

Clothes, status and class in Malta under the Order of St John

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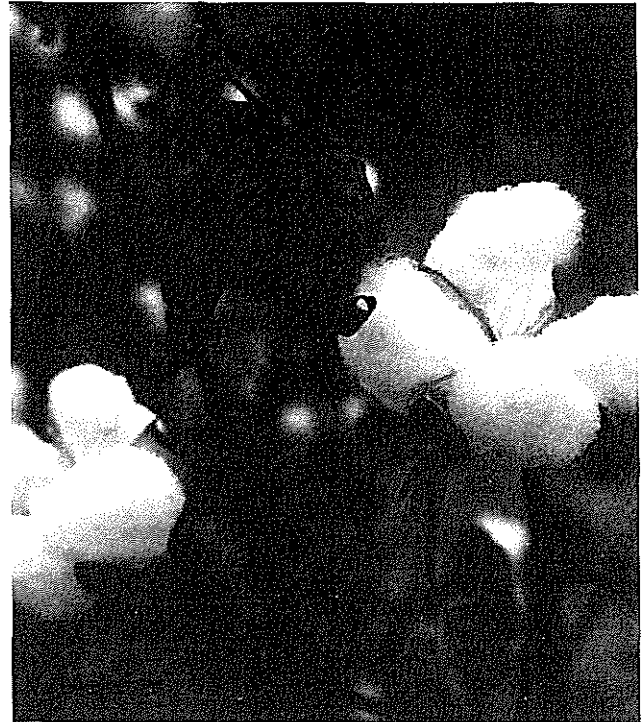
Between the early sixteenth and the end of the eighteenth centuries the Maltese islands were administered by the Military and Hospitaller Order of St John. The Order's rule brought to the Maltese population law, order, security, and prosperity. It also brought about a new boost of activities and great demographic growth which continued to rise throughout the period of that rule.

The shift from a peasant and domestic mode of production to one based on commerce, and the rapid expansion of trade, together with the growth of market opportunities, economic dislocations by market forces, and a new form of dependent labour, such as employment with the Order of St John, must have left their indelible mark on traditional peasant society. Nonetheless crude homespun appears to have been the everyday working garb for the majority of Maltese inhabitants, and was normally produced from the least expensive of local resources namely wool, and more importantly, cotton.

Few people today realize that irrespective of whether they were rich or poor, most people owned only a few garments and thus tended to wear the same clothing items all the time to the extent that it was normal for witnesses in criminal investigations to describe culprits by their clothing. It was thought that identification would hold because most had few garments to spare and these were hardly ever changed.

Class distinctions

Despite the ignorance of fashion and very poor clothing, the women of the lower classes valued their trousseau which undoubtedly formed an essential part of their dowry. The differences between male and female clothing at the time served to emphasize gender roles.



The cotton plant - an important raw material used in the making of textiles

In 1576 Nicolò de Nicolai remarked that there were a multitude of Greek, Italian, Spanish, Moorish and Maltese prostitutes in the Harbour enclave.¹ He commented on the minimal amount of clothing worn by these women who wore only a long white shirt tied beneath their breasts and covered their shoulders with a long fine white woollen cloak called *barnuco* by the Moors.² For Nicolai these women seemed scarcely clad and blamed the hot climate for these practices. Overall, gender prescribed for women less bare flesh than for men. But prostitutes were obviously rated differently from 'honest' women. Yet the Frenchman Pierre D'Avity, who never visited Malta, but is often accredited for the most detailed descriptions on Maltese clothing, confirms that "...at home they [Maltese women] wear only a shirt, but when they go outside, they wear an under-vest, a *faldetta*, and a cloak."³

Since cloth had such an important value, its production loomed large in Malta's economy. Most women were directly involved in the production of cloth in all its stages. They combed, spun and wove. Spinning was an everyday activity for women. One such woman was Betta Caloiro, a notorious witch, who declared that in her youth she had visions of a

- 1 The harbour enclave of Malta consisted of the city of Valletta, and the three towns of Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua. In the late seventeenth century Floriana was developed as a suburb of Valletta and occupied the outer walls of the city.
- 2 De Nicolai's comment is interesting because it shows that Maltese legislation on prostitutes followed closely the legislation of most Italian states. Restriction to defined areas and distinctive dress were obligatory for prostitutes in Italian cities. N. De Nicolai, *Le navigazioni et viaggi nella Turchia di Nicolò de Nicolai del Delfinato...* (Antwerp, 1576), 35.
- 3 P. D'Avity, *Description générale de l'Afrique, seconde partie du monde*, vol. iii (i) (Paris, 1637), 536.



A Maltese peasant woman in her everyday attire
– a drawing by Francesco Zimelli (1748-1803)

young devil called *farfarello*.⁴ Despite her decrepit old age – at the time she was summoned to depose in front of the Inquisition tribunal Betta was over eighty – she gave a vivid account of the way the little devil *farfarello* was dressed.⁵ Betta explained that in her excitement she called a neighbour and was surprised to discover her in the company of a *fato* (fairy), who resembled a lad, and was weaving for her. She was even more surprised to learn that the *fato* had woven over sixty *canne* (lengths) of linen within the short span

of eight days.⁶ But for Betta this was not particularly extraordinary. She recalled that an acquaintance of hers – one Ginaina from Zebbug who lived before the Ottoman Siege of Malta of 1565 – had become rich thanks to the enormous support of a group of *fati* who helped her produce large amounts of linen. Ginaina was reputed to be so rich that she had difficulty to find space were to hide her rich savings.⁷

Betta's case confirms that spinning was an everyday activity for women. The distaff and spindle often featured as traditional symbols of the virtuous, diligent wife. Girls spun to prepare their trousseau, women spun for the family. But the evidence suggests that spinning and weaving were believed to be a good source of income. Hence although for many women life revolved around the needs to be mothers and wives, which meant that they had the responsibility to bear children, cook, clean, sew and mend the clothes,⁸ they were also outsourced to weave and spin for a fee.

The trousseau

Clothes were, at least until the eighteenth century, carefully handed down from mother to daughter and formed an important part of the dowry. It was of course the dowry that tangled the threads of a woman's fate. In principle, the dowered goods that a wife brought to her husband were attached to her for life. They had the double function of providing for the expenses of the household and, when the household dissolved on the husband's death, of providing for the surviving wife.⁹

Women however were not passive recipients of the exchange of goods. They were as Marilyn Strathern has remarked, heavily involved in the 'genderizing of valuables'.¹⁰ They endowed themselves and were endowed by the womenfolk of their family of origin with trousseaux (clothes, linen, lacework, etc). These goods defined women as brides and as daughters above

4 *Farfarello* can more easily be associated with a brownie, or perhaps an elf, than with the devil as perceived in modern culture. The late nineteenth century Sicilian ethnographer Giuseppe Pitrè points out, that in popular belief, devils were looked upon essentially as tricksters who caused trouble. In Sicily *Farfareddu* – or *farfarello* as referred to by Dante Alighieri in the *Divine Comedy* (Hell, cantos 21 & 22) – is a nocturnal devil that disturbs the minds and hearts of men. Yet the demon can only disturb people who were baptized incompletely, that is to say, those who had some words omitted from the ritual or were baptized without the use of oil or salt. G. Pitrè, *Usi e costumi, credenze e pregiudizi del popolo siciliano*, vol. iv (Florence, 1949), 74.

5 *Farfarello* appeared in the shape of a "six year old boy", dressed in clothes of several colours, that often visited her at night. A[rchives of the] I[nquisition of] M[alta], Crim[inial Proceedings], vol.19B case 46, ff. 477a-477a'. Cf. C. Cassar, *Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition. A Study of Cultural Values in Early modern Malta* (Malta, 1996), 19.

6 AIM Crim., vol.19B case 46, ff.494'-95 (25.vi.1601). One *canna* is 2.064 metres long. Sixty *canne* make a total of 123.84 metres of cloth.

7 One morning Betta went to ask her for fire and noticed that Ginaina had already prepared the table. The table was covered with a clean white table-cloth, with bread, salt, honey and a knife. Betta wondered why Ginaina had prepared her lunch so early. On asking her next door neighbour, a woman called Xellusa, Betta was told that Ginaina prepared a meal for the *fati* who helped her produce so much linen. According to Betta, Ginaina was so attached to her wealth that during the siege of 1565 she left beleaguered Birgu to recover her goods at Zebbug where she lived, and was captured by the Turks. No one knew of her whereabouts since then. AIM Crim., vol.19B, case 46, f.490-91: 15 October, 1600. Cf. Cassar, 21.

8 N. Castan, 'The public and the private', in R. Chartier (ed.), *A History of Private Life* (English trans. Cambridge Mass. & London, 1989), 407.

9 C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, family and ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago, 1985), 121.

10 M. Strathern, 'Subject or Object? Women and Circulation of Valuables in Highland New Guinea', in R. Hirschon (ed.), *Women and Property – Women as Property* (London 1984), 166.

all else. Trousseaux essentially established relations of support and solidarity among women. It also “enabled women as individuals to give a specific expression to their femininity, distinguished them collectively from men, and enabled them to assume their roles as brides, wives, and mothers, within the differentiating bond of marriage.”¹¹ Furthermore, as clothes and linen were costly items in their own right, trousseau was considered a substantial source of wealth in a material sense. However, the sale of these items was vigorously resisted perhaps due to their symbolic associations and they were often passed from one generation of women to the next.

Linen and better quality cloth appears to have been a particularly valuable and highly prized asset which marked out the family standing. Signorina Clara, daughter of the Hon. Simon Simonis and Signora Maria of Valletta, hailed from a relatively well-off family. She received a reasonable number of movable goods from her parents including: 35 *scudi* in cash; six new gowns; two pairs of sheets; three pillow covers; two towels; a wooden four-poster bed, a woollen mattress and a straw cover; a pair of silk-embroidered cloth cushions; two woollen-stuffed cushion pillows; a satin blanket of various colours; a blue printed valance; a table-cloth and six napkins; two *faldettas* (hooded cloaks – one made out of blue damask and the other of striped green satin); two coats; a new veil; four pictures; a beech chest, a table and four small chairs; a second-hand *faldetta*; a short grey coat and a new *dobbano* (skirt?).¹² On the other hand Catharina Griscti of Casal Bisbut was given a *faldetta*, a *gippone*, and a new cloak, and other items which were still in the process of being made. Among other items it was stipulated that she was to receive a weaving loom.¹³ Domenica Dalli, described the items given to her by her mother Theresa as dowry – a pair of bed sheets, five female shirts, and a bedspread as *roba di povera gente* (poor people’s goods). She was even promised thirty *scudi*.¹⁴ Primarily, women looked at their trousseau as a form of subsistence that could be retained, and was meant to be transmitted to their own daughters at marriage.¹⁵ Clothing and cloth items accompanied brides of all social classes at marriage and in the case of Catharina Griscti even a weaving loom is singled out. The same notarial deed specifies that more cloth was in the process of being produced. This may suggest



A woman of Malta, as featured in the book *Les navigations pereginations et voyages* by Nicolas de Nicolay (1517-1583)

that it was most unlikely for brides to produce all their clothing through their own labour, and assistance was probably received from other female kin. Among the wealthy who endowed brides with larger amounts of clothing and cloth items, like Signorina Clara Simonis, it is likely that clothing was commissioned in part from women of lower status. Wealthy brides received more numerous, higher quality, and more varied goods than rural brides. Clothes, together with jewellery represented and embodied a considerable portion of the value of a bride’s dowry and tied women’s identities to the trousseau.

Trousseaux represented and embodied the productive use of time by wives and daughters. In exploring the role of textiles as trousseaux in Western Sicily, Jane Schneider has come to the conclusion that the

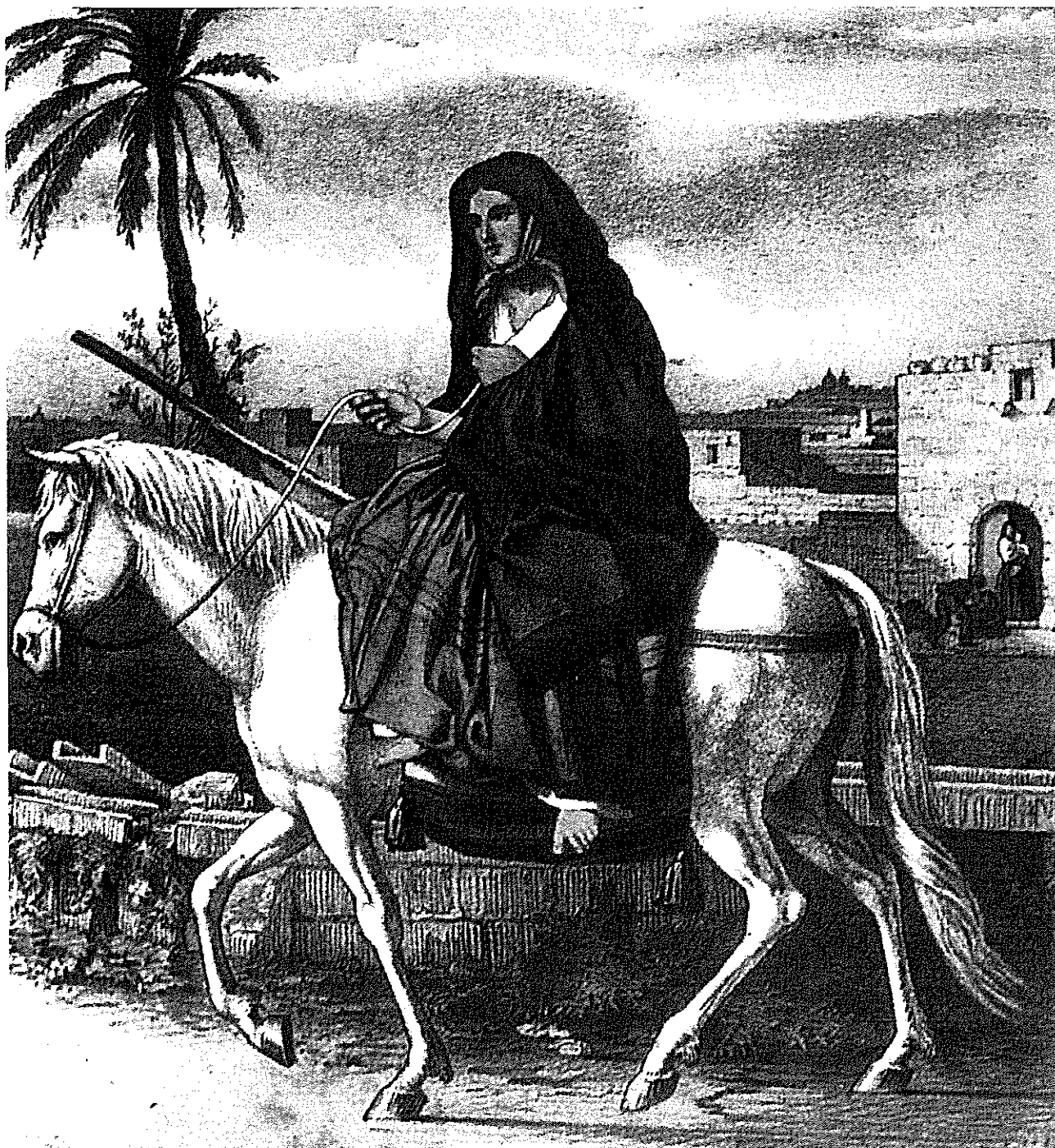
11 P. Sant Cassia & C. Bada, *The Making of the Modern Greek Family. Marriage and Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Athens* (Cambridge, 1992), 99.

12 N[otarial] A[rchives] V[alletta], Acts of Notary Tommaso Agius 28/521 (27.iii.1664).

13 NAV, Acts of Michele Attard 39/540 (12.vii.1671).

14 M[agna] C[uria] C[astellania] A[cta] O[riginalia], vol. 620, f.110 (6.ii.1702).

15 Klapisch-Zuber, 121.



A peasant women wearing a faldetta on her way to work in the fields –
a drawing by the Maltese artist Michele Bellanti (1803-1883)

production of textiles by women in their homes was linked to sexual restraint and therefore encouraged by Christianity.¹⁶ Women were expected to be modest, chaste, and had to guard against vanity. By concentrating on the production of their trousseau, girls were closely monitored and controlled by other women of the household. A comment by Joanne Lopes, a Spaniard from Sardinia, strengthens the view that

sexual honour was the most coveted possession for a woman. Lopes asserted: “I have learned that if one dishonoured a woman by lifting up her clothes and skirt it would not suffice to pay her the sum of one hundred scudi.”¹⁷ In short a woman had to avoid as much as possible attracting the admiration of the opposite sex as this would lead to the brink of dishonour. A woman’s reputation was best preserved by staying at home and

16 J. Schneider, ‘Trousseau as Treasure: Some Contradictions of Late Nineteenth Century Change in Sicily’, in E.B. Ross (ed.), *Beyond the Myths of Culture. Essays in Cultural Materialism* (London, 1980), 338.

17 AIM Crim., vol. 21A case 175, f.444 (27.v.1603).



A scene from 18th century Malta depicting two women and a girl from the wealthier classes with a Maltese dog looking on – from the book *Ancient and Modern Malta* by Louis de Boisgelin

leaving it only when properly accompanied. In order to defend his neighbour Maria, and assert her honesty, Orazio Frendo declared that Maria was an honest woman because he often saw her weaving linen and washing clothes.¹⁸ Indeed some women had no option but to accept humble, though honest, jobs like that of washerwomen. Petronilla Ricci, an elderly woman, and her two daughters, a widow and a spinster, had to work as washerwomen in order to survive.¹⁹ Angelica Calabrese defended her reputation by stating that the previous Saturday she did not leave her home but had spent the day washing and drying her clothes.²⁰ Laundry services were important in an age when baths were very infrequently taken and clean linen was deemed necessary for the respectable and the affluent. One powerful knight, the Commendatore Fra Villa, brought Antonina la Chianchio of Modica to Malta as part of his entourage to serve as washerwoman. Nonetheless Antonina even served the Prior Grand Cross of Naples.²¹

Concluding remarks

On a general level clothes distinguished the rich from the poor. One of the negative comments passed by the early seventeenth century Italian painter Giovanni Baglione on his great contemporary Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was that in his early days the great artist was poorly dressed – *pessimamente vestito*. This comment was meant to emphasize Caravaggio's poverty, and presumably inferiority of status.²² However poverty of dress implied that great value was attached to clothes, so much so that clothes were some of the most coveted of possessions. For the poorer classes, particularly the womenfolk, expensive and refined clothing seem to have formed part of a great unattainable dream. Detailed descriptions of clothes worn by little devils, whom they saw in their dreams and alleged 'apparitions', may indicate an intense wish, among women of all ages, to wear beautiful and expensive clothes. Some women seemed to believe

18 MCC AO, vol. 623, f.168 (8.x.1702).

19 MCC Suprema Appellationis Curia, vol.392, f.15 (5viii.1700).

20 AIM Crim., vol. 17, case 162, f.441 (29.viii.1600).

21 AIM Crim., vol. 14A, case 11, f. 326 (9. i. 1596).

22 G. Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori scultori et architetti. Dal pontificato di Gregorio XIII fino a tutto quello d'Urbano VIII* (Rome, 1649), 136.



A country woman working in the fields –
in typical rural attire complete with hat for
protection from the sun –
from an engraving by G. Muir (c. 1840)

that through intensive spinning and weaving they could grow wealthy, as the story of Ginaina discussed above may imply. However women involved in gainful activity had very few opportunities to improve their lot. Details from marriage contracts indicate that the trousseau of poor girls, a main requisite for marriage by girls from all social classes, hardly ever included goods of much value besides the usual bed sheets, towels, and specific clothing items. In a particular way, among the forms of social place that clothing announced, gender evidently stood out most of all.

Early Modern Currency in Malta

6 dinari	=	1 grano
5 grani	=	1 cinquina
2 cinquine	=	1 carlino (or 10 grani)
2 carlini	=	1 tarì (or 20 grani)
12 tarì	=	1 scudo
30 tarì	=	1 oncia (ounce or 2 ½ scudi)

The author

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