

THE JEWS, CATHOLIC POLICY, AND THE KNIGHTS OF ST JOHN IN MALTA

CARMEL CASSAR
University of Malta

In early modern times Malta served as a place of transition between Christendom and the Muslim world. It was a Catholic frontier society under the crusading Knights of St John. The Jews that lived in Malta at the time were few in number and, like the much larger community of Muslims, they were mostly captured slaves. Jews, in particular, were closely watched by the Malta Inquisition Tribunal, which in turn, made great efforts to clarify the boundaries between Christianity, Islam and Judaism particularly because clear parameters made the identification of transgressors easier. A standard feature that emerges from the Inquisition records is the large-scale hostility of Christians against the Jews. As a result Jews were often exposed to unjust charges of corrupting, insulting or otherwise threatening the progress of the Catholic faith. This meant that Jews were often investigated and, at times, prosecuted by the Holy Office.

Information on the Jews living in Malta throughout the period of the Order of St John is very sketchy. The Jews that reached Malta during the long rule of the Order between the 16th and 18th centuries arrived mainly as slaves. The number was usually very small but it is difficult to work out the precise number of Jewish slaves residing in Malta at any time from 1530 to 1798. The few free Jews that arrived in Malta, especially in the 18th century, researched the Island as a port of call for specific transactions. Their stay was often brief and they had vested interests to stay out of trouble, with the result that references to their activities are often casual. One can only evaluate the way Jews were treated in Malta after gaining a proper understanding of the way Jews were perceived and treated in other parts of Christian Europe.

Christian Perceptions: The Jews in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

Kenneth Stow (1992) has argued that medievalists generally hold the view that Jews were treated well in Latin Europe since the times of Louis the Pious (c.826) and that conditions only deteriorated from the eleventh century, especially the thirteenth, when Jews were increasingly and ruthlessly repressed, taxed, and later expelled. It was in this period, it is often argued, that Jews began to be accused of deicide (the Killing of Christ), an idea which spread widely and inflamed passions, fanned directly, or indirectly, by the ecclesiastical authorities. But Stow questions whether there really was such a clear deterioration in the treatment of Jews and that this resulted from pressure directly exerted by the Church authorities. Rather

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it was held that in spite of their errors and beliefs, the Jews could be converted to Christianity. In essence therefore, Stow argues that the Church as an institution was not the driving force towards drastic measures against the European Jewry, despite the fact that some elements of the clergy held extremely negative views of the Jews. Church policy insisted on the achievement of stability through the imposition of series of regulations that changed little over the Middle Ages. Nonetheless this ecclesiastical ideal was often subverted by actual clerical behavior at the grassroots level that often resulted in a severe persecution of the Jews. (Stow 1992: 3–5).

In Europe, Jews were treated as social and civic inferiors. However the imposition of distinctive dress and other restrictions on Jewish minorities in Christian Europe were introduced several centuries after they had been introduced in the Islamic World. A study by Nicholas Vincent (1997), examines two papal letters written in 1221 and 1229 and sent to two archbishops of Canterbury, on the wearing of the Jewish badge. These letters provide insightful information on the spread of distinctive dress in early thirteenth century Christendom. Thus for example provision 68 of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which had insisted that both Jews, and Saracens (Muslims) should wear special clothing that would distinguish them from Christians. Sometimes non-Christians were made to grow beards as part of a distinctive dress code. In the thirteenth century the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II imposed the wearing of a beard by Jews in the Kingdom of Sicily, and a similar decree ordering Jews to grow long hair and beards was decreed in Castile in 1412.

Vincent's study shows that by 1221 Pope Honorius III ordered Archbishop Stephen Langton to enforce the distinction in Jewish dress mainly as a precaution 'against the miscegenation between Jews and Christian women'. The second letter of 1229 was written by Pope Gregory IX to Richard, Archbishop of Canterbury, in response to a complaint from William of Blois, Bishop of Worcester, in which the Archbishop was accused of ignoring the imposition of the statute of the Lateran Council. It seems that Jews not only ignored the order to wear badges, but they even continued to employ Christian servants in their households, whose service had likewise been forbidden by the Council of 1215. Indeed the ban on the employment of Christian servants dated back to the Third Lateran Council of 1179. Vincent opines that what really emerges from the two letters is that in the eight years between 1221 and 1229, the papacy had come to a much clearer understanding of precisely what dress-code should be applied to distinguish Christians from Jews (1997: 209).¹

It seems that at the time of the first letter (1221), the dress code was rather vague no clear indication is given about the way Jews should distinguish themselves in their dress, whereas the second letter of 1229 clearly specifies the wearing of badges (Vincent 1997: 210). In the centuries before the Fourth Lateran Council, the Church had discouraged any contact between Christians and Jews, believing that contact would pollute Christians and should therefore be restricted as much as possible. What was previously discouraged had become an imposition. The new standards were increasingly enforced by the early modern period, particularly from the 16th century onwards.

Prior to the first two crusades, outbursts of persecution of Jews had been rare and sporadic (Cohen 1994: 36). Encouraged by the popular fervor of the first Crusade, Jews of the Rhineland, and adjacent regions, found themselves under attack. The terrible tradition of fanatical brutality against the Jews in medieval Europe is attributed to Emico, Count of Leiningen who in 1096, during the first Crusade, massacred the Jews in the Rhineland towns, although Heer suggests that such violent attacks and expulsions were common place elsewhere (1962: 306).

By the 12th century one witnesses an appalling development in outbreaks of hysterical violence against Jewish communities in the Latin West. We can take examples from several cities and periods. Violent outbreaks against the Jews in London and York led to mass murders in both cities in 1189. In 1290 the Jews were expelled from England by Edward I, Duke of Aquitaine and King of England and it was only in 1655, under the Commonwealth of Oliver Cromwell, that they were readmitted (Hoyt and Chodorow 1976: 492). Jews were likewise expelled from France in 1306, while Lithuania expelled its Jews in 1395.

Thus starting from the end of the 13th century, the marginal position of the Jews was accentuated, and the massacres that followed induced them to segregate themselves from the larger Christian community. The Jewish quarters that rose throughout Europe were originally favoured by the Jews themselves who saw them as a way to ward off hostile incursions (Moore 1992).

Perhaps the worst massacres of Jews came in the wake of the Black Death of 1348, originating in the south of France, where Jews were blamed for the spread of the epidemic. As a result, the Jewish quarter of Toulon was invaded on the night of Palm Sunday of 1348 when forty people were massacred in their sleep and houses plundered. The plague was already raging in the city when the massacre took place there. The events of Toulon were soon repeated elsewhere, when a series of attacks against Jews accompanied by plunder of property took place in nearby Hyères, and further north in towns like Riez, Digne, Manosque and Forcalquier. But the climax was reached on 16 May when all the Jews in the village of La Baume were exterminated with the exception of one, Dayas Quinoni who happened to be away at Avignon (Shatzmiller 1974: 469–472; Crémaux 1930: 33–72; Ginzburg 1990: 63, 81). A day later, anti-Jewish violence erupted in Barcelona, when the funeral of a plague victim was transformed into a massacre of Jews. Similar incidents occurred in other parts of Catalonia (Lopes de Meneses 1959: 92–131, 322–364; Ginzburg 1990: 63, 81).

The spread of the accusations against Jews coincided with the spread of the plague. By June 1348 the association of the Jews with the Black Death had reached the Dauphiné and by February of the following year similar accusations were being levelled against the Jews of Strasbourg. Soon persecutions of Jews spread along the Rhine and into central and eastern Germany where terrible massacres or burnings at the stake became commonplace (Ginzburg 1990: 67–68). Many Jewish communities were massacred in the aftermath of the Black Death, perhaps reaching a climax with the surge of intolerance and excessive violence among the populace of Castile that led to the massacre of Sephardic Jews in 1391.

The situation worsened after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 when the fanaticism generated by the crusading fervour reached an unprecedented peak. This was the age of the Spanish *reconquista*, directed against the Muslims of al-Andalus, which stirred an intense and countervailing spirit of *jihad* in the Islamic world.²

As a result, in 1477 Andalusian and North African Muslims sent a delegation to the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II (the Conqueror) to solicit his aid and protection. After the fall of Granada in 1492, the North African Muslims redoubled their efforts to secure Ottoman protection. Halil Inalcik however, is of the opinion that in the Ottoman perception:

Spain was a major antagonist and the Ottomans made little distinction between the plight of the Andalusian Muslims and that of the Jews when both communities were threatened by Spain and both appealed for Ottoman aid and protection (2002: 4).

In the following decades the plight of the Jews in most Christian states worsened. It was then believed that the political unity of Spain should be accompanied by religious unity. In 1478

the ‘Catholic Monarchs’, Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile, established the Spanish Inquisition, which replaced the Medieval Inquisition that was under papal control. But it was only after the capitulation of Granada in January 1492 that the Catholic sovereigns of Spain displayed a bitter sort of intolerance towards the Jews. The ‘official’ persecution of Jews revamped old hatreds and led to the decree of 1492 by virtue of which Jews were given the choice of conversion or expulsion. To root out Jewish practices and ground the Jews in their inferior place, Ferdinand and Isabella founded the Supreme Council of the Spanish Inquisition, which placed all inhabitants of the united kingdom of Spain, and not just Jews, in constant fear of being accused of heresy (Kamen: 1997: 13–43). This was accompanied by genealogical discriminations based on purity of blood. Religion and descent became the two intertwined features of Christian anti-Jewish and anti-*converso* apologetics in Spain and elsewhere.

By the late 15th century the situation for the Jews in Spain had become critical. There is evidence of the stoning of Jews in Spain in which even clerics participated and soon copied elsewhere.³ Even Jews who had converted to Christianity continued to carry the stigma of their Jewish origin and intolerance towards them remained very high in the 16th century.⁴ These sentiments were not limited to Spain, and there is evidence that by the early 16th century non-Spaniards began to accept these views to the extent that in 1517 Erasmus of Rotterdam commented that ‘Spain is not pleasing because it is full of Jews’ (Nirenberg 2002: 35). When Erasmus wrote this, the number of crypto-Jews in Spain was fast diminishing, and the Jews were a despised community, at the mercy of the Spanish Church. Miriam Bodian (2002) argues that the Spanish Inquisition and the Spanish monarchy had grown much stronger, prestigious and powerful after the union of Aragon and Castile. By the early 16th century, crypto-Jews could find no sympathetic audience in Spain; they lacked any vital sources of ideological inspiration and furthermore had little hope of any improvement in their condition through any kind of action.⁵ The situation was so critical that many had no other option but to leave the Iberian Peninsula. Under pressure from Spain, Portugal followed the example and forced its Jewish subjects to convert.

In reality, the persecution of the Jews was not restricted to Spain itself, but rather the order for their expulsion was extended to all lands belonging to the new Kingdom of Spain. This explains why Jews were driven out of Sicily and Malta in 1493. That same year there was an influx of Sicilian Jews to mainland Italy, although the Jews were later expelled from Naples in 1541, from Tuscany in 1571, and from Milan in 1597 (Poliakov 1965: 67–108).

Some, and they were few in number, went to the south of France. Around 1568–1570 they were driven out of Provence to be received in the Duchy of Savoy. The expulsion of Jews in the 16th century, including from Provence, is discussed at some length by the Italian Jewish chronicler and physician Joseph Ha Cohen in his book *Emek Habakha* [*Emeq Ha-Bakha*] or *la Vallée des Pleurs* (*Vale of Tears*). The book was translated into several European languages.⁶ In the English version of 1971 H.S. May translates it thus:

‘The inhabitants of the towns in the Provence were also forced to leave their domiciles and go to different places. Many went on ships of the sea to the Levant and went their way; whilst others travelled away to settle down in the cities of Savoy near where they had been. And, because God had pity on them, they made a new covenant with the Christians...’ (Ha-Cohen 1971: 103; Ha-Cohen 1881: 127).

Jews were likewise few in Languedoc, and by the turn of the 16th century, numbered only about 500 in Avignon, then under papal control.⁷

But the helpless situation of the Sephardim meant that many sought refuge in the non-Spanish lands of Italy. The arrival of the Jews in the Italian states had great repercussions on the local populations. Jewish merchants fanned out all over Italy and Leon Poliakov's study (1965) has shown that soon they were controlling the lower levels of usury and ousting their rivals from commerce.

Gradually the Jews who escaped from forced conversion in Spain were faced with new restrictions that began to be imposed on the Jews in all the states of the Italian peninsula. In 1516, the Republic of Venice had already established a designated quarter as a ghetto for the Jews of the city (Stow 1977; Roth 1946: 329–353; Ravid 1987: 222–228). Soon after his election to the papacy in 1555 Pope Paul IV (1555–1559) issued the papal decree *Cum nimis absurdum* in which he called for the confinement of the Jews. This decree appealed to basic 'Christian' theology in its reasoning.

'It is absurd and utterly unacceptable 'the decree stressed' that the Jews, who due to their own guilt were condemned by God to eternal slavery, can, with the excuse of being protected by Christian love and thus tolerated living in our midst, show such ingratitude toward the Christians' (Kertzer 1997: 14).

Ingratitude was connected to the fact that the Jews were accused of having crucified Christ. The Jews were not allowed to mingle with the Christians and were, from then onwards, confined to ghettos. Paul IV had indeed established one ghetto within the city of Rome and successive popes enforced a number of strict regulations on the freedom of Jews within the Papal States and throughout the rest of Italy. Economic rivalry with some Jews, especially over money-lending, probably encouraged anti-Jewish sentiments. In 1572 Pope Pius V (1566–1572), who was particularly against Jewish lending, set up the *Monte di Pietà*—a sort of communal bank offering cheap loans for the poor. The *Monte di Pietà* proved useful when he needed cash for his own government expenditure and helped to undermine money-lending—a major Jewish source of income (ASR Bandi, Busta 5, no.31. Bull dated 17 December 1572).

In 1569, during the rule of Pius V, all Jews were expelled from the cities, towns and villages of Papal States—irrespective of whether they had been recent migrants from the Iberian Peninsula or had long been established there—and were forced to resettle in the two great communities of Rome and Ancona. In Rome, Jews lived a cramped existence, but in Ancona they prospered. By the early years of the 17th century Livorno became the most prosperous Jewish community in Italy thanks to its revival under the Medici (Braudel and Romano 1951: 26–27).

The Catholic Church's attitude towards Jewish life can best be appreciated by comparing regulations issued by Pope Sixtus V (1585–1590) with those of Pope Clement VIII (1592–1605). Both popes insisted on canon law requiring Jews to carry a distinguishing mark; but whereas Sixtus did not object to contacts between members of the two faiths, Clement seemed determined to prevent them. In 1586, Sixtus allowed Jews to work and live throughout the Papal States and to associate freely with Christians; he permitted them to open new synagogues and to follow their own laws. He even licensed Jewish physicians to treat Christian patients, a practice that had been prohibited by Pope Paul IV more than 30 years earlier.⁸ But on 17 August 1592, Pope Clement VIII issued an edict in which he prohibited a wide range of activities which had previously brought Jews and Christians together: no Christian could enter a Jewish shop, house or synagogue; no Jew was to visit a Christian prostitute, talk to any Christian after midnight, or eat, with a Christian at any time. Jews were not to teach, employ

or serve Christians, or use their physicians, midwives or tutors. Christians were not to borrow money from Jews. Clement's edict brought social relations between Christians and Jews almost to a halt (ASR Camerale II, Ebrei, Busta 3, 54–57; Milano 1964: 82–84).

Jews in Malta

Two studies, published by Carmelo Trasselli in 1954 and 1956 respectively, estimated the Jewish population of Sicily, including those of Malta, Gozo and Pantelleria, at the time of the expulsion to consist of about 19,000 to 20,000 souls. Trasselli sticks to the assumption that the expulsion of 1492 led to a serious depopulation. Basing himself on Trasselli's analysis, Godfrey Wettinger estimates that the Jewish community of Malta and Gozo may have numbered some 500 persons that work out at some 3% of the total population of Malta. The number of Jews of Mdina alone in the 15th century was between one-fourth and one-third of all the inhabitants living in Mdina, making it the only large non-Christian community in Malta. Nonetheless he opines that the claim that the expulsion would cause a serious depopulation in Malta, Gozo and Pantelleria 'must have been greatly exaggerated' (Wettinger 1985: 8–9). Whatever the case may be, according to Wettinger '[...] In spite of numerous postponements, the departure of the Jews was far too sudden for a complete straightening out in time of all their affairs' (Wettinger 1985: 121). Thus Wettinger concludes: 'Certainly it took long for the problem to be solved completely and for the medieval Jews of Malta and Gozo to fade entirely from public notice' (Wettinger 1985: 123).

The absence of Jews from the Maltese scene lasted until the advent of the Order of St John in 1530. However the juridical status of Jews in the early modern period was radically different from that of the 15th century. Most of the Jews that one encounters during the early modern period were captive slaves who had fallen victim to the depredations of the knights and other Christian corsairs.

Malta then served primarily as a frontier between Christianity and Islam. Jews, often thought to be sympathetic to the Ottoman cause, were normally labelled as potential traitors of the Catholic faith, and indeed of Western Christianity. As a result, it would have been hard for Jews to settle permanently in a crusaders' haven like Malta. The Jews that reached Malta in the 16th and 17th centuries were therefore either travellers or rootless men and women. They were not born in Malta and ranged in status from 'international merchants' to slaves. They brought with them the cultural values of the area where they originally hailed from. These included the Marranos, immigrants from the Iberian peninsula of Jewish blood who lived, at least outwardly, as Catholics. There were also Jews from Italy and the Levant, some of whom had turned Christian and then apostatised, and others, who remained firmly entrenched in their Jewish beliefs.

The earliest reference to a party of Jews visiting Malta dates to 1561. These Jews had left the island of Djerba in Tunisia, sought temporary refuge, and obtained a *salva-condotto* to carry out trade between Malta and Djerba. This is the earliest known instance of Jews allowed to return to Malta and conduct legitimate trade ever since their expulsion in 1492.⁹ Nevertheless, that was before the introduction of the restrictions imposed on Jews by the late 16th century Grand Masters of Malta.

Jews, Catholic Policy and the Order of St John

The provisions of medieval canon law were designed to distinguish Jews from Christians, and to reduce regular contacts between them. Jews were therefore supposed to wear distinctive

dress, and to stay indoors on Good Friday. Christians were forbidden to take employment with them as servants, and no new synagogues were to be built in Christian territories. Some governments enforced these provisions. Thus, until the mid-16th century, Catholic Church policy toward the Jews showed a certain restraint. Jews were permitted to practice their rituals and to have their synagogues, for they were a people who had played a special role in God's work on earth, and their continued existence bore testimony to that historic role. Yet it was thought that the day would ultimately come when the Jewish people would see the true way, embrace God's Church, and in this way help to usher in the Second coming of Christ. This attitude, however, changed dramatically with the election of Paul IV to the throne of St Peter in 1555. Jews were now consigned to ghettos, and their conversion was no longer something to wait passively for but had to be vigorously pursued (Stow 1977).

At this stage, it is appropriate to say a few words about the Order of St John, which ruled Malta between 1530 and 1798. As a religious order, the Knights of Malta had a peculiar inner constitution, its top echelons being open to any male Christian European of aristocratic origins. The Order therefore treated with contempt anyone who had non-Christian blood in his/her ancestry. Racial segregation against those of non-Christian origin, particularly Jews, was much older than the advent of the Order in Malta. We learn that from very early on, the Statutes of the Order barred Christian nobles of Jewish ancestry from joining. By the times of Grand Master La Sengle (1553–1557), the habit was denied to any descendent of Jews. Under Grand Master Verdalle (1582–1595) it was stipulated that there could never be an exception to this rule (Statuti 1676: 11; Bonello 2002: 147). The prohibition against those of Jewish descent from joining the Order was very strict and went to extraordinary lengths.¹⁰ As a result, descendants of Jews continued to be habitually forbidden from joining the Order, and the rule became even more stringent in the Code of 1782 during the reign of Grand Master De Rohan (Codice 1784: 41). Thus, only a few years before the drawing of the Declaration of Human Rights, a French Grand Master approved a decree perpetuating racial discrimination.

However the real situation, in 1789 was somewhat different from the official, legal version. Indeed matters were already changing drastically in the early decades of the 18th century as the case of the Jewish merchant Samuel Farfara suggests. In 1729 when Farfara was summoned before Inquisitor Fabrizio Serbelloni (1728–1730) for questioning, he declared that he had been residing in Malta as a businessman for five years and during all those years no one spoke to him of a residence permit, nor was he ever ordered to wear a distinctive badge. In order to regularise his position, Mgr Serbelloni issued Farfara a licence, but obliged him to wear a symbol in his cap. Serbelloni remarked that Jews normally reached Malta as slaves and as such they were kept in the *bagno*, the slaves' prison, together with the Muslim slaves. Unlike most Jews, Samuel Farfara arrived in Malta to engage in business and could stay wherever he pleased. Not only that, Farfara even ended up as a guest of Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena (1722–1736) and even kept the key to a room he had at the Grand Master's Palace! In the end, Grand Master Vilhena agreed that Farfara should conform, but only after he was ordered to do so by the Inquisitor (AIM Corr 94, 226–227: 12 February, 1729).

The Enemy within

Official archival evidence varies in its relation to the Jews so that the attitude towards them seems to have been rather ambivalent. Sometimes the Order appeared willing to tolerate,

sometimes even sympathize with the Jews, at other times it reacted harshly to the presence of Jews in their territories. While still in Rhodes in 1501, during the rule of Cardinal Grand Master Pierre d'Aubusson, the Jews were expelled from that island on the assumption that in case of hostilities with the Ottoman Turks, they could constitute a fifth column. D'Aubusson's reasoning seems based on fear and survival rather than persecution. Thus, in the same decree with which the Grand Master expelled the Jews, he favoured the Rhodioties by allowing them to join as members of the Order (Seaward 1995: 255). In his chronicle, Giacomo Bosio, justified d'Aubusson's fears and put forward as an example the Rhodes-based Jewish convert and physician, Giovanni Battista, caught spying in Rhodes for the Grand Turk in 1521.¹¹

Giacomo Bosio presents the vague assumption made in 1521 as a fact, and repeated it once again on the occasion of the Ottoman Siege of Malta in 1565. He asserts that the Levantine Jews had paid a large part of the expenses for the Ottoman armada directed against Malta. In effect it might probably be more precise to say that the Jews lent money for the expedition, in as much as they lent money to Christians for their trade, as Shylock is portrayed to have done in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*.

However, Bosio could well understand the indirect involvement of the Levantine Jews towards an Ottoman Armada directed against Malta. The Jews were evidently eager to free themselves from the continuous threat posed by the corsairing activities of the Knights of Malta who often, after capturing Jewish passengers, carried them away into slavery.¹² They were also presumably less persecuted in Ottoman lands where they could practice their faith and economic activities without hindrance. The reason put forward by Bosio justified the Knights' sense of frustration and fear of Mediterranean Jews. In a later chapter of his *Istoria*, Bosio again felt the need to remind his readers that the Jews had spontaneously paid large sums of money for the enterprise.¹³ The Order of St John was evidently very ill disposed towards the Jews, a state of fact that no doubt generated a lot of malevolence by Jews against the Order. It is no wonder that in a subsequent passage of his detailed account of the Ottoman Siege, Bosio expressed great surprise that two recently converted Jews to Christianity were among those who had volunteered to help to re-enforce the exhausted garrison in the defence of the besieged fort St Elmo.¹⁴

Irrespective of whether Bosio's assumptions were real or imagined, it must definitely have helped to ensure that the Order would look at the Jews, not simply with suspicion, but also with great antagonism—a state of affairs that seems to have survived from their days in Rhodes. In fact, Stanford J. Shaw points out that Rhodes only fell when on 20 December 1522 Ottoman agents among the Jews and Muslim women enslaved by the Knights enabled the Sultan's forces to break in and force an ultimate surrender (1976: 88). Ernle Bradford 1972 refers to the incident of a Jewish spy—a neophyte physician caught sending secret messages to the Ottomans—in the early days of the Order's rule in Malta. We are told that at some point, the neophyte was caught red-handed and Grand Master L'Isle Adam ordered him to be tortured and later hanged and quartered (Bradford 1991: 112, 116). If the involvement of the Jews in the fall of Rhodes was the case, as suggested by Shaw, then the knights were forewarned not to permit such a situation to repeat itself in Malta.

The deep rooted fear and enmity of the Jews for the Knights of St John is perhaps best expressed in the *Emek Habakha* or *la Vallée des Pleurs* (*Vale of Tears*) written by the 16th century Italian Jewish chronicler and physician Joseph Ha Cohen cited earlier. It is quoted by Cecil Roth who in turn refers to a study by Gedaliah bin Jahia who states that in '1549 there were said to be as many as seventy Jewish slaves on the island at one time' (1931: 215). Roth quotes the text that he himself translated into English:

In the year 5312 (1552), the vessels of the monks of Rhodes, who are in Malta, cruising to find booty, encountered a boat from Salonica [Thessaloniki] whereon were about seventy Jews. They captured it, and returned to their island. The unhappy victims had to send to all quarters to collect money for the ransom of their souls exacted by the miserable monks. Only after payment were they suffered to continue their voyage (Ha Cohen 1881: 172; Roth 1931: 214–215).

In cases of treason, Jews normally figured as prime suspects and this may explain their rough treatment. In 1558, only a few years before the Ottoman Siege of Malta, the recently elected Grand Master de Valette set up a commission to inquire into the activities of the Greek Joanne de Laurentio de Lango suspected of carrying a letter addressed to Constantinople (NLM AOM, vol. 90, fol. 18v: 30 May, 1558). Some days later three Jews—Samuel Magnon and Moysse Abdelif from Jerusalem, and Samuel Cafsut of Monastir (Tunisia)—were accused of acting as spies for de Lango and condemned to death (NLM AOM, vol. 90, fol. 19: 9 June, 1558).

Fear that the Jews may constitute a fifth column remained high even in the years following the Ottoman Siege of 1565. In June 1569, two knights—Fra Prospero Pignon and Fra Nicolao de Miré—were appointed to prepare a census of all ‘infidels’ living in Malta whether these were slaves or freemen. Non-Christian freemen, or more precisely Jews, had to be checked for any sort of offensive or defensive weapons. If any such arms were discovered, these had to be confiscated and the matter had to be reported directly to the Grand Master (NLM AOM vol. 92, fols. 157v–158: 29 June, 1569). Yet despite widespread fears and official strict controls over the activities of Jews, the Order’s government continued to issue safe-conducts to Jews on their way to the Levant. A decree published in September 1569 specified that all Jews travelling to the Levant and passing through Malta were issued with safe-conducts in order to ensure that they would have a safe journey without being obstructed or impeded by corsair vessels flying the Order’s flag. The decree was meant to assist the Jews recently expelled from the papal city of Avignon in Provence.¹⁵

Much different orders were issued during the rule of Grand Master La Cassiere (1572–1581). A mere week after his election to the grandmastership—which took place on 30 January 1572—La Cassiere ordered the expulsion of all the Jews residing in Malta. The rule stipulated that any Jewish male that ignored the order was to be sent to row on the galleys. Women and children were to be sent to work on the public works without wages, and would only receive food rations normally allotted to slaves.¹⁶

Under Grand Master Hugh Loubenx de Verdalle (1582–1595) Jews were allowed to live in Malta as long as they wore a distinguishing sign. As a result, Jews of both sexes had to carry a piece of yellow square cloth in their cap, or head dress, of the size of four fingers. The rule specified that transgressors were to be flogged in the public square (NLM Libr. ms. 704, fol. 102v).

Joseph Ha Cohen rightly claims that life in Malta was made particularly difficult for the Jews from the mid-16th century onwards. It was a time when the Knights of St John, and other Christian corsairs, considered it legitimate to swoop on all sorts of cargo vessels that plied the Mediterranean and that might be remotely suspected of being in the service of the Ottomans, or of carrying merchandise belonging to Jews. Any Jews captured on board vessels were reduced to slavery. On the whole therefore, the Jews who reached Malta during the late 16th and the 17th centuries were, in their majority, slaves whose main preoccupation was to secure ransom and return safely to their home country. At first ransom arrangements were informal and *ad hoc*. The Jews of Italy and North Africa were normally informed on the latest developments, and organised the fund-raising drive to pay for freeing the slaves. Thus for

example, in 1585 an old Jew arrived in Malta to negotiate the ransom of four Jews (AIM Crim. 8, fol. 43v: 8 May 1585). But in the 1640s the Venice *hevrah* [Jewish Ransom Society] appointed its own agent in Malta who became known as the *procuratore degli ebrei* and was at times considered as the Jews' agent. Thus the redemption of Jews was formally recognised. The move may have been an attempt by the Jews to contain the levels of ransom. Some very high prices are recorded for the early 17th century, which certainly proves that the political pressure, applied by the Jews of Venice and Rome to secure the release of captives, was rather limited (Benayhu 1966: 69).

In time the Jewish community of Livorno grew rapidly in wealth and importance and began to provide more funds, although Venice retained control of the organisation for the redemption of Jewish slaves for a long time (Roth 1931: 222). There is reference to a man named Baccio Bandinelli who served as agent of the Jewish Society between 1648 and 1666 or thereabouts when Bandinelli was made to retire for reasons of old age (Benayhu 1966: 70).

The French merchant François Garsin, who served as judge of the *Consolato del Mare*, took up the post of consul and was sometimes involved in the ransoming of slaves in the late 17th century. The community even had as its spokesman a Moroccan Jew R. Moshe Azulai who had had some education (Benayhu 1966: 70, 71–72). In a letter addressed to its agent in Malta in 1661, the Society for the Redemption of Captives made a reference to books for the synagogue of the slaves, while Cecil Roth refers to the presence of a Scroll of the Mosaic Law, a mantle, lamps and even a pulpit within the synagogue (Roth 1931: 234; Ljubibratic 2013: 727–728).

During his visit to Malta in the late 17th century, the English traveller, Philip Skippon noticed that 'The Jews are distinguished from the rest by a little piece of yellow cloth on their hats or caps, etc.' (Skippon 1732: 621). Skippon, who visited Malta in 1663, dwelt at some length on the treatment of state slaves and gives a detailed architectural account of the *bagno* of Valletta where slaves were obliged to lodge and where they were permitted to carry out various trades. During that time, the total number of slaves amounted to about 2,000—mostly Muslim—who belonged to the Order, but some 300 of them served as domestic personnel to private individuals. He explains that since Malta is an island from where it is difficult to escape, slaves 'wear only an iron ring or foot-lock'. Those in private domestic service reside in their masters' homes but usually sleep in the *bagno* at night. Skippon records:

[...] We saw a rich Jew who was taken about a year before, who was sold in the market that morning we visited the prison for 400 scudi; and supposing himself free, by reason of a passport he had from Venice, he struck the merchant that bought him; whereupon he was presently sent hither, his beard and hair shaven off, a great chain clapp'd on his legs, and bastnado' d with 50 blows. (Skippon 1732: 621).

Despite restrictions and harsh treatment, archival references, particularly in the quarantine records of the late 17th century, confirm that Jews had never really ceased to travel to Malta as free men. However, their traditional good relations with the Ottoman Turks continued to generate a lot of suspicion and contempt of Jews among members of the Order of St John, and the inhabitants of Malta. Nonetheless, the members of other vassal communities of the Ottoman Turk shared a similar treatment. Thus the law codes imposed a curfew not just on Jews, or the Muslim slaves resident in Malta, but even on Maronite Christians and Orthodox Greeks. In short, anyone considered vassal of the Grand Turk was deemed his potential ally. This, *ipso facto*, seems to have helped transform all the vassals of the Grand Turk into enemies of the crusading Order of St John.

Amongst other prohibitions, the code specified that neither the Jews, nor other ‘potential’ enemies, were allowed to go on board a boat without the presence of its owner; nor were they allowed to venture near any artillery, nor other military equipment; nor even loitering in the proximity of fortifications. Punishments inflicted on those ‘aliens’ who disobeyed were harsh, ranging from the payment of a hefty fine, a public scourging, or even a ten-year sentence on the galleys (Codice De Rohan 1784: 256). Until the end of their rule in Malta, the knights of St John continued to treat the ‘alien’ with contempt. The Jews, in particular, were under special scrutiny even because, in the daily jargon, it was said that Jewish and Turkish spies became interchangeable. As such, no distinction was made between Levantine, Iberian, or Italian Jews.

Conclusion

In Catholic theology, embodied in papal declarations of various forms through the centuries, Jews were a people to be tolerated, but even then only within strict limits. As the people from whom Jesus was descended, and a people whose holy books formed part of the Christian Bible, they enjoyed a special place that distinguished them from other non-Christian peoples. They played a fundamental part in God’s plan for the salvation of mankind. Their religion predicted the coming of Christ and the truths taught by the Catholic Church and had thus to be distinguished from all other non-Christians (ASR Camerale II Ebrei Busta 2. Copy of the Papal Constitution: 13 February 1429).

Yet they also bore a special guilt, for they were made responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. While the Jews were once God’s chosen people on earth, they had become—in Christian eyes at least—God’s enemies. Their temple in Palestine was interpreted as having been destroyed by divine punishment and God consigned them to being perpetual wanderers, leading a wretched life.

Until the mid-16th century, Church policy toward the Jews showed a certain restraint. They were allowed to practice their rituals, and to have their synagogues. Yet, it was believed that the day would ultimately come when the Jewish people would see the true way, embrace God’s Church, and in this way help to usher in the Second Coming of Christ.

In the early modern Maltese context there existed much discord and confrontation and very little contact between the three great Religions of the Book—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—at least at the top level. However, there was much mixing at grassroots level, among the three communities. The Christians of the Malta harbour enclave were in daily contact with the large, mainly Muslim, and predominantly male, slave community, and to a lesser extent the tiny Jewish community. They met them everywhere, in the streets of the Harbour towns, in the auberges and public buildings of the knights, on the bastions, at the quayside, on the vessels and the galleys towed in the harbours. Despite strict official prohibitions, the local population mingled freely with the Muslims and Jews. They bought goods from Muslim and Jewish hawkers, and sought advice in order to try resolve problems of everyday life through witchcraft, love magic, the search for hidden treasure, and similar activities. In all these activities, Jews were obviously less visible than Muslims, and rather peripheral, yet they formed an integral part of the thriving and bustling Malta Harbour enclave.

It is fair to point out that the Order of St John was not interested in attracting Jews as ‘third party nationals’ to perform a useful economic role. Rather than being oriented towards

trade like the Italian maritime cities of Venice, Livorno, or Ancona, they were more concerned with booty. In the case of Malta, the Knights of St John had much less incentive to seek some coexistence with the Jews or even to license them in some way to perform trade. But this argument may present quite a few pitfalls. The Tuscan city of Livorno, served as a sort of haven for Jews and there was a relatively large Jewish community, yet it also served as the main port for the equally booty-oriented Knights of St Stephen.¹⁷ Furthermore we know that by the 18th century Jewish merchants and traders were allowed to carry trade in Malta, and the case of Samuele Farfara, discussed above, is perhaps a glaring example.

The Order's aristocratic and hierarchical structures induced the Knights of St John to perceive the Jews as lying low in their social scale. So the natural tendency was to despise them. The fact that the knights were essentially a crusading order further enhanced their antagonism against the Jews who were often seen as killers of Christ and their patron saint St John the Baptist. On their part, the Jews harboured no illusions about the knights and they feared them as confirmed in the *Emek Habacha* by Joseph Ha Cohen mentioned earlier. All in all they were treated much better by the Ottomans who permitted them to practice their religion without hindrance in the same way as Christians did in Ottoman lands. Thus it is hardly surprising that there was little love lost between the Knights of Malta and the Jews. Yet interestingly Jews at times were allowed safe passage to their country of origin indicating that the knights were not actively persecuting them.

Early modern Malta always shared an age-old attitude towards Jews, common among most Christians. It follows, that Jews could not be trusted because their ancestors had crucified Christ—a mentality which was further strengthened in the 16th and 17th centuries. It resulted in a policy of repression and intolerance, which remained in force throughout the 18th century, nullified with the French Revolution and its vigorous assertion of personal dignity, regardless of birth or creed. It was to make a lasting impact upon European society, and its institutions, not least on Malta.

Notes

1. ... the ban on Christian servants appears to have been inspired by a fear of miscegenation and the concern that Jews might prey on the naivety of young women to pervert them away from the Christian faith ... (Vincent 1997: 209).
2. In 1490 Pope Innocent VIII invited all the Christian states to send delegates to Rome to discuss a fully-fledged crusade against the Ottomans. Two years later the fall of Granada was celebrated with religious processions throughout Christian Europe.
3. Tamburini refers to petitions by two clerics from Castile: Pietro de Leòn, a cleric from the city of Cuenca, and Francesco Marquez, a cleric from Avila. De Leon had voted in favour of the stoning of a Jew (Tamburini 1996: 36, 71–72). Marquez had actually participated in the lapidation when he was a lad of fifteen (Tamburini 1996: 37, 77–78). Both clerics petitioned for a dispensation from the irregularity in order to receive holy orders.
4. Again the documents published by Tamburini (1996: 38, 137–138) come in handy. In March 1521 Francesco of Segovia, a Franciscan friar of Jewish origin who lived in Toledo, had to request Rome to confirm that his ordination and profession in the Franciscan order was valid.
5. Despite the decline of the crypto-Jews in early 16th century Spain, conditions changed dramatically by the end of the century when a population of Jewish *converses* from nearby Portugal, descended from Spanish exiles, began to move about and throughout the Spanish empire with relative freedom, particularly after the annexation of Portugal by Spain in 1580, taking with them crypto-Jewish practices which had been preserved over generations (Bodian 2002: 73).

6. 'Joseph Ben Joshua Ha-Cohen (1496–c.1577) Historian. Born to a family of Spanish exiles, he was brought up in Italy where he practised medicine, mainly in and around Genoa. Ha-Cohen wrote two important works in biblical Hebrew: one, a world history (*History of the Kings of France and Turkey*) stressing the struggle between the Christians and Muslims from the period of the crusades; the other '*Emeq Ha-Bakha* (The Vale of Tears) detailing the tribulations of the Jews in the Middle Ages. The latter utilizes many sources otherwise unknown and, with its supplement written by another hand, is of particular value for Jewish history in the sixteenth century'. *The New Standard Jewish Encyclopaedia*, p.1070. The book was translated into German by Dr M. Wiener and published in Leipzig in 1858. It was later translated into French and published in Paris in 1881 based on Wiener's translation. A Spanish translation was published as '*Emeq ha-Bakha de Yosef ha-Kohen. Estudio preliminar, traducion y notas por Pilar Leon Tello*, Madrid-Barcellona, 1964. An English translation was published as *Joseph HaCohen and the Anonymous Corrector. The Vale of Tears (Emek ha-bacha)*, edited and translated by Harry S. May. The Hague, 1971. More recently a critical edition was published at Uppsala in 1981 by Karin Almladh as *Sefer 'Emeq Ha-Bakha (The Vale of Tears), with the chronicle of the anonymous Corrector*.
7. As in the rest of the Papal States Jews were neither allowed to own a house, nor were they allowed to buy real estate. They had been reduced to deal in second hand clothes and as tailors. (Platter 1963: 81).
8. Sixtus V considered the Jews as potential economic assets. On their arrival Jews were ordered to pay a tax of 20 giulii (Roman coinage) for each male aged between 15 and 60 of each family, and a further 12 giulii each year thereafter. (ASR Camerale II Ebrei, Busta 2).
9. Joseph Giudeo con altri tre giudei desiderando dell Gerbi venire.. con loro robbe e dinari in questa nostra isola.. che gli volessimo dar... salvo condotto con li quali puotessi liberamente venir e tornar... (NLM AOM vol. 429 fol. 267v; Cutajar & Cassar 1985: 34).
10. The Chapter General convened in 1631 ruled that once a knight was admitted, challenges to the validity of his profession would solely be entertained during the first five years. The only exception to this statute of limitations was for descendants of Jews, who, if discovered, were bound to be expelled from the Order at any time. (Statuti 1676: 14; Bonello 2002: 147).
11. 'Agiungevansi à questo particular interesse, e ragione di Stato, che mosse Solimano à far l'Impresa di Rodi, i continoui lamenti, e le querele de' Turchi habitatori di Mettelino, di Negroponte, della Morea, dell'Acaia, della Caramania, & i i nuovi Vassalli suoi ... Instigavalo continuamente alla detta Impresa, un Medico Giudeo habitante in Rodi, che da Selim suo padre quivi per Ispia era stato mandato. Costui per meglio coprire il tradimento suo, si fece battezzare chiamandosi Giovanni Battista: & essendo nelle cose della Medicina assai valente, e pratico; fece di molte cure notabili. Onde non poco credito & amicitia co' Principali del Convento, e della Città acquistata haveva; Et havendo secreta intelligenza con un Greco da Scio, scriveva continuamente à colui in cifra, & in parole coperte, quanto in Rodi si faceva; & il Greco faceva di mano in mano intendere il tutto al Turco. E continuando di fare iol medesimo officio dopo la morte di Selim con Solimano ; gli diede per mezo del detto Sciotto molti avvisi importanti ...' (Bosio 1594: 524).
12. ... *che l'Università de gli Ebrei Levantini gli facevano, di pagare una gran parte delle spese dell'Armata; per liberarsi dal continuo pericolo; e danno d'essere condotti Schiavi in Malta; come in compagnia d'altri Infedeli, spesso à molti di loro occorrer suole...* (Bosio 1602: 481).
13. ... *e anco l'Università de gli Ebrei Levantini, che gran somme di danari, per quell'Impresa, spontaneamente offerivano ...* (Bosio 1602: 493).
14. ... *E quel, ch'è più notabile, due Hebrei, che 'l detto cappuccino [Fra Roberto d'Eboli] haveva poco dinanzi convertiti alla S. Fede; quivi parimente rimaner vollero, à morire per la Fede di Christo ...* (Bosio 1602: 553).
15. ... *fuit decretur ut expediatur procuratio in persona dominum fratrum Antonio Flotte dit La Roche et Francesco du Brocs ad effectum concordandi et conveniendi cum nonnullis Judeis existentibus in civitate Avinionensi expulsae a sua sanctitate et ad concedendum eisdem Judeis saluum conductum ad tuti et secure navigandum huc si opus fuit veniendum et se ad portas orientalis transferendum absque ullo impedimento seu molestatione trirremium seu navigorem Religionis et quod salvus conductus duret Annum unum.* (NLM AOM vol. 92 fol. 168v: 3 September 1569).
16. *Monsignor Illustrissimo et Reverendissimo Gran Maestro et il Venerando Consiglio hanno eletti*

deputati Commissarii li Signori Fra Hernando Alvares de Evan, Pirrho Melzio et Ludovico della Roche dit la boulec quali con ogni sollicitudine et diligenza debbano riconoscere generalmente tutti li Giudei et giudee che sono a Malta tanto quelli dell'habito quanto de secolari et particolarmente di scriverli con iniungere alli patroni che li mandino fuori di Malta, o vero non gli mandando che li giudei atti al remo faccino ponere in Galera della Religione et gl'altri piccioli et grandi donne et figliuoli li mandino à travagliare all'opere della Signoria che se gli darà solamente il mangiare come schiavi ... (NLM AOM vol. 93, fol. 48: 6 February, 1571).

17. Similar to Valletta, Livorno was the port city of the corsairing Knights of St Stephen. However, unlike Valletta where they were often captured as slaves and often treated with contempt, Jews were invited to settle in Livorno as early as 1583. In 1591 the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Ferdinand I, issued a charter, reissued with slight changes in 1593. Known as 'La Livorniana' the charter enticed Jews, regardless of origin to settle there. The charter remained in effect until the end of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany in 1860, including the French interlude under Napoleon Bonaparte. Cf. Renzo Toaff, *La nazione ebrea a Livorno e a Pisa (1591–1700)*, pp. 15, 41–51; 419–435. Benjamin Ravid explains that '... the Jews of Livorno could, among other things, basically engage in retail trade, while the Jewish merchants of Venice were restricted to wholesale importation and exportation.' Ravid, 'A tale of three cities and their raison d'etat', pp. 156–157.

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v. - verso
f./ff.—folio/s

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Busta 5, no.31
- b) Camerale II Ebrei
Busta 2, 3

NLM—National Library, Malta

- a) AOM - Archives of the Order, Malta
vols. 90, 92, 93, 429
- b) Libr. ms.—Library manuscripts
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AIM—Archives of the Inquisition, Malta

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