declared in advance their devotion to the island's connection with St. Paul.³⁰ In the writings of the seventeenth century, St. Paul's grotto became the focus of this new devotion, strengthening what Quintin D'Autun had already specified in 1536

Near the city there is a cave dug in rock, with two altars within; they say that Paul was in custody in it for three months along with other prisoners, healing at the same time the islanders ... Moreover no harmful kind of serpents

²⁵ A. Bres, *Malta antica illustrata*. (Rome, 1816), p.444.

²⁶ C. Cassar, 'Visitors to St Paul's grotto in the seventeenth century', J.Azzopardi (ed), *St Paul's Grotto, Church and Museum at Rabat, Malta*. (Malta, 1990), p.77.

²⁷ J. Azzopardi, 'St Paul's grotto - history', *Il-Festa Taghna*, n.p., (Malta, 1983), n.p.

²⁸ Luttrell, 'Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela', p.117.

²⁹ See the incomplete list of passengers for 1613-1616. N(ational) A(rchives) M(alta), M(agna) C(uria) C(astellania) R(egistrum) R(evelationis) M(anciporum) vol.unico: 1588-1617.

³⁰ The passengers were: Joanne Tacie, a Frenchman who arrived on 31 August 1613; Giovanni Vulpe, a German on 14 September 1614; Pietro Steyncrt, a Hungarian on 18 March 1615; Stefano Maccino of Bologna (Italy) on 22 April 1616; Sylvestro Benc of Vienna (Austria) and Ulficano Neult of Styria (Austria) on 27 July 1616. MCCRRM vol.unico: 1588-1617 n.p., cf. Cassar, 'Visitors to St Paul's grotto', p.77.

*is born in Malta, and those brought from elsewhere become harmless... From that cave, ...pieces of stone are daily cut off by visitors who confirm openly throughout Africa, Italy and Rome that they are healed from the bites of serpents and scorpions through these stones. The people consider this a favour from St Paul.*³¹

In a Latin poem attributed to Girolamo Manduca, the author synthesizes the salient moments of the saint's life. Of prime importance is the list of references to the various traditions linked with St. Paul's stay in Malta, with such episodes as the snake which the Apostle shook back into the fire; the Gozitans who could hear his sermons while he preached from Naxxar; the Maltese who were baptized and became fervent Christians; the anointing of the first citizen of Malta, Publius, as spiritual pastor; and the saint's stay in the grotto.³² Particularly relevant is the way Manduca managed to portray the feeling of warm participation and hospitality accorded to St. Paul by the Maltese. Above all, St. Paul is looked upon as the heavenly protector of the Maltese, and Manduca ends his poem in this spirit, invoking the saint to avert calamities befalling Malta.³³

The long established veneration for St. Paul was being propagated actively during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries thanks to the indefatigable activities of some Jesuits and their students. The culmination of this campaign may perhaps be said to have reached the climax with the publication of Gian Francesco Abela's *Della Descrizione di Malta* in 1647. Abela hailed from a family of Maltese Mdina notables, who had studied at the Jesuit *Collegium Melitense*, continued his studies at the University of Bologna, joined the Order of St John as a chaplain and ended his career, during the rule of Grand Master Jean Paul Lascaris Castellar (1636-1657), himself a great admirer of the Jesuits, as Vice-Chancellor of the Order of St John. Abela's work was mostly influential in the consequent development or fabrication of traditions, some of which have continued to enliven Maltese culture ever since. He claims that Malta had been converted to Christianity by the Apostle in the first century, and had since remained faithful. In this way, the essential mythic foundations for the history of Maltese Christianity are firmly established.³⁴ The illustration chosen for Abela's introductory page confirms this general belief. The iconography of St. Paul, holding the Gospel-

³¹ Quintin D'Autun, *Insulae Melitae Descriptio*, pp.45-47.

³² G. Bugeja, 'The grotto motif in Pauline poetry', J. Azzopardi (ed), *St Paul's Grotto, Church and Museum at Rabat, Malta*, (Malta, 1990), pp.218-219.

³³ N(ational) L(ibrary of) M(alta), Libr(ary manuscripts) vol.515 fols.9v-15v. copies of which are found in NLM Libr. vol.631 and A(rchives of the) C(athedral of) M(alta), Misc. vol.269 by Marc' Antonio Axac entitled, 'Relazione della nuova e grandissima divottione introdotta nella Sta. grotta di San Paolo nell'isola di Malta con breve raccolta delle cose notande et antichita de detta Isola'.

³⁴ Abela, *Della descrizione di Malta*, pp.236-242.

book in his left hand, with a viper hanging from his raised right hand, and a lit fire beside him, has imprinted itself deeply on the minds of the Maltese ever since. Abela's image of St. Paul might even have inspired the baroque sculptor Melchiorre Gafa (1636-1667), in the execution of the Apostle's statue for the Testaferatta family around 1660.³⁵ Clearly, an attempt was unconsciously being made to explain the apparent contradiction between Maltese aspiration to be considered as Europeans, and the linguistic reality pointing to their Semitic past.³⁶

A celebrated physician and Maltese man of letters, Gian Francesco Bonamico (1639-1680), wrote a poem recently claimed to be the most important literary work on the grotto. It dates from about 1670-1680, the last in a series of nineteen poems entitled *Gaudia Melitense* (The Joys of the Maltese), all dealing with some aspect of the saint's stay in Malta.³⁷ Most of these poems are inspired by verses inspired by the Acts of the Apostles compounded with local popular beliefs, which are part and parcel of the Pauline cult. The last poem is of particular significance, since it refers to the crypt as a place of veneration. A sense of enthusiastic participation on the poet's part is enhanced by his desire to express himself in Maltese about the marvellous feats of the saint. Hence, through this linguistic allusion, Bonamico makes all Maltese participants follow in the event.³⁸

The Pauline cult came to symbolize the salient social relationships of Maltese life, embodying the emotions it generated. Above all, it provided a cultural idiom, 'a collective representation' of Maltese society.³⁹ In short, the Pauline cult helped to unite the Maltese into a single ritual community. Maltese religion was

*...strengthened by a propaganda campaign sustained by members of religious orders who deliberately fostered a series of historical inventions... to cultivate popular sympathy for St. Paul and other saints.*⁴⁰

³⁵ This work-of-art representing St Paul is now held at the parish of St Paul's Shipwreck in Valletta.

³⁶ The Maltese linguist Joseph Brincat purports that Muslim immigration from Sicily resulted in the importation of a Semitic dialect to Malta. In this sense the Semitic language could be said to have arrived from Sicily, an island which geographically forms an integral part of Europe. J. Brincat, *Malta 870-1054. Al-Himyar's Account*. (Malta, 1991), pp.1-22.

³⁷ ACM Misc. vl.54, fols.150-158.

³⁸ Bugeja, 'The grotto motif in Pauline poetry', p.221.

³⁹ This theme was frequently referred to during a three day visit to Malta by Pope John Paul II and was particularly stressed in his farewell speech on 27 May 1990. Understandably the motto chosen for the occasion was: Peter on the island of Paul.

⁴⁰ A. T. Luttrell, 'The Christianization of Malta', *The Malta Year Book 1977*. (Malta, 1977), p.417. In 1599, the Augustinian rector of the Marian sanctuary at Mellieha, Fra Aurelio Axach, explained in his deposition, in front of Inquisitor Mgr Antonio Hortensio (1598-1600) that during several exorcism sessions the demons within the possessed told him that in Malta there is a saint with a long beard and a sword in hand – an obvious allusion to St Paul - who does not allow them to mistreat the Maltese. A(rchives of the) I(nquisition of) M(alta), Crim(inal Proceedings) vol.16A case 42, fol.380: 12 January 1599.

St. Paul, in particular was not only the most efficacious mediator with God on behalf of the islanders, but he also came to represent 'Malteseness'. The figure of the Apostle thus emerged as the major symbol of seventeenth century Malta, enshrining the hopes and aspirations of the Maltese at large. The theme parallels in Eric Wolf's study the very similar role attributed to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Wolf considers the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint, as a 'master symbol', arguing that

...complex societies must possess cultural forms (which) develop historically, hand in hand, with other processes which lead to the formation of nations, and social groups which are caught up in these processes must become 'acculturated' to their usage.⁴¹

In Wolf's opinion, only when such forms exist can communication and coordinated behaviour be established within society itself. These provide

...the cultural idiom of behaviour and ideal representations through which different groups of the same society can pursue and manipulate their different fates within a coordinated framework.⁴²

These theoretical considerations suggest that a sacred liturgy and a mythology do provide the community with a *raison d'être*. A common feature can be met with among religiously inspired ethnic communities and their cultures; we find repeated attempts at cultural renewal, especially in the face of external threats (i.e. fears of invasion by the Muslim Turks), or inner divisions (i.e. the growing hegemony of the Grand Masters at the expense of the Maltese commune and its notables). Taking the ideal community as their focus of concern, the Maltese ethnic community, like other religion-based groups of its kind

...inject a popular dynamic element into communal consciousness, which is lacking in the more dynastic or even political kinds of 'myth-symbol complex'.⁴³

In seventeenth century Malta, the cult of St. Paul developed into a symbol of Maltese identity embodying its hopes of salvation. It came about due to various factors crossbred and enriched with the passing of time. First in importance was the foundation of the Jesuit College, founded in 1592, that went on to promote studies in both local history and traditions, especially the Pauline cult.⁴⁴ The Order's perpetual Holy War against the Infidel Muslims made the Knights resemble St. Paul for they too had the

⁴¹ E. Wolf, 'The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican national symbol', *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. lxxi (1958), p.34.

⁴² Wolf, 'The Virgin of Guadalupe', p.34.

⁴³ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, p.67.

⁴⁴ V. Borg, 'Gerolamo Manduca: His life and works', *Melita Historica*, vol. vii no.3, (1978), pp.237-258.

mission to christianize and possibly regain lost territory from the Ottoman Turks. Their arrival on Malta was accidental too! St. Paul was shipwrecked on Malta, seemingly by an act of providence. The Order accepted Malta only after having lost Rhodes.⁴⁵ Finally the Knights saw in St. Paul a counterpart of their patron, St. John the Baptist. Both saints had led a highly adventurous life, endured myriad hardships, and both ended up as martyrs.⁴⁶ The effects of the popularity of the Pauline cult are evinced by the introduction of new cults of saints. Rooted in late medieval Christian universalism, the cult of St. Paul stretches back to the late middle ages, together with the ideology of the Marian cult.⁴⁷ By the seventeenth century the cult was extended to the more general worship of particular saints, notably saints Publius and Agatha,⁴⁸ and those other saints to whom Maltese parishes were dedicated.⁴⁹

It may be argued that the patron saints of the eighteenth century village parishes came to embody the virtues of the village community in question. Thus, the cult and celebration of associated festivities helped define even further the boundaries of local small-scale communities within tiny Malta. Possibly the cult of village saints emerged in response to the view that the Maltese were a distinct people - a motif that gained ground particularly as it ensured that even foreigners would accept the commonly held belief that Malta never gave up its Christianity since the advent of St. Paul. Therefore, the veneration of saints came to stand more than ever for the symbolic expression of an ethnic consciousness - a consciousness that was already moulded by the religious concepts of the seventeenth century. Thus the notion of 'Maltese-ness' assumed continuity between past and present and helped to bind the Pauline cult firmly with Maltese ethnic consciousness.

⁴⁵ J. Cassar-Pullficino, 'Documentary material relating to "L-Imnarja"', *Littérature Orale Arabo-Berbère, Association pour l'Étude des Civilisations et des Littératures de l'Afrique Septentrionale*, Paris, Bulletin No. 14 (1983), pp.23-26.

⁴⁶ Bugeja, 'The grotto motif in Pauline poetry', p.217.

⁴⁷ The earliest evidence of a Marian cult goes back to 1274 when the church of the *castrum maris* (later Fort St Angelo - Vittoriosa) is known to have been dedicated to Santa Maria. M. Buhagiar, 'Late medieval Marian art in Malta', M. Buhagiar (ed), *Marian Art - During the 17th and 18th Centuries*. (Malta, 1983), p.1.

⁴⁸ The cult of St Publius was propagated in the early seventeenth century. See the writings of Axac and Manduca discussed above. The devotion to St Agatha was already strong in the mid sixteenth century particularly after it was believed that it was instrumental to repel a Turkish attack on Mdina in 1531. On that occasion Mastro Blasio Zammit who publicly doubted the efficacy of the mounting of the statue on the town walls was denounced to the Inquisition tribunal. AIM Crim., vol.3B case 63 fols. 622-625: 18 June 1574.

⁴⁹ In most Maltese parishes the cult of saints, particularly those of St Nicholas, St Catherine and St George, were already well established by the fifteenth century.

Christianity and the Norman Conquest

We have so far attempted to show that the great importance attached to the Pauline cult reinforces the general belief that religious factors were pivotal in fostering ethnic identity in Malta. However at this point we need to distinguish between social memory and the activity of historical reconstruction. Usually historians tend to prefer to investigate, and do not usually depend heavily on social memory, making it possible to rediscover what has been completely forgotten. However historical reconstruction is still necessary even when social memory preserves the direct testimony of an event. Nonetheless despite its independence from social memory, history can still be inspired by collective beliefs and can also shape the memory of social groups.⁵⁰ A particularly extreme case of this interaction occurs when the state apparatus is used in a systematic way to deprive its citizens of their memory. In the opinion of social theorist Paul Connerton a similar condition might even create a situation where no one can properly bear witness to the past.⁵¹

It seems that Connerton's opinion may safely be applied to post-Muslim Malta which the Maltese have reclaimed making it part of a continuous present. The available historical evidence points out to a razzia by Count Roger in 1091 after which he permitted the Arabs to stay on. It therefore appears that the Maltese islands remained within the orbit of Muslim culture well after the original Norman incursion and it was only after the second Norman invasion and conquest of Malta in 1127 by the Count's son, King Roger II, that a Christian community became firmly established in Malta.⁵² All of this is of course ignored in the mythical tradition. It is thus common for the Maltese to contemplate with satisfaction the actual appearance of a Norman deliverer from Arab rule, an act that is played out in pageants dealing with the 'glorious history' of the Maltese islands. Malta's manipulation of the Count Roger tradition is founded primarily on the need to postulate a nineteenth century national revival, as well as the re-instatement of the Church: both statements are perfectly acceptable to the great majority of the people who would never dream of questioning their validity.⁵³

Some events of the Norman period, commonly referred to, clearly have a basis in fact and have been passed down the generations particularly during the early British period when Maltese intellectuals in search of the past did their utmost to revive forgotten national myths in order to dignify the rightful political claims of Malta. Maltese patriotic sentiments became more intense from the 1860s onwards when the

⁵⁰ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins*, p.15.

⁵¹ P. Connerton, *How Societies Remember*. (Cambridge, 1989), pp.13-15.

⁵² G. Wettinger, 'The Arabs in Malta', *Mid-Med Bank Ltd., Malta: Studies of its Heritage and History*. (Malta, 1986), pp.87-88, 91-92.

⁵³ See for example: *The Sunday Times (Malta)* 24 September 1989, pp.20-21. Also the Brincat/Wettinger debate about the survival of Christianity in Muslim Malta: *The Sunday Times (Malta)*, 11 February 1990, p.29; 18 February 1990, p.16; 18 March 1990, p.9; 8 April 1990, p.28.

British colonial administrators feared that the newly established Italian kingdom might inspire an irredentist view among the Maltese upper and middle classes that could instigate an Italian claim on Malta. In short from the 1860s the British rulers feared that Maltese loyalty to Britain might not survive the test given the existing choice of powerful masters. The new political climate induced the British to revise their policy on Malta resulting in the adoption of an extensive Anglicisation campaign and the exclusive dependence of the Maltese economy on Britain.⁵⁴

The Norman period seems to provide a case for a continued, often critical, commentary upon contemporary life and what has become acceptable by and large as the norm. Above all, this period evokes the origins of the Maltese as a separate ethnic community, thanks to the re-establishment of the Catholic faith, the setting up of a Maltese commune, and the survival of a Semitic dialect in a Latin Christian *entro-terra*. One might also add references to the foundation of the Cathedral as a bishop's see, emphasizing the revival of Christian values. In this way, the Norman past is linked up with the national culture of Maltese patriotism, with acts of heroism and concepts about the Maltese state.⁵⁵ The narrative recounts historical events, which are transfigured by myth, the contents of which deal with struggle, sacrifice and victory, suggesting that 'the narrative was more than a story told: it was a cult enacted... It did not only remind the participants of mythic events, but above all the rite was represented'.⁵⁶ According to the Maltese folklorist Joseph Cassar-Pullicino,

*The Maltese Christians have to be pictured as suffering under the Arabs... before they were liberated by the Count... Such a feat can only be accomplished after a desperate resistance by the Arabs, whom the Count fighting against great odds, succeeded in defeating, after which he was met by the Maltese Christians, whom he had liberated, and was given a reception, with palms and olive branches and songs of thanks giving, such as befitted only a hero... All benefits derived from the period of Norman rule were attributed to the Count.*⁵⁷

Many of the legends concerning Count Roger presuppose the survival of a considerable Christian segment under Muslim rule. The legend holds that Count Roger, having landed at Migra l-Ferba (on the west coast of Malta and not far from Mdina), was met by Maltese Christians and led in triumph to the town.⁵⁸ In effect, in the

⁵⁴ C. Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity*, pp.268-286.

⁵⁵ This view was propagated by Laferla, *Cenni storici sullo scudo e stendardo Maltese*, p.6, but it still holds ground among some educated Maltese. Two letters to the editor, one by Brincat and another by Mallia published on *The Sunday Times* (Malta), 18 March 1990, still upheld the view that Count Roger founded the Cathedral Church and 'donated' the colours of the Maltese flag.

⁵⁶ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, p.43.

⁵⁷ J. Cassar-Pullicino, 'Norman legends in Malta', in A.T. Luttrell (ed), *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*. (London, 1975), p.100.

account of Malaterra, Count Roger's chronicler points out that the Christians who went out to meet the Count were *captivi christiani*,

...whom Count Roger subsequently carried back to Sicily from where they departed to their homes.⁵⁹

Folk memories about the Norman rule are though revealing for a number of different reasons, notably because they are contrary to the existing evidence. According to the Maltese medievalist Godfrey Wettinger none of the documentation found for the island suggests any degree of hardship or servility to Arab overlords as some of the later informants vividly describe.⁶⁰ In this sense the legend refers to collective memory. By the sixteenth century the story had already become part of traditional lore widely known and accepted as a true account. It refers primarily to a traditional version about Count Roger's incursion as it has been collectively remembered and transmitted orally. At the same time a sixteenth century audience would have no difficulty in regarding the story as true, and would have treated the narration as correct.⁶¹ Maltese social memory of the sixteenth century recalled that Count Roger freed the Maltese Christians who were then suffering under the Arab yoke a theme that suited official propaganda at a time when Malta was engaged in constant combat with the Muslims. It was of no relevance that the twelfth century chroniclers, Gaufredus Malaterra and Alessandro de Teleso closer to the original invasion of 1091 recount that the Count liberated the enslaved 'Christians', who were not necessarily inhabitants of Malta.⁶² Above all, the medieval Church, as observed by the Russian medievalist Aron Gurevich, consistently expounded its doctrines and teachings in the form of stories, while the clergy maintained a vivid interest in heroic poetry and tales of chivalry.⁶³ Thus an Arab and Muslim past, based on misery and degradation, would have well suited the cultural orientation of the clergy who would then expound it to the laymen.⁶⁴ This may also suggest how a definite separate identity was first established. The legend of Count Roger as 'libera-

⁵⁹ Therefore it matters little to the mass of the Maltese that it was only after 1127, during the reign of King Roger II, that Christian domination was securely established over the Maltese islands. It seems that the king's name has been confused with that of his father, the hero Count Roger. Cassar-Pullicino, 'Norman legends in Malta', p.99. According to M. Buhagiar, "The Mígra l-Ferha story was first told in Giovanni Antonio Vassallo's history of Malta published in 1854. Its origins are unknown". G.A. Vassallo, *Storia di Malta* (Malta, 1854), p.64. See M. Buhagiar, 'The Norman conquest of Malta: History and mythology', pp.51-52.

⁶⁰ Quotation based on Malaterra in Cassar-Pullicino, 'Norman legends in Malta', 98.

⁶¹ Wettinger, 'The Arabs in Malta', pp.87-88, 91-92.

⁶² J. Fentress & C. Wickham, *Social Memory. New Perspectives on the Past*. (Oxford and Cambridge Mass., 1992), p.55.

⁶³ Cassar-Pullicino, 'Norman legends in Malta', pp.96-97.

⁶⁴ A. Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*. Eng. trans. (Cambridge, 1988), p.8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

tor' readily lent itself as a myth of origin. We have no firm evidence to confirm when this might have occurred, but it was surely well entrenched in Maltese social memory by the time the Ottoman Siege of 1565.⁶⁵

Maltese religion must definitely have been strengthened by a propaganda campaign that was fostered by the religious orders, who made deliberate use of a series of historical inventions. Many of these were established almost ineradicably in G.F. Abela's authoritative *Della descrizione di Malta* published in 1647.⁶⁶

One dubious tradition that surfaces in Abela concerns the place-name *Ghajjn Klieb* or (Dogs Fountain). Allegedly, it derived its name from the discovery and suppression of a supposed Muslim plot to regain control over the island, some decades after the Norman Conquest. Fortunately for the Christian community, a shepherd girl overheard the Muslims at their plottings and duly informed the Christian elders. On the appointed day, the Christians lay in ambush close to a fountain on the road leading to Bahrija in the limits of Rabat. As the Muslims approached the fountain, the Christians sprang upon them crying *Ghall-klieb!* (At the Dogs!) massacring a large number. The name *Ghajjn Klieb* has supposedly retained a memory of the skirmish.⁶⁷

Abela's 'invention of tradition' can be better appreciated, if reference is made to another feature of historiography, likewise intended to make the past justify the present. The instance in question regards the position of the Maltese Church since the Middle Ages. The Maltese bishopric had operated as suffragan of Palermo since at least 1170. A Cathedral Church dedicated to St. Paul has been functioning at Mdina since. By the fifteenth century, 'the Maltese Church took on the aspect of a regular Italian diocese', abiding by standard Latin practices. Sometime before 1436, Malta had become ecclesiastically divided into twelve parishes, including the Cathedral at Mdina, the parish at Birgu, as well as a matrix church in Gozo.⁶⁸

The insular Maltese Church was naturally affected by the arrival of the Knights Hospitallers in 1530. Malta was to enter the main currents of the Counter-Reformation with the advent of the Jesuits, the introduction of the Inquisition, and the arrival of the Apostolic Visitor Dusina in 1574, whose report revealed numerous irregularities in matters of discipline and ritual in Malta's ecclesiastical life.⁶⁹ The Church,

⁶⁵ Brincat basing himself on Al Himyari's account argues in favour of the possibility that Malta was deserted between 871-1049. The Sunday Times (Malta), dated 5 August 1990, pp.24-25. The argument put forward by Brincat has been questioned by Wettinger in *Ibid.*, 26 August 1990, p.23. Yet, in his poem entitled *Ad Patriam*, written on the eve of the Ottoman siege of 1565, Luca de Armenia points out to a continuous Christian past since the times of St Paul. See esp. C. Cassar, 'O Melita Infelix. A poem on the Great Siege written in 1565', *Melita Historica*, vol.viii (1981), pp. 153-154, and C. Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta*, pp.224, 289.

⁶⁶ Luttrell, 'The Christianization of Malta', p.417.

⁶⁷ Abela, *Della descrizione di Malta*, pp.80-81, 267; Cassar-Pullicino, 'Norman legends in Malta', pp.99.

⁶⁸ Luttrell, 'The Christianization of Malta', pp.415-416.

⁶⁹ G. Wettinger, 'Concubinage among the clergy of Malta and Gozo, 1420-1550', *Journal of the Faculty of Arts: The University of Malta*, vol.vi (1977), pp.164-184.

reformed along Tridentine lines, managed to win greater influence over the population, particularly after 1580. Thanks to the strengthening of the Inquisition, the Church was able to establish complete hegemony over Maltese society, a state of affairs barely disturbed in the centuries that followed.⁷⁰ Intense religious activity embodied popular attachment to myths and memories, as enshrined in symbols and religious values, that came to symbolize the communal self sacrifice of the Maltese. In such circumstances, apostates or relapsers, were seen as nothing short of traitors to the ethnic cause and its survival. Abela's thesis was therefore aimed to dispel any doubt on the continuity of Christianity during the Muslim occupation. Thus a great deal was made of Malta's attachment to Christianity from the days of the Apostle Paul.⁷¹ The advent of Count Roger was interpreted as representing the end of Muslim misrule over a liberated Christian population. Abela goes on to assign the introduction of the Gothic style in architecture to the Goths of the sixth century, a theory intended to lend support to the thesis of Christian continuity during the Muslim phase.⁷² But here Abela was only following a trend common among academics of the Italian sixteenth century and the French fashion of his times. P. Frankl shows that the prevalent French opinion in that century was hostile to Gothic architecture. Among others, the leading French architectural theorist Nicolas Francois Blondel (1617-1686) felt the need to proclaim his antipathy for the Gothic style. In the introduction to his volume on architecture, he wrote that classical architecture

*...remained buried for a span of thirteen centuries, allowing that an outrageous and insupportable fashion of building to reign in its stead, and of which our fathers long made use under the name of Gothic architecture, given to it by the Goths, its first authors.*⁷³

Here then, the theory of the barbaric origins of Gothic architecture crystallizes in the thesis alleging that the Goths themselves had already called it Gothic. Such a situation seems to have prevailed in England as well. In his report of 1666 on the state of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, Christopher Wren (1632-1723) proposed that the greater portion of the Gothic structure, then still standing, should be rebuilt 'after a good Roman manner', without following 'the Gothic rudeness of the old design'.⁷⁴ This view may seem more credible if one appreciates that during the period in question artistic developments in Italy also set the standard elsewhere in Europe, and an artist aiming to profit from the market was better off mastering Italian

⁷⁰ C. Cassar, 'The Reformation and sixteenth century Malta', *Melita Historica* – New Series, vol.x (1988), p.68.

⁷¹ Abela, *Della descrizione di Malta*, pp.221-242.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ P. Frankl, *The Gothic: Literary Sources and Interpretations Through Eight Centuries*. (New Jersey, 1960), p.341.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.362.

concepts and techniques. Though all of these arguments are recognizably fallacious, one cannot fail to appreciate Abela's preoccupation with presenting the right image of Malta's past. Abela's main aim was to interpret the past to suit a contemporary ideological need: conformity and integration into the Latin culture, as represented by the Order of St. John. One cannot help concluding that Abela undertook the task of writing the *Della descrizione*, impelled by the need to demonstrate that Maltese notables - the class to which he belonged - had the right cultural background to justify their claim to participate in the government of the island. By the 1640s, any remaining vestiges of power, to which the Maltese notables aspired to, had definitely become something of the past. Abela's claim to status and responsibility had to be argued by reference to the past. The antiquity and eminence of their history compensated for their lack of aristocratic standing, while the traditional loyalty towards the Hospitaller Order justified any trust placed in them. Through Count Roger's liberation of the island's Christians from Arab domination, Abela emphasizes the continuity of a Maltese state whose features remain identifiable precisely with the cultural values of seventeenth century Europe.⁷⁵

This last point is further stressed by a widespread and implanted belief that Count Roger had raised Malta to the rank of a small 'nation', by granting the town (*citta*) to the 'Maltese', then residing outside it, claiming also that in 1090 he also endowed the Maltese Church.⁷⁶ Therefore the Norman legends seek to idealize the religious character of the Maltese people. The arrangement was surely conditioned by their position on the frontier of Latin Christianity, in threatening proximity to Islamic North Africa.⁷⁷ Like all salvation religions, Christianity served as a repository of ethnic symbolisms and myths, as well as a bulwark of ethnic sentiments, values and memories. It has been convincingly argued that the ancient and medieval history of surviving ethnic communities and nations today is invariably a religious one, since religion furnished

*...the inspiration and forms of their communal experience, as well as their modes of self-understanding and renewal.*⁷⁸

Above all, religion helped to mediate the needs of the Maltese community, thus ensuring both the persistence of the religious traditions and their renewal through all the vicissitudes of history.

⁷⁵ Abela, *Della descrizione di Malta*, p.261.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pp.259. It was believed that at the time the Muslims lived within the fortified town of Mdina, whilst the Maltese lived outside the walls and in the rest of the island.

⁷⁷ Luttrell, 'The Christianization of Malta', p.418.

⁷⁸ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins*, p.121.

Warfare and the growth of Ethnic Awareness

The period Malta spent under the Knights Hospitallers of St. John is a theme constantly debated by the Maltese, and it is mostly focussed on the Order's incessant warfare against the Ottoman Turks and their Muslim allies in North Africa; at the centre of this interest, one invariably finds the crucial Siege of Malta of 1565. The siege experience had generated a sense of belonging and solidarity in the face of potent external enemies and dangers. Here, I will try to show how that resistance, and the interminable warfare that followed, induced the Maltese to think in new ways, giving rise to different experiences and new perceptions.⁷⁹ It is necessary to have a clear notion of what had occurred during that crucial event of Maltese history. The Maltese militia force, for the most part centred on Mdina, the civilian population largely within the fortified enclaves, together with the knights and foreign volunteers, found themselves all locked in one bond of solidarity against a common enemy, the Muslim Turkish invader.⁸⁰ The Maltese militia force, and especially its cavalry, often intervened conducting surprise forays from its base in Mdina at crucial moments. Most of its members were peasant villagers who, like Domenico Caniana, used to go

... with his mare fighting and skirmishing in the neighbourhood of the villages...

until his mare was shot from under him.⁸¹ The besieged Knight Hospitallers, and mixed civilian population of Maltese and others of foreign origin, had to play various roles in the war effort. The blacksmith Mastro Micheli Chilia,

*... during the siege plied his trade to turn out numerous picks and spades for the besieged inside St. Elmo, and afterwards for the Senglea bridge to which he contributed the major part of the nails without any compensation, apart from never failing to turn up during all the assaults under the Genoese Knight Malabaila, then his Captain.*⁸²

Again Antonina *la fornara*, widow of the late Francesco Perez, probably one of the community of foreign artisans who had settled in Birgu after 1530, declared that her

⁷⁹ Collard, 'Investigating "social memory" in a Greek context', in E. Tonkin, M. McDonald and M. Chapman (eds), *History and Ethnicity*. (London and New York, 1989), p.91.

⁸⁰ One could not underrate the generous contribution of foreign volunteers who risked their life, and often lost it, due to their idealism for the cause. Among those who survived, some asked for official attestations of their participation in the siege, presumably before leaving Malta. Between 24 September and 9 October 1565, the Judge of the Grand Master's law courts issued attestations that permit to assess the composition of this body of volunteers. Ten of these were Sicilian, three Neapolitan, two Greeks from Sicily, one Spaniard, and one Portuguese. NAM, MCC, A(cta) O(riginalia), vol.10 (1565), unpaginated.

⁸¹ NAM MCC C(edulae), S(upplicae et) T(axationes), vol.3 (1566-1568), fol.46.

⁸² *Ibid.*, fols.131v-132v.

*...eldest son had been sent to Fort St. Elmo at the time of the siege with a supply of arms... after my son had fought together with the others to the very end of the war, he was captured... by the Infidels, in whose power the unhappy prisoner still lies a miserable slave, together with the others who were found there alive.*⁸³

So there can be no doubt that the inhabitants and the new arrivals made this struggle their own and proved to be really valiant partners. It is likewise significant that not even a single Maltese is recorded to have crossed over to the enemy, at a time when relations between the government and the inhabitants had become painfully tense and strained.⁸⁴ This grave danger facing the community served to unite the Maltese with the Order against the forces of Islam and

*...this undoubtedly softened the first adverse reactions to the rule of the Knights. That is why Maltese folk-memory does not, on the whole, show the Order in an unfriendly light.*⁸⁵

Consequences of the Ottoman Siege of 1565

It comes as no surprise that the siege experience exerted profound effects on the Maltese inhabitants and its consequences remained imprinted in people's minds long after. Significantly, during the siege, nearly every family had lost at least one member who was either killed, or transported to Sicily, or at times enslaved as a direct result. The devastation to the crops and livestock meant that most country people found themselves in dire straits.⁸⁶ For this reason, a commission was appointed to reschedule claims of debts and rents due, that most country people found themselves unable to meet.⁸⁷ The fortified walls of Birgu and Senglea, as well as the buildings inside them, had been the objects of the heaviest concentrated bombardment known at the time. The villages, most of all those of the populous south, particularly those nearest to Birgu, had been repeatedly pillaged, while the hamlets and their churches vandalized.⁸⁸ Political repression prior to the Siege had also altered

⁸³ Ibid., fol.245.

⁸⁴ D. Cutajar and C. Cassar, 'Malta and the sixteenth century struggle for the Mediterranean', Mid-Med Bank Report and Accounts. (Malta, 1985), p.42.

⁸⁵ Cassar-Pullicino, 'The Order of St John in Maltese folk memory', Scientia, vol. xv (1949), p. 150.

⁸⁶ Pietro Bonello of Tarxien lost four salme of barley MCC CST vol.3, fol.44; Blasio Bonnichì of Luqa declared that he '...lost all his animals together with those of his father'. Ibid., fol. 184.

⁸⁷ Ibid., fol.184.

⁸⁸ Declared during the Chapter General of 12 February 1566; NLM A(rchives of the) O(rder of) M(alta) vol.299, fols.111-112; A(rchepiscopal) A(rchives of) M(alta) Visitatio Balaguer (1646) vol.xv, fol.152, refers to the scraping of paintings by the Ottoman invaders during the siege of 1565.

the balance of political power.⁸⁹ Authority lay in the hands of the Grand Master and the Order of St. John, who virtually exercised complete control of Malta at the expense of the Università (Town Council) run by local notables. This lamentable state of affairs had come about in part on account of the upheavals brought about by the siege. Whole communities had to be evacuated to either the Harbour enclave or Mdina. Indeed, when initially news arrived that the Ottoman Armada had cast anchor off Mgarr, the country-folk jumped to the conclusion that the Ottoman objective was Mdina. The result was a concerted move towards the fortified Harbour enclave centred upon Birgu. The inhabitants of Mdina were terrorized at the terrible prospect that seemed to stare them in the face. At this stage, the Università despatched an envoy to La Valette, selecting for this delicate job the notable Luca de Armenia.⁹⁰ La Valette, always a master of the situation in moments of crises, was able to assure de Armenia that the Order did not contemplate any evacuation of Mdina. He urged the inhabitants and refugees in the old city to do their duty as good vassals and promised to send some militia regiments to the old town.⁹¹ Thus among other things, the Siege of 1565 had wrought a traumatic break in the physical continuity of village life. Apart from the hardships the villagers had to go through as refugees, their removal from the village brought in its wake a variety of dire consequences.

In the aftermath of this traumatic experience, social relationships assumed new socio-cultural dimensions, often of political significance, eventually giving rise to the emergence of Maltese authors like Salvatore Imbroli (1580-1650), later elected Prior of St. John's Conventual Church, and Carlo Michallef (?-1669) who wrote about the history of the Order in Malta, giving the establishment view of the events.⁹² But there were others, like Don Filippo Borg, clearly critical of the Order's usurpation at the local, parochial level.⁹³ Don Filippo's *relazione* on the Order's government has a palpable hostile tone. He elicited the fact that, in the course of the sixteenth century, the medieval office of *contestabili*, exercised by the village representatives in the Mdina council, had lost much of its importance, being deprived of every 'shred' of 'political' initiative they once held in matters of taxation, *angara*, food distribution, the keeping of law and order. Though they still had to be property owners and could not be ordained, they were really the Grand Master's appointees through

⁸⁹ Political repression emerges in the conflict between Grand Master La Valette and Joseph Callus. See in Maltese G. Wettinger, 'L'attitudni tal-Maltin lejn il-Kavallieri', pp.7-14; S. Fiorini, 'X'nafu dwar Callus?', pp.15-54; and C. Cassar, 'La Valette bl-assedju riesaq', pp.55-62 in E. Bartolo (ed), *Min Kien Callus?*, (Malta, 2003).

⁹⁰ Bosio, *Dell'istoria della Sacra Religione*, pp.515-516.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² G. Mangion, 'La letteratura barocca a Malta', *Journal of the Faculty of Arts: The Royal University of Malta*, vol.iv (1971), p.269.

⁹³ G. Wettinger, 'Early Maltese popular attitudes to the government of the Order of St John', *Melita Historica*, vol.vi (1974), p.257.

his militia captains.⁹⁴ In other words, they were reduced to puppets in the Grand Master's hands. The only personage in the village invested with any political or social importance, comparable to that of parish priest, was the militia captain.⁹⁵ Borg's *relazione* reveals how the power of the medieval *contestabili* had declined, so that the onus of representing the village fell increasingly on the parish priest, politically and socially challenged for that role by the knight serving as captain of the local militia company.⁹⁶

Thus the whole articulation of the village in relation to the state acquired different dimensions, redefining the roles of both consensus and resistance. The siege itself is remembered in the *relazione* as a time of communal resistance and heroic deeds, but it is also recalled as a time when a certain amount of self-government did exist, and a council of local notables was elected.⁹⁷ But political propaganda encouraged by the state glorified the exploits of the Knights, and particularly La Valette, as the protagonists of the siege. The aim clearly was to justify and strengthen the Order's strategic position on the island and to ensure that the loss of their own fellow people were interpreted as sacrifices to a higher cause. Patriotic resistance became identified with the religious motive and the struggle against the Muslim inevitably assumed the nature of a Holy War.⁹⁸ This 'ideal' motive was still strong in the eighteenth century, when a protracted crusade against the Moslem 'infidel', enemy of both the Maltese and the Order, could unite the people and the Order in a common aim.⁹⁹ Agius De Soldanis gives a valuable insight of this feeling in one of the dialogues he prepared for the revised manuscript version of his *Della lingua punica* (1750), entitled *Nuova scuola della lingua punica*. It records the dialogue held between two ladies of rank, whom he describes as *puliti* (well-bred), and refers to the fear of an Ottoman invasion in 1760. One of the ladies is made to say:

*Ma nistax nemmen li jigu.
Stambur wisq bghid minn Malta.
Is-salib beiiieghi.
Qatt ma ghamlu l-prova meta haduha maghna.*¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.260-265.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.270.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.268.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.271-278.

⁹⁸ P. Cassar, 'Psychological and medical aspects of the siege of 1565', *Melita Historica*, vol.i (1954), p.133.

⁹⁹ Cutajar and Cassar, 'Malta and the sixteenth century', p.42.

¹⁰⁰ 'I could never believe that they (the Turks) will come. Istanbul is too far away from Malta. The Cross (the Order) frightens them. They never managed to win against us'. NLM vol.144 fol.195; Cassar-Pullicino, 'Id-djalogi ta De Soldanis', *Il-Malti* (1947), p.122.

But it is above all, the myths of war set down in epics, dramas, hymns or even children's games, coupled with contemporary accounts, which possess a long term influence to shape ethnic consciousness across generations. Some age-old traditions still linger on from this period. Thus for example, the celebration of Carnival is ushered in by the *parata* on the morning of Carnival Saturday, an old sword dance, which supposedly commemorates the Maltese victory over the Ottoman Turks in 1565. It consists of companies of young men or boys dressed up as knights, clad in black robes with an eight pointed cross on the front, and as 'Turks', wearing gay coloured ribbons and tarboosh, and armed with wooden swords. Under the Order of St. John, the *parata* was taken very seriously and the Maltese eagerly awaited its performance because the ruling norm was 'No *parata* no Carnival'.¹⁰¹ The deadly animosity of the Maltese for the Turks has likewise survived in children's rhymes and games. In 1948, J. Cassar-Pullicino found that in some Maltese villages children still sung the following rhyme:

<i>Dghajsa galjotta</i>	A boat like a galliot
<i>Dghajsa xambekkin;</i>	A boat like a xebec;
<i>It-Torok kanalja</i>	The Turks are wicked
<i>L-Insara qaddisin.</i>	The Christians are saints. ¹⁰²

Another popular game called *Malta Taghna* (literally Our Malta) is practically a re-enactment of the siege. In this game, two groups of children represent the 'Turks' and the Maltese respectively. The Maltese play out the defensive role with the 'Turks' trying to dislodge them.¹⁰³ The survival of such games suggests that the prolonged persistence of anti-Muslim warfare mentality helped to mould a sufficient sense of common ethnicity to allow the community to absorb the effects of a political setback,¹⁰⁴ while continuing to recall the memory of their victory in the siege as a dear day of remembrance. They came to identify with a type of dichotomy: the 'Turks' meaning Muslims, in their majority North Africans; the Maltese meaning Christians and defenders of the Christian faith. Therefore in order to maintain continuity, Maltese society learnt to qualify itself, and so preserve an enduring identity that memory and folk beliefs differentiated from the state.

The siege came to represent a very crucial episode in a complex of memories that contributed towards the creation of a Maltese identity, both in fact and in concept. Little did it matter for subsequent generations that their sixteenth century an-

¹⁰¹ J. Cassar-Pullicino, *Studies in Maltese Folklore*. (Malta, 1976), p.22.

¹⁰² J. Cassar-Pullicino, 'Pirates and Turks in Maltese tradition', *Scientia* vol.xiv, (1948), p.186.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.187.

¹⁰⁴ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins*, p.40.

cestors had panicked at the sight of the Ottoman Armada over the horizon on that fateful day of 18 May 1565.¹⁰⁵ The autocratic and despotic manner with which La Valette governed the Maltese was likewise conveniently forgotten.¹⁰⁶ By the nineteenth century, La Valette came to symbolize the golden age of Malta, and embodied the allegedly real qualities of the Maltese community, which modern complexities have obscured and tainted.¹⁰⁷

This may perhaps explain why the Maltese nationalists, like Enrico Mizzi, were so keen to celebrate the *Otto Settembre* (the day marking the victory over the Turks in 1565) as Malta's national day.¹⁰⁸ The 8 September was proclaimed Malta's national day on the initiative of Fortunato Mizzi in 1885.¹⁰⁹ After the attainment of self-government, under the first responsible national administration, a commemorative monument was inaugurated in the very centre of Valletta on 8 August 1927. Indeed, the monument reflects what 'Victory' signified for the Maltese under British colonial rule. The Maltese are depicted as protectors of Christianity and European civilization.¹¹⁰ By emphasizing the role of Malta in a siege fought for the defence of Europe, the Maltese were actually claiming for themselves a European past. In short the Maltese elites managed to produce visions of the past, which however populist, were those of the traditional intellectual class dominated either directly by the clerical establishment, or by those with a clerical education. They produced these visions primarily for their own consumption but, from the dawn of the seventeenth century, they managed to pass them on successfully to the rest of the population.

The Implications of Maltese Identity

So, one can well argue that the figures of St. Paul, Count Roger and La Valette came to feature as protagonists in the legitimacy doctrine of Malta from the seventeenth century onwards. As far as their historical relationship is concerned, the Apostle's name is associated with the christianisation of the island; Count Roger is credited with the expulsion of the Muslim Infidels and the return of Christian rule; while La Valette is related to the crucial defence of this Christian territory from the Muslim Ottoman Turks. In short, all three personages represent the virtues of one's ancestors interpreted from the perspective of a Catholic Counter-Reformation social background.¹¹¹ The figure of St. Paul is a symbol from 'below', that is, it represents basic popular expression. On the other hand, Count Roger and later La Valette, came to

¹⁰⁵ See note 91 above.

¹⁰⁶ Wettinger, 'Early Maltese popular attitudes', pp.266-268, 274-277; Cutajar and Cassar, 'Malta and the sixteenth century', pp. 35,51.

¹⁰⁷ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins*, p.196.

¹⁰⁸ E. Mizzi, *Per il VIII settembre 1565: Lampi e fremiti di vita nuova*. (Malta, 1908), pp.7-8, 19-20.

¹⁰⁹ H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience*. (Malta, 1979), p.31.

¹¹⁰ H. Ganado, *Rajt Malta Tinbidel*, vol.i (Malta, 1974), p. 359.

¹¹¹ J. Bossy, *Christianity in the West: 1400-1700*: (Oxford, 1985), chap.5.

represent ethnic pride and national revival respectively; the first originated from the Maltese commune's own sense of distinct identity; the latter from the state, or rather, the government of the Order itself.¹¹²

Finally, while geography may set limits to certain ways of life and encourages a particular mode of production and patterns of settlement, a national identity and character are more directly influenced by collective perceptions encoded in the myths and symbols of the community. Each generation inherits the myths and symbols of previous generations, whose value lies in their ability

*...to create bonds and generate a 'society' in the past, through the mythical and emotional union of kin groups sharing a common 'history and destiny'.*¹¹³

One may argue that the essence of Maltese ethnic awareness was enhanced and actually transformed into a 'national' cause during the short spell of French occupation (1798-1800), culminating in an insurrection against the French administration, and particularly throughout the British colonial period that followed. The Maltese encounter with these two Big Powers, and their highly sophisticated civilizations, compelled some Maltese to treat first the French republicans and later the British imperialists as reference points and possible models to follow. It should be remembered that the British had originally made fruitless attempts to introduce forms of Anglican Protestantism among the Maltese. However the British administrators, appreciating Malta's strategic position in the central Mediterranean, soon realized that in order to retain the confidence of the people, they had to concede the freedom of local religious practices. Thus protection of the Catholic Church in Malta, and co-operation with its hierarchy, formed the basis upon which the British modelled church-state relations until their departure in 1964.

Finally the apparent deference of the Maltese towards the British seems to have been accompanied by a widely held belief that they were morally superior. In short they shared a general feeling of 'religious' superiority that they may have come to apply as a form of moral self-defence. In the end, local modes of behaviour came to differentiate the ethnic Maltese from outsiders. In their attempts to glorify their past the Maltese made intense use of their traditional heroes who thus came to serve as 'border guards' of the ethnic community. One may argue that other politically dominated communities share a similar tenacity to their traditional beliefs as that held by the Maltese for their Catholic faith.

Thus for nations to endure, they must not only be founded upon ethnic cores, but they must also include a living past based on myths, symbols and values. This explains why successive generations of intellectuals in Malta, as elsewhere, are often drawn

¹¹² The themes are particularly popular among the Maltese as can be seen in the frequent printing of stamps commemorating the three events, in particular St Paul's conversion of the Maltese printed for the first time in 1889. See: J.B. Catalogue of Maltese Stamps, 8 edn. (Malta, 1991).

¹¹³ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins*, p.207.

back to reconstructions of the past, which does not cease to exert a strong fascination and often provides an antidote to their avid professionalism.¹¹⁴ The images they recreate become the unconscious assumptions of later generations. Thus many modern Maltese carry around with them a 'taken for granted' background to their sense of collective identity, with such assumptions as that about the uninterrupted practice of Christianity in Malta since the times of St. Paul's shipwreck, and their fervid attachment to the faith. Even more important are the actual myths attached to those heroes who, at one point in time, helped to shape the nation, locate its borders, and chart its destiny.

It is myths that help to describe an historical identity which, together with the accompanying symbols, provide obsolete compensations for much feared social changes. Continuously worked on, with new episodes added to every story, together with every comment on it, confirms the existence of the community and its members in a continuous cycle of self-reliance. The historian Eric Hobsbawm makes a concrete observation when he argues that 'communitarian' myths are perpetuated and traditions invented ensuring that the portrayers become at the same time the portrayed.¹¹⁵ Hobsbawm's argument gains strength if one considers that history must preserve the collective tale of a people, while myths and memories need to be constantly renewed, and continually retold, in order to ensure the survival of the community. The ethnic group therefore emerges from the constant renewal and retelling of a set of values that are often passed from one generation to the next in the form of tales and myths.

In the case of Malta, the common cultural values shared by the Maltese proved both potent and vital. Their cultural impact was so strong that they were determinant in forging a Maltese cultural identity and in turn made it easier for the Maltese to communicate among themselves. These values, represented largely by the omnipresent Catholic reality, had by the sixteenth century, become synonymous with being ethnically Maltese.¹¹⁶ One may argue that religion succeeded in creating a cultural homogeneity which was shared as a way of life, as well as a belief system, by all Maltese during a phase in their history when the ethnic Maltese, notably those living in the Harbour towns, had to share their socio-economic and cultural values with a large foreign and mixed community - free and slave; Christian and Muslim; Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. In other words the Maltese Catholic reality marked off the locals from outsiders. These outsiders lacked empathy with Malta's national symbols and myths, and for them Maltese ethnic values, that were predominantly seeped in the island's Catholic heritage, conveyed no such meaning.

¹¹⁴ M. Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills (eds), (London, 1947), p.176; E. Kedourie, 'Introduction', E. Kedouries (ed), *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*. (London, 1971), esp.pp.31-48; Smith, *The Ethnic Revival*, p.100.

¹¹⁵ E. Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: inventing traditions', E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*. (Cambridge, 1983), pp.1-14.

¹¹⁶ NAM MCC CST vol.2 (1565-1566) last folio; Cassar '*O Melita Infelix*. A poem on the Great Siege written in 1565', pp.149-155; Cutajar and Cassar, 'Malta and the sixteenth century', p.39; Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta*, p.289.

THE CULTURAL ROOTS OF MALTESE IDENTITY. CHRISTIAN MYTHS AND SOCIAL MEMORY IN A MEDITERRANEAN FRONTIERS SOCIETY

КУЛТУРНИТЕ КОРЕНИ МАЛТИЙСКАТА ИДЕНТИЧНОСТ. ХРИСТИЯНСКИ МИТОВЕ В ЕДНО СРЕДИЗЕМНОМОРСКО ГРАНИЧНО ОБЩЕСТВО

Кармел Касар

РЕЗЮМЕ

Какво е било, може да се пита, Малтийското общество, неговата култура и идентичност, еволюирали в критичните векове след Отоманската обсада на Малта през 1565 г.? Дали те са резултат от драматичния успех на Рицарите Носпиталиери на Св. Йоан в управлението на Малтийската държава, много по-ефективно, отколкото това на техните предшественици, проявяващо се във венчико чрез тясно съдействие между държава и общество? Религията изиграва решителна роля във формирането на малтийския етнос и малтийското самосъзнание през вековете. След Трентския Събор (1564 г.) отделните пластове на населението развиват дълбока обвързаност с идеологията на католическата църква. Малта става действителна ефективна теокрация, ръководена от три отделни църковни юрисдикции: Великите Майстори на Ордена на Св. Йоан, епископа на Малтийската диоцеза и Инквизиторите на Свещения престол, всичките три утвърдени от папата като техен върховен глава. Представата за “турците”, от друга страна, е за брутална и варварска орда, жестока по природа и нямаща страх от нищо. Като резултат от това всички прослойки от обществото се консолидират, а църковните приходи служат за поддържане на обществото. Християнските свещеници са също и учители, изпълнявайки и други дейности, съвместими с тяхната духовническа роля и същевременно служат като постоянна връзка между църковния клир и външния свят. Подстепенно духовенството на практика обвързва местните традиции и обичаи, общите символи, празници, церемонии и митове с добре познатия стил на живот и кодекс на християнството. По този начин помага да се запазят и поддържат общите чувства за членовете на общността. Създадената народна култура заедно със старите костюми и традиции помага да запази голямото историческо минало чрез взаимопроникване на религиозните стойности с етническото самосъзнание. Във време на голяма религиозна нетърпимост, когато Малта служи като база за защита на Европа срещу исляма, е естествено малтийците да се идентифицират като един Орден, който служи на великите добродетели на рицарството, смелостта и иабожността. В действителност малтийците гледат на Ордена на Св. Йоан не само като на защитник срещу мюсюлманските нашественици, но също и като на герой от тяхното християнско минало. От своя страна хоспиталиерите окуражават тези стойности, чрез които се заздравяват позициите им в Малта. Накратко, след

отоманската обсада през 1565 г. малтийците се идентифицират с Ордена на Св. Йоан и това продължава много след като Наполеон Бонапарт експулсира Ордена от Малта през 1798 г. Наистина, в дългосрочна перспектива, обсадата, комбинирана с вярата в устойчивостта на християнството, наложило се от две хилядолетия, се проявят като катализатор в непредвидени случаи на крайна необходимост за малтийската национално съзнание през XIX и XX в.

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