

SIGĠIEWI IN THE LATE 18TH CENTURY (1790–1800)
INVESTIGATING SOCIETY THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE LIFESPAN:
FROM BIRTH UNTIL DEATH

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the social, religious, and demographic landscape of Siggiewi between 1790 and 1800, examining how a rural Maltese community experienced everyday life during a decade marked by political upheaval, famine, and socio-economic strain. Employing a life-course and microhistorical approach, the study analyses the parish registers of baptisms, marriages, and deaths alongside selected parish administrative sources. These records provide a detailed reconstruction of family formation, reproductive patterns, mortality trends, and devotional practices, enabling an assessment of both continuity and adaptation within village society.

The findings reveal a community characterised by remarkable structural resilience. Family life largely followed established Maltese patterns—nuclear households, early adulthood marriage, and high infant mortality—yet was periodically disrupted by crisis. The French occupation and subsequent blockade (1798–1800) caused a sharp decline in baptisms and marriages, alongside a dramatic surge in mortality in 1799, reflecting the effects of famine, disease, and armed conflict. Nonetheless, these disruptions proved temporary: parish life quickly rebounded, and long-standing social frameworks endured.

Religion emerged as the principal anchor of community identity. Daily devotional routines, confraternities, liturgical feasts, and pastoral leadership reinforced cohesion, even during periods of political instability. Evidence from the registers—including cases of refugees, foundlings, illegitimacy, clerical succession, and wartime casualties—demonstrates how broader events were filtered through the intimate spaces of family and parish.

By foregrounding the experiences of ordinary villagers, this dissertation contributes to Maltese social history by highlighting the interplay between continuity and crisis. It shows that Siggiewi, despite facing profound external shocks, preserved the essential structures of family, faith, and communal life that defined it at the close of the eighteenth century.

Dedication

To my wife, Natasha, and to our children, Bettina and Bertu.

Your encouragement, sacrifices, and unending affection gave me the strength to complete this dissertation during one of the busiest and most demanding periods of my life—balancing work, family responsibilities, the restoration of our old house, and the rigours of academic research. This accomplishment is deeply intertwined with your patience and support.

To Siggiewi, the village I have made my home. Its beauty, character, and rich historical fabric have profoundly inspired this study and nurtured my interest in understanding the lives of its past inhabitants.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to the people of Siggiewi who lived between 1790 and 1800. To those who worked tirelessly, endured hardship, and made extraordinary sacrifices simply to survive; and especially to those who lost their lives during the turbulent years of the French revolt. May their resilience and stories continue to be remembered.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Nestled in the southwestern part of Malta, the rural village of Siggiewi at the end of the eighteenth century offers a revealing microcosm of Maltese social life during a period of political upheaval and transition. Established as a parish since the late Middle Ages, Siggiewi gradually absorbed neighbouring hamlets and developed into a cohesive agrarian community shaped by centuries of agricultural practice and Catholic devotion (Aquilina, Bezzina, & Callus, 2015). By the 1790s, its local significance was recognised formally when, in 1797, Grand Master Ferdinand von Hompesch elevated it to the title of *Città Ferdinand* (Vella, 2002). This honour symbolised the culmination of the village's gradual growth within the socio-political framework of the Order of St John, on the very eve of its collapse.

The decade 1790–1800 was selected for this study because it encompasses the final years of Hospitaller rule and culminates in the profound political and social disruptions brought about by the French occupation and the subsequent emergence of British rule. After more than 250 years, the Knights' government crumbled when Napoleon seized Malta in June 1798. French reforms, particularly those targeting ecclesiastical property and confraternities, provoked widespread popular resistance (Frendo, 1998). Within weeks, the Maltese rose in rebellion, confining the French to the fortified harbour towns. Rural communities, including Siggiewi, played an active role during the siege that lasted until 1800. These rapid political developments provide a compelling context for examining whether—and to what extent—such external forces reshaped village life, or whether longstanding social patterns continued largely unaffected beneath the surface of political revolution.

Despite this external turbulence, Siggiewi's cultural and social fabric remained deeply traditional. The village was fundamentally a peasant agrarian society: most families depended on farming, animal husbandry, or rural labour, cultivating the fertile lands surrounding the

settlement (Aquilina et al., 2015; Vella, 2002). Social rhythms were structured around the agricultural calendar and the Catholic liturgical year. The baroque parish church of St Nicholas, completed in 1693, dominated the skyline and anchored communal identity (Pace, 2023). Religious devotion shaped the rhythm of time—the ringing of bells, feast days, confraternity activities, and sacramental rites marked the stages of individual and collective life. As Cassar (2000) observes, organised religion in early modern Malta acted as a crucial focus of social organisation, binding rural communities together. Annual festivities, particularly the feast of St Nicholas, served as powerful moments of social cohesion, even during the uncertainty of the French period.

Within this historical and cultural framework, the dissertation adopts a life-course approach to reconstruct the lived experience of Siggiewi's inhabitants. Instead of repeatedly using the phrase “from birth until death,” the study examines how individuals were born, raised, formed families, practised religion, worked, aged, and died within their local social structures. The analysis focuses on two major thematic domains: marriage and family, and religious devotions and festivals. Building on Ciappara's (1988) foundational work on marriage patterns, inheritance, and family structures, the dissertation considers whether Siggiewi followed island-wide trends or displayed distinctive local characteristics. Likewise, the studies of Vella (2002) and Pace (2023) provide a valuable foundation for understanding the village's devotional culture, which is examined both for continuity and for possible disruption during the French occupation. The study also accounts for broader social pressures—including food shortages, wartime stress, and the blockade of 1799—that shaped daily life in rural Malta (Frendo, 1998). Through this integrated life-course perspective, the dissertation seeks to illuminate how Siggiewi's inhabitants navigated both routine and crisis within their community.

The research is grounded in extensive primary archival analysis and informed by relevant historiography. A major justification for focusing on Siggiewi is the exceptional survival of continuous parish archives dating back to the mid-sixteenth century. The parish registers of baptisms, marriages, and deaths provide quantitative data for reconstructing demographic trends during the 1790s, including birth rates, marriage ages, mortality patterns, and indications of demographic crises. Complementing these registers are documents such as the *status animarum* (a household census carried out periodically by the parish priest to record inhabitants and their sacramental participation) and pastoral visitation reports, which shed light on household composition, population structure, and religious observance on the eve of political change. Additional layers of evidence are drawn from notarial acts preserved in Valletta—dowry contracts, wills, depositions, and other legal agreements—which offer insight into kinship structures, inheritance practices, property transfers, occupations, and literacy levels.

Methodologically, the study aligns itself with broader international traditions in microhistory. Its close focus on a single rural community as a means of understanding wider social dynamics reflects the microhistorical approach advanced by scholars such as Carlo Ginzburg (1993) and the Annales School. Historians associated with the Annales tradition—notably Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1978)—emphasised the importance of long-term structures (*la longue durée*) and the lived experiences of ordinary people. By grounding the research in these methodological frameworks, the dissertation situates Siggiewi within both Maltese and European historiographical currents. It also reaffirms that the findings, while centred on a specific village, contribute more broadly to our understanding of Maltese social resilience under rapidly changing political circumstances.

The study contributes to a growing body of Maltese social history. Traditional historiography has long focused on political and military narratives, especially the Knights

and the sieges of 1565 and 1798. In recent decades, however, Maltese historians—including Fiorini, Cassar, and Ciappara—have shifted attention towards everyday life, family structures, economic activity, and popular religion. This dissertation builds on that expanding scholarship, applying it specifically to the case of Siġġiewi during a decade of exceptional historical significance. Scholars continue to debate whether the French period constituted a brief “parenthesis” or a catalyst for later transformation (Frendo, 1998). The findings from Siġġiewi offer a ground-level perspective that contributes meaningfully to these debates, revealing how rural communities perceived, resisted, or adapted to political upheaval.

In summary, this chapter has outlined the historical context, aims, and methodological foundations of the study.

The dissertation is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 presents the literature review and methodology.
- Chapter 3 examines marriage and family in Siġġiewi.
- Chapter 4 explores religious devotions and festivals.
- Chapter 5 provides the conclusion, synthesising the findings and evaluating the degree of continuity and change in Siġġiewi’s social structures during 1790–1800.

By examining Siġġiewi through a life-course and microhistorical lens, this dissertation aims to deepen scholarly understanding of rural Maltese society at the end of the eighteenth century. Ultimately, it offers a nuanced portrait of how ordinary villagers lived through—and responded to—extraordinary historical events.

Chapter 2: Literature Review, Methodology, and Research Gaps

Introduction and Historical Context

The village of Siggiewi in the late eighteenth century offers a compelling case study of rural Maltese society during a period marked by political upheaval and socio-economic change. Situated near the old capital of Mdina, Siggiewi was a predominantly agrarian community whose daily rhythms were shaped by long-standing Catholic traditions and kin-based structures. Between 1790 and 1800, Malta underwent a series of dramatic transitions: the decline of the Order of St. John, the brief but transformative French occupation (1798–1800), and the emergence of British colonial governance. These events left a tangible impact on village life, disrupting religious practice, undermining local stability, and contributing to famine and disease-related population decline.

Despite such disruptions, the core elements of Siggiewi's social fabric—family, faith, and agricultural labour—remained resilient. This literature review synthesises existing scholarship on two interrelated themes: Marriage and Family and Religious Devotions and Festivals, to reconstruct how Siggiewi's inhabitants experienced life from birth to death during this transitional decade. While the original scope of the study included Work and Agricultural Activities, due to the limitations of word count and the depth of analysis required, this theme has been omitted to allow for a more detailed treatment of the former two.

Drawing on parish registers, as well as key secondary sources (Ciappara, 2011; Aquilina et al., 2015; Vella, 2002), this chapter explores both continuity and adaptation within village society at a moment of significant historical transformation. The focus on Siggiewi allows for a microhistorical lens through which broader societal patterns may be inferred.

Comparative studies of Mediterranean rural societies by Blok (1988), Galt and Smith (1979), Davis (1977), and Delille (1985) highlight patterns such as kinship-based landholding, ritualised religious calendars, and adaptive subsistence strategies. These broader findings provide a useful frame for situating Siggiewi within a wider European rural context, demonstrating that Maltese villages shared several structural similarities while retaining locally distinctive features.

In addition to archival and historiographical perspectives, this study also integrates observations from contemporary foreign accounts. Sir Richard Colt Hoare, an English traveller who visited Malta in 1790, provides an invaluable outsider's viewpoint in his *Recollections Abroad* (1817). Hoare's reflections on Malta's natural environment, religious devotion, architecture, social customs, and regional diversity add qualitative depth to this analysis. His impressions—drawn from visits to areas including Buskett, Għirgenti, and the surrounding countryside—offer not only descriptive insights but also a comparative frame for understanding how Maltese rural society was perceived by foreign elites during the very period under investigation.

Hoare's observations must be interpreted critically, as his elite British background and limited linguistic access shaped how he perceived Maltese rural life. His tendency to romanticise 'picturesque' customs reflects broader Enlightenment travel-writing conventions. Nonetheless, his account provides valuable corroboration of parish-based evidence.

This study argues that Siggiewi's rural community demonstrated strong resilience and adaptability in the face of rapid political transitions mainly between 1798 and 1800, expressed through family structures, religious practices, and demographic behaviour.

Marriage and Family in 18th-Century Siggiewi

Historical research suggests that late 18th-century Siggiewi, like other Maltese villages, was predominantly organised around nuclear households, with newlyweds typically establishing their own homes. Ciappara's study of nearby Qrendi confirms this neolocal pattern, likely mirrored in Siggiewi due to its larger population and status. The village's social structure consisted of a modest elite, a few professionals, and a broad base of farmers and labourers. Family life was framed within patriarchal norms, with men as heads of households and women managing domestic work and contributing to agricultural production or cottage industry.

Marriage commonly occurred in the early twenties for women and mid-twenties for men, aligning with the Western European marriage pattern (Ciappara, 2011). Factors such as pre-inheritance land transfers and affordable housing facilitated early marriage, while endogamous unions were common but rarely consanguineous due to the village's relatively large population. Church oversight, particularly post-Tridentine reforms, regulated marriage through formal ceremonies and kinship dispensations.

Marriage was not universal. In Qrendi, around 15% of men and 19% of women over fifty remained unmarried, often due to economic or familial responsibilities. Though illegitimacy rates were low, evidence of premarital relations and pragmatic fertility practices exists (Ciappara, 2008). Inquisitorial records suggest a more nuanced reality than idealised portrayals of moral village life. These records point to instances of cohabitation, fertility testing before marriage, and informal unions that, while frowned upon by ecclesiastical authorities, were not uncommon.

Remarriage was common, especially among widowers, whereas widows were less likely to remarry and often relied on kin or charity. Ciappara (2011) observes that only economic necessity prompted most widows to seek new unions, and

widows frequently headed their own households. This dynamic reflected both gendered economic roles and social norms surrounding widowhood. The limited options available to widows highlight the intersection of gender and economic dependency in late eighteenth-century Maltese society.

Within families, women bore children in rapid succession, with little agency over reproduction. Baptismal records show frequent births—every 1–2 years—due to high infant mortality and absence of birth control. Ciappara links this to women’s subordinate status, as men dictated reproductive outcomes. Marital strain did surface, and church courts occasionally heard cases of separation, though formal annulments were rare. The domestic sphere was often marked by tension, economic stress, and health risks. These dynamics underscore the fragility of domestic stability in a period of limited medical care and high fertility expectations.

The life cycle was defined by Catholic ritual and high mortality. Infants were baptised quickly to guard against unbaptised death, and burial records often reveal corresponding entries for children. While some individuals reached advanced age, especially men, women frequently died young due to childbirth complications. Respect for the elderly, rooted in Catholic doctrine, remained strong and was reflected in multigenerational households where elders held advisory or spiritual authority.

In summary, marriage and family life in Siggiewi were shaped by demographic patterns, religious doctrine, and socio-economic constraints. Though centred on stable nuclear units, the realities of celibacy, remarriage, gender inequality, and mortality rendered the “traditional” family more complex than later nostalgic narratives suggest. This nuanced portrayal draws on both parish data and recent scholarship (Ciappara, 2011) to challenge idealised views and illuminate the lived experience of rural Maltese society at the close of the 18th century.

Religious Devotions and Festivals in Village Life

In 18th-century Siggiewi, religious devotion was central to daily life and community identity. The baroque Parish Church of St. Nicholas, built by local initiative in 1693, served not only as a spiritual hub but also as the venue for all major rites of passage—baptisms, marriages, funerals, and weekly Mass. Villagers exhibited deep loyalty to their parish, with its records forming a continuous chronicle of community life (Aquilina et al., 2015; Fiorini, 2003). The church's architectural embellishments, such as statues and altarpieces, and public inscriptions invoking blessings on agricultural labour, reflected the close interweaving of faith and agrarian livelihood.

Lay confraternities like the Rosary and Blessed Sacrament played a significant role in devotional life. These societies organised feast days, sponsored masses, and promoted charitable acts. Ciappara (2008) notes that beyond the primary patronal feast, villagers celebrated numerous saints' days throughout the year, combining religious observance with community gatherings. Local chapels, such as that of Our Lady of Providence, also hosted their own minor feasts, reflecting the depth and diversity of popular devotion.

Daily piety was marked by familiar rhythms—Angelus prayers, Lenten fasting, and catechism instruction. By the 1790s, sacramental participation in Siggiewi was high: over 70% of the population were of communion age and likely fulfilled their Easter duties (Fiorini, 2003). The parish priest played a vital role in reinforcing Catholic doctrine and ensuring religious instruction, particularly among the youth. This sustained a cohesive moral framework that permeated village life.

The feast of St. Nicholas remained the spiritual high point of the year. Celebrated on 6 December, it included High Mass, processions, and evening illuminations. While later 19th-century festas introduced fireworks and band marches, the late 18th-century celebration

already featured essential ritual elements and strong community participation. Even under French occupation, when Church activities were suppressed, villagers likely maintained clandestine observances, reaffirming their religious identity.

The French interlude (1798–1800) posed a severe challenge to local devotion. Anticlerical reforms—such as the suppression of the Inquisition and seizure of church treasures—provoked widespread resentment. In Siggiewi, sacred items were reportedly hidden, and locals joined the insurrection under the banner of religion and homeland. Following liberation, religious life revived rapidly, reinforced by British authorities’ early support for Catholic institutions (Hardman, 1994).

Popular religion also included elements of folk belief. While formal Church practice prevailed, villagers retained practices such as invoking saints for protection, blessing crops, and using talismans or traditional healers. Though officially discouraged, such customs were tolerated if integrated into Catholic forms—e.g., processions in times of drought or plague. The motto later adopted by Siggiewi, *Labore et Virtute* (“Work and Virtue”), captured this fusion of labour, belief, and divine reliance.

In sum, religious devotion in Siggiewi during the 1790s structured both the sacred and social dimensions of life. From daily prayers to public festivals, faith offered rhythm, purpose, and communal identity—especially amid political uncertainty. Scholarly accounts (Ciappara, 1994; Pace, 2023) consistently highlight the parish as the heart of village life. Understanding Siggiewi’s social world in this period thus requires placing religion at the centre of both individual experience and collective resilience.

Methodology and Research Gaps

This chapter outlines the methodological framework used in investigating Siggiewi’s society between 1790 and 1800. Rooted in social history,

microhistory, and the life-course approach, the study focuses on reconstructing everyday experiences of rural villagers through both quantitative and qualitative archival analysis. It addresses key gaps in the literature on 18th-century Maltese rural life, highlighting the value of integrating ecclesiastical records for a multi-faceted understanding.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in social-historical and microhistorical approaches, which prioritise the lived experiences of ordinary individuals within a clearly defined local context. Microhistory allows for a close, detailed examination of Siggiewi, revealing social and demographic nuances that broader national or regional histories often obscure. Complementing this, the life-course perspective structures the analysis around key transitional moments—birth, marriage, and death—thereby connecting individual trajectories with wider social, cultural, and political forces. Together, these frameworks facilitate a holistic reconstruction of daily life in Siggiewi during a decade marked by political transition and instability.

Archival Sources and Data Collection

Primary sources from the Siggiewi Parish Archives constitute the empirical core of the research. These include:

- Baptism, marriage, and death registers
- *Libro delli Pollami* (1700)

Quantitative data were extracted from these sources and compiled into a demographic database, while qualitative content was transcribed and analysed for themes relating to social

practice, economic behaviour, and religious life. Paleographic and translation skills were applied where necessary to interpret difficult or damaged entries.

To ensure accuracy in the interpretation and translation of Latin entries, multiple complementary methods were employed. These included the use of AI-based language tools such as ChatGPT, extensive consultation with the Siġġiewi Parish Archive custodian—who possesses long-standing experience in working with ecclesiastical Latin—guidance from the dissertation supervisor, and systematic cross-referencing with authoritative Latin dictionaries. AI tools served exclusively as auxiliary instruments for cross-checking and refining translation clarity; they did not replace expert validation or consultation of the original manuscript sources. This triangulated method significantly enhanced the fidelity and reliability of the translations.

Missing or incomplete entries were not interpolated. Instead, such records were excluded from quantitative visualisations in order to preserve data accuracy. Statistical patterns were analysed only when datasets remained consistent across multiple years. This conservative methodological stance avoids artificial distortions while acknowledging the inherent gaps and inconsistencies that characterise eighteenth-century parish records.

Qualitative material was analysed manually using a thematic coding approach. Codes were developed inductively through repeated close reading of the registers and subsequently organised into broader analytical themes relating to family structure, religious observance, and mortality patterns. This interpretive process was cross-verified with both the archive custodian and the dissertation supervisor to ensure rigour and reliability.

Analysis Strategy

A mixed-methods approach combines:

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Birth/death rates, marriage ages, family structures, and demographic trends are analysed using tables and charts.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Narrative content derived from baptism, marriage, and death registers is thematically interpreted to understand social norms, individual agency, and religious values.

Triangulation across sources enhances reliability, and both statistical trends and case studies are used to interpret social patterns.

Case Selection and Sampling

Siggiewi is the intrinsic case study due to its size, agrarian character, and historical relevance. All records from 1790–1800 are included in the quantitative dataset. Qualitative sampling follows theoretical criteria, selecting cases rich in available evidence or representing key social types. Comparisons with other villages (like Qrendi) offer contextual insights. Further detail on case selection is discussed in subsequent chapters examining baptisms, marriages, and death registers.

Validity, Reliability, and Limitations

Source triangulation, transparent coding, and cross-verification underpin the research's credibility. However, the study acknowledges several limitations:

- Gaps or biases in the archival record (e.g., underrepresentation of the poor or unbaptised).
- Challenges in reading Latin/Italian manuscripts and deciphering 18th-century handwriting.
- The absence of personal testimonies, which limits insight into villagers' emotions or perspectives.
- Contextual gaps for localised terms or events.
- The study's limited scope: a single village over a single decade, requiring careful interpretation of generalisability.

Despite these constraints, the available sources are sufficient to provide a nuanced picture of late-18th-century village life. The methodology allows for a robust reconstruction of Siġġiewi's social fabric, laying the groundwork for deeper archival exploration in the dissertation's core chapters.

Research Gaps and Original Contribution

Although the historiography of late eighteenth-century Malta is extensive—particularly regarding the Knights of St John and the upheavals surrounding the French occupation (1798–1800)—detailed studies of rural communities remain limited. Existing works, including those by Stanley Fiorini, provide valuable overviews but span long chronological periods and do not focus closely on the transformative decade of the 1790s. This dissertation addresses this gap by offering a focused microhistorical study of Siġġiewi during 1790–1800, a period of significant political, social, and demographic change that has received minimal scholarly attention at the village level.

The research also contributes methodologically by adopting a holistic life-course framework that traces social experience from birth to death. Rather than isolating themes such as marriage or religious practice, the study analyses interconnected stages of life and their wider social meanings—an approach largely absent from Maltese rural historiography.

A further contribution is the creation of original demographic data for Siggiewi in the absence of a national census. By reconstructing vital statistics—births, marriages, and deaths—from parish registers, the dissertation establishes a baseline against which other Maltese villages or comparable Mediterranean contexts, such as Sicily or southern Italy, may be assessed. This situates Siggiewi within broader debates in European demographic history.

Qualitatively, the dissertation makes innovative use of under-explored sources, particularly baptism, marriage, and death registers, to recover micro-level narratives that humanise broader historical processes. These include household responses to the 1798 regime change and local mechanisms for conflict resolution, themes typically overshadowed by urban or elite-centred studies of the French occupation.

Comparative insights are also gained through engagement with scholarship on other rural parishes, notably Frans Ciappara's work on Qrendi. Identifying parallels—such as the prominence of nuclear families or the rise of monetised rural economies—or divergences linked to Siggiewi's size or proximity to Mdina, refines our understanding of local variation within rural Malta.

In sum, this dissertation fills a clear historiographical gap by producing the first sustained, community-based social history of Siggiewi during a decade of profound transition. Through its integration of demographic reconstruction, microhistorical analysis, and a life-course perspective, it offers an original contribution to Maltese and Mediterranean rural history, illuminating how ordinary villagers lived, worshipped, adapted, and endured during one of the island's most turbulent periods.

Chapter 3 – Marriage and Family

The institution of marriage and the structure of family life in late eighteenth-century Siggiewi provide a vital lens through which to understand the rhythms of village society during a period marked by both continuity and upheaval. Parish registers from 1790 to 1800, recording baptisms, marriages, and deaths, reveal not only the demographic trends of the community but also the ways in which kinship networks, inheritance practices, and religious ritual shaped everyday existence. Families were not static units; they were constantly being reshaped by cycles of birth, marriage, widowhood, and remarriage, as well as by external pressures such as epidemics, famine, and the disruptions of the French occupation of Malta (1798–1800). Similar patterns have been identified elsewhere in Malta, where marriage alliances were instrumental in consolidating property, strengthening kinship ties, and ensuring household survival (Ciappara, 2000). These findings resonate with broader European scholarship, which has emphasised both the economic and symbolic dimensions of marriage in structuring early modern societies (Goody, 1983; Stone, 1977). By situating individual case studies within wider quantitative patterns, this chapter explores how marriage alliances reinforced communal bonds, how fertility and mortality affected household composition, and how the family functioned as the central organising force of economic, social, and religious life in Siggiewi (Wettinger, 1983).

This chapter examines marriage and family life in late eighteenth-century Siggiewi through a detailed analysis of the parish baptism, marriage, and death registers covering the years 1790–1800. By integrating quantitative demographic patterns with microhistorical case studies, it reconstructs how households navigated the rhythms of birth, marriage formation, widowhood, and loss within a decade shaped by both continuity and rupture. The chapter also adopts a life-course perspective, tracing how individuals and families experienced major transitions against the backdrop of famine,

war, and social upheaval. Placing Siġġiewi within wider Maltese and Mediterranean contexts, the analysis demonstrates how sacramental records functioned not only as ecclesiastical instruments but also as reflections of communal identity, gender norms, and social resilience. Through this combined methodological approach, the chapter contributes to the wider thesis by showing how family structures both reflected and mediated the pressures of the period.

The parish registers were transcribed directly from the original Latin manuscripts, following the orthographic conventions, abbreviations, and scribal variations present in the source material. Particular attention was given to faded ink, damaged folios, and inconsistent spellings, which required careful cross-reading and paleographic verification. These methodological considerations ensure that the quantitative and qualitative observations presented in this chapter rest on an accurate and critically informed reading of the archival record.

The Baptism Register of Siġġiewi, 1790–1800

The baptism register of Siġġiewi for the decade 1790–1800 provides an invaluable source for reconstructing the demographic, social, and religious realities of the community in a period of transition and upheaval. These registers, meticulously preserved in the parish archive, record not only the sacrament of baptism itself but also broader aspects of family life, ecclesiastical authority, and civic identity. They reveal birth rates, unusual cases such as foundlings (*expositi*), illegitimacy, displacement due to war, and the roles of clergy and midwives in safeguarding spiritual belonging. By examining these entries in detail, one can perceive both the rhythms of ordinary parish life and the disruptions caused by famine, revolution, and political change.

Demographic Trends and Historical Context

The baptism register of Siggiewi between 1790 and 1800 provides crucial insight into both the demographic rhythms and the wider socio-political conditions that shaped family life in this rural community. As the principal sacramental record of birth and initiation into the Catholic faith, the baptism register not only documented the continuity of lineage but also acted as a mirror of social disruption, ecclesiastical authority, and civic identity. In this period, the register recorded a total of 1,089 baptisms, with annual figures fluctuating between a minimum of 74 (1799) and a maximum of 118 (1797).

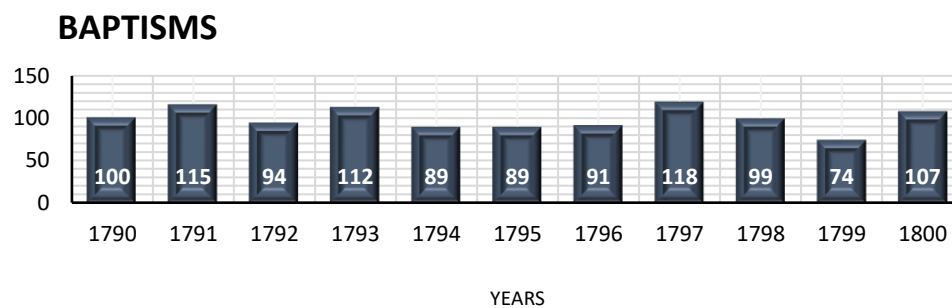


Figure 1. *Demographic fluctuations in Baptism rates, 1790-1800.*

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the *Liber Quartus Baptizatorum, 1780 – 1820*, from the Siggiewi Parish Archive.

Yearly Birth Rates and Statistical Overview

On average, the decade reflects an annual baptismal rate of approximately 101 baptisms (excluding the anomalous year of 1799). This statistical consistency suggests a stable demographic base in Siggiewi, which was one of the largest *casali* (villages) on the island during the late 18th century. However, the year 1799 stands out as a demographic rupture, with baptisms falling by 27% compared to the average.

The Drop in 1799: The Impact of the French Blockade

The sharp decline in baptisms during 1799 coincides with the French occupation of Malta (1798–1800) and the subsequent blockade, during which Maltese insurgents, including many from Siggiewi, resisted French garrisons in Valletta and the Cottonera lines. Historical scholarship consistently highlights the blockade period as one of famine, economic collapse, and widespread displacement (Cassar, 2000; Blouet, 1997). Parish registers across Malta reflect similar contractions in birth rates during these years, pointing to the direct impact of political instability and food shortages on family formation and infant survival.

The drop in baptisms in 1799 may be attributed to several interconnected factors:

1. Food scarcity and famine – The French confiscation of church goods and the disruption of trade routes created acute shortages, discouraging family growth and contributing to higher infant mortality.
2. Displacement of populations – Records from Siggiewi note refugees from Floriana (*Vilena*) being baptised in the parish during *tempora revolutionis*. The stress of displacement likely reduced birth rates among both local and migrant populations.
3. Delayed marriages and fertility decline – With the community under siege, marriage formation was disrupted, leading to fewer conceptions in the preceding year.
4. Pastoral disruption – Though priests continued to baptise, the political upheaval strained ecclesiastical administration, as seen in the reliance on chaplains such as Fr. Vincentius Molinos.

Wider Context and Comparative Analysis

The contraction in baptisms in 1799 is not unique to Siġġiewi but part of a broader Maltese demographic response to crisis. Similar patterns of reduced fertility and increased infant mortality have been noted in Southern Europe during periods of war and famine (Kertzer and Saller, 1991). The Maltese case, however, is distinctive in that the blockade of 1798–1800 affected nearly every village simultaneously, creating a collective demographic shock.

By contrast, the rebound in baptisms in 1800 (107 baptisms) suggests a partial recovery, even though famine and instability persisted. This resilience reflects both the adaptability of Maltese households and the centrality of baptism as a non-negotiable sacrament, regardless of hardship. The sacrament was essential not only for spiritual reasons but also for the community's sense of continuity, as even illegitimate or abandoned children (*expositi*) were diligently baptised.

The baptismal figures from Siġġiewi between 1790 and 1800 demonstrate the delicate balance between demographic stability and external disruption. While the decade generally reflected stable fertility patterns, the year 1799 marked a profound rupture, illustrating how war, famine, and displacement directly influenced the intimate realm of family life. The decline in baptisms that year is emblematic of how political crises translated into demographic realities, leaving their imprint in the parish register — a document intended for spiritual record-keeping but which simultaneously serves as a historical witness of communal suffering and resilience.

Clerical Continuity During the Blockade

The French occupation and subsequent blockade (1798–1800) brought widespread disruption to Maltese society. Civil institutions were destabilised, famine spread across the island, and the normal structures of authority were contested (Blouet, 1997). Yet, the Church

sought to maintain continuity through the sacraments, and the baptismal register of Siggiewi demonstrates this resilience. By recording Molinos' service explicitly under the authority of the Grand Master, the parish affirmed that sacramental life continued in defiance of French control.

This note in the register illustrates how parish priests and chaplains became symbols of resistance. The continuation of baptisms provided not only spiritual reassurance but also reinforced communal identity during a period of political uncertainty. The very act of administering baptism signified that, despite siege and famine, the Christian community of Siggiewi persisted, with its children incorporated into the Church and recognised as legitimate members of both the faith and the village.

Sacramental Authority and Allegiance

The phrase *obedientiæ Mag. Ordinis Superioris* also demonstrates how ecclesiastical allegiance was articulated at the local level. Molinos' obedience to the Grand Master was more than a clerical formality: it was an assertion of sovereignty. In parish records, where normally baptisms were simply attributed to the presiding priest, this unusual emphasis on institutional obedience reflected the contested authority of the moment.

In this sense, the Siggiewi register does not merely document births but also operates as a political text. It aligned the parish with the insurgent cause, since the Maltese rebels—supported by Britain and the Kingdom of Naples—fought to expel the French and restore traditional institutions. Molinos' presence in Siggiewi, a stronghold of the insurrection, symbolises how the parish clergy acted as intermediaries between the community and the wider currents of war and politics.

Illegitimacy, Foundlings, and the Margins of Family Life

The baptism registers of Siggiewi from 1790 to 1800 not only document the normative rhythms of parish life but also expose the fragility of family structures and the social stigma attached to illegitimacy and abandonment. These entries, often marked with formulae such as *ignoto padre* or *expositus*, reveal how the parish simultaneously extended sacramental inclusion while recording the social boundaries of legitimacy. They offer an invaluable lens through which to understand how poverty, war, and stigma intersected in the intimate sphere of family life.

One of the earliest examples is found in the baptism of Salvator Joannes Nicolaus Borg on 22 October 1790, recorded as *filius Mariæ (Ignoto Padre)*. Here the mother, Maria, was explicitly identified, while the father was either absent, unacknowledged, or deliberately left unnamed. Such phrasing, common in Maltese parish records of the late eighteenth century, was used to mark children as illegitimate, situating them socially on the margins of the community. Unlike *expositi*—abandoned infants for whom no parental identity was given—cases of *ignoto padre* preserved the maternal bond while effacing paternal responsibility. This reflects both the moral codes and social pressures of Maltese society, where the honour of women and the reputations of families were closely guarded.

Another case appears on 19 March 1798, when Silvester Borg was baptised as *filius Annæ et ignoti patris*. Again, the mother's name was recorded while the father remained undisclosed. These silences suggest not administrative oversight but deliberate pastoral choices. Priests recorded the sacrament faithfully, ensuring the child's inclusion in the Christian community, but at the same time registered the absence of paternal acknowledgement as a marker of illegitimacy. Such omissions highlight the tensions between pastoral care and social stigma, with the register serving as both an instrument of compassion and a record of exclusion.

As Bernard Capp (2003) argues in his study of gender and reputation, communal responses to illegitimacy were deeply embedded in systems of honour and surveillance, a dynamic clearly visible in the careful phrasing of *ignoto padre* within the Siggiewi register.

The theme of illegitimacy becomes even more pronounced during the French blockade of 1798–1800, when displacement and social instability unsettled traditional family structures. On 16 May 1799, Felix Joseph Salvator was baptised as the son of Antonia, a widow from Valletta, and an unknown father. This case illustrates the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities: widowhood, displacement from the capital, and illegitimacy. Antonia, already marked by her status as a widow, bore a child without recognised paternity while seeking refuge in Siggiewi, one of the strongholds of resistance. Her case reveals how wartime upheaval disrupted kinship ties and amplified social stigma, as women struggled to negotiate honour and survival in precarious circumstances.

While cases of *ignoto padre* reflected hidden or contested paternity, the register also contains examples of children who were entirely abandoned. These infants were explicitly marked as *expositi*, denoting foundlings left without any parental identification. In most years between 1790 and 1800, the number of *expositi* remained between zero and two. However, in 1801 there was a sudden spike to five cases, far exceeding the normal pattern. This anomaly must be read in the context of the aftermath of the blockade. Although the French had surrendered in September 1800, the island remained devastated by famine, disrupted agriculture, and widespread poverty. Families who had already absorbed refugees and endured years of deprivation found themselves unable to provide for additional children, leading some to abandon infants at parish doors. The rise in foundlings is thus best understood as a demographic aftershock of the blockade, when economic collapse forced families into heartbreaking choices.

These examples demonstrate the complex ways in which baptismal registers recorded both inclusion and exclusion. On one level, every child—whether legitimate, illegitimate, or abandoned—was baptised, ensuring incorporation into the Church and the hope of salvation. On another level, the language of the register marked distinctions that reflected and reinforced social hierarchies: the legitimate child was seamlessly inscribed within family lineage, while the illegitimate bore the stain of paternal absence, and the abandoned child was consigned to anonymity. For the historian, these entries reveal the moral universe of eighteenth-century Malta, in which the sacraments extended compassion even as the record perpetuated stigma.

Clerical Succession and Parish Authority in Siġġiewi

The Siġġiewi baptismal registers do not solely record sacramental acts but also contain administrative notes that illuminate the structures of clerical authority and ecclesiastical governance within the parish. One notable example occurs in March 1791, with a detailed record of the installation of Fr. Pietro de Cefali as parish rector. The entry reads: “*Anno salutis 1791, 3a Martii Ego Petrus de Cefali feci primum ingressum in S.P. Eccl. S. Nicolai Nigidensis, Episcopo Illmo et Rmo Dno Fr. Vincentio Labini*”—“In the aforesaid year of salvation 1791, on the 3rd of March, I, Pietro de Cefali, made my first entrance into the Holy Parish Church of St Nicholas of Siġġiewi, with the permission of the Most Illustrious and Reverend Lord Bishop Fr. Vincenzo Labini.” This formula of *primum ingressum* marked the canonical possession of the parish, signifying the beginning of Cefali’s pastoral charge. Such notes were typically placed at the beginning of new register sections and acted as both a legal and spiritual marker of succession. By naming Bishop Vincenzo Labini, the diocesan head, the entry also reveals the hierarchical structure of ecclesiastical governance and the ritual solemnity attached to pastoral appointments. This demonstrates how parish registers could serve as instruments of administrative record-

keeping as well as sacramental documentation, thereby framing the wider pastoral and social context of community life.

A similar example appears in September 1794, when the register records the first baptism performed by Don Salvator Corso, who is described as *Sancti Juris Doctor* (Doctor of Canon Law) and parish rector. The note marks the beginning of Corso's sacramental ministry in Siggiewi and functions as a record of clerical succession. Such entries reinforced the continuity of pastoral leadership and the legitimacy of sacramental acts under the new rector. The mention of Corso's academic title underlines his stature within the diocesan clergy, emphasising the importance of learning and canonical expertise in parish administration during the late eighteenth century. His arrival illustrates the dual role of the parish priest as both a spiritual leader and a figure of legal-religious authority, entrusted with guiding the community through both sacramental life and the interpretation of ecclesiastical law.

Together, these administrative notes reveal that baptismal registers were not static compilations of ritual acts but dynamic texts that incorporated markers of clerical succession, authority, and identity. They anchored the sacramental life of the parish within broader diocesan hierarchies and ensured that pastoral continuity was inscribed in writing, thus reinforcing both the spiritual and institutional stability of the Siggiewi community.

Civic Identity and Ecclesiastical Record-Keeping

A particularly significant shift in the Siggiewi baptismal registers occurs from 31 December 1797, when the parish ceased describing itself as *Casale Siggieui* (the village of Siggiewi) and instead adopted the title *Città Ferdinanda* or *Città Ferdinandi* (the City of Ferdinand). This change directly reflected the civic promotion granted by Grand Master Ferdinand von Hompesch, who elevated Siggiewi from a village to a city in recognition of its growing importance. The fact that this alteration was immediately incorporated into the

baptismal registers illustrates the close intertwining of civil and ecclesiastical recognition in late eighteenth-century Malta.

By adopting the new civic designation in the very framework of sacramental documentation, the parish registers became more than a record of baptisms: they also functioned as vehicles of civic identity and memory. Each subsequent baptism inscribed not only the child's entry into the Christian community but also the community's elevated political status. This act of recording demonstrates how broader political changes were absorbed into the sacred routines of parish life, ensuring that Siggiewi's transformation into a city was perpetually remembered in ecclesiastical texts.

The implications of this change are twofold. On the one hand, it reflects the Order of St John's use of civic promotions as instruments of reward and governance, affirming loyalty and honouring localities of strategic or symbolic importance. On the other hand, it underscores the symbolic power of registers as living instruments of identity, where civil and sacred authority converged. Through this textual shift, the baptismal register preserved for posterity the pride of Siggiewi's inhabitants, embedding the new civic status within the collective memory of the parish.

Archival 'Reform' and the Visibility of Women

A notable reform in the Siggiewi baptismal registers occurred on 20 January 1798, when priests began systematically recording the surname of the mother alongside her given name. Prior to this date, baptismal entries generally followed a consistent formula: they recorded the name of the child, the full name of the father (including surname), and only the mother's first name. The introduction of maternal surnames therefore marks a significant archival shift, bringing greater precision to record-keeping and altering the way family identity was documented in the parish.

Several factors may account for this change. It may have been the result of diocesan reforms, aimed at improving clarity in tracing family lineage and reducing ambiguity in genealogical records. Alternatively, the reform could have reflected civil concerns during the final years of Hospitaller rule and the turbulent period of the French occupation (1798–1800), when parish registers often functioned as quasi-legal documents for questions of inheritance, legitimacy, and property. It is also possible that French administrative pressures encouraged stricter registration practices, aligning ecclesiastical documentation with broader expectations of civil governance.

The inclusion of the mother's surname carried profound genealogical and social significance. On a practical level, it enhanced the traceability of family lines, ensuring that maternal identities were no longer obscured in a patriarchal record-keeping system. Symbolically, it afforded women a more visible role in the archival construction of family identity, even if this visibility remained mediated through clerical control. For historians, this reform is particularly valuable, as it provides rare recognition of maternal lineage in a society where descent and property were largely articulated through paternal lines.

By incorporating the surnames of mothers into baptismal registers, the parish of Siggiewi demonstrates how ecclesiastical records not only safeguarded sacramental duties but also adapted to evolving social, legal, and political pressures. This reform illustrates that registers must be understood as dynamic instruments of family and community history, recording not only births but also shifting patterns of identity and authority.

Comparable archival refinements have been observed in Italian parishes, where, as Benigni demonstrates, expanding the precision of maternal identification reflected both administrative modernisation and shifting perceptions of women's documentary presence.

Displacement and Refuge During the French Blockade

An important entry dated 6 October 1798 reveals the presence of displaced families from Floriana (*Vilena*) residing in Siggiewi during the turbulent period of the Maltese insurrection against the French. The priest explicitly noted that these baptisms occurred *tempora revolutionis* (in the time of the revolution), a rare and significant acknowledgement that situates the sacrament within the broader historical upheaval of the French blockade (1798–1800). This annotation underscores that the parish registers were not neutral repositories of sacramental acts but also witnesses to extraordinary circumstances, recording demographic shifts linked to political and military conflict.

The inclusion of Floriana refugees within the Siggiewi baptismal register highlights the migration and displacement caused by the blockade. Valletta and its surrounding suburbs, including Floriana, were under French control, and many inhabitants sought refuge in the rural villages that formed the strongholds of resistance, among which Siggiewi played a prominent role. By baptising the children of these displaced families, the parish extended both sacramental care and communal belonging, integrating outsiders into the spiritual and social fabric of Siggiewi at a moment of collective crisis.

This entry also provides a valuable case study for the way parish registers document marginalised or vulnerable groups. The presence of refugees, alongside other categories such as children baptised with the formula *ignoto patre* (unknown father) or as *expositi* (abandoned infants), demonstrates the parish's dual role as both guardian of sacramental inclusion and recorder of social stigma. While illegitimate and abandoned children were baptised to ensure their incorporation into the Christian community, their status was carefully inscribed in the register, reflecting both pastoral compassion and societal judgement. In this sense, the registers capture the paradox of eighteenth-century family life:

the obligation of the Church to safeguard souls was matched by its commitment to preserving social distinctions.

The entry of October 1798 is therefore more than a record of baptism; it is a microhistorical window into the effects of war on family life. It shows how displacement altered parish demography, how refugees were absorbed into rural communities, and how the registers preserved memory of the revolution as part of the community's lived experience. For Siggiewi, this case exemplifies how the French blockade not only disrupted but also reshaped the intimate dimensions of family, kinship, and belonging.

Illegitimacy, Widowhood, and Displacement: The Case of Antonia (1799)

A baptismal entry dated 16 May 1799 records the baptism of a child described as *infantem ex Antonia, vidua ex Valetta, et patre ignoto*—the child of Antonia, a widow from Valletta, and of an unknown father. This case is striking for the way it combines elements of illegitimacy, widowhood, and displacement at the height of the French blockade. The mother, Antonia, is identified both by her name and by her social status as a widow, yet the father is explicitly marked as *ignotus* (unknown), branding the child as illegitimate. The baptism was performed by Fr. Vincentius Molinos, a chaplain who officiated numerous baptisms in Siggiewi during the years of the blockade, often under the formula of obedience to the Grand Master of the Order.

The entry demonstrates how parish registers could reflect both personal struggles and wider historical forces. On one level, it is a private tragedy: a widow bearing an illegitimate child, a situation that would have carried significant social stigma in late eighteenth-century Malta. On another level, it embodies the demographic and social effects of war. Antonia, originally from Valletta, had her child baptised in Siggiewi, suggesting that she had sought refuge in the village during the insurrection, when many urban families were displaced to

rural strongholds of resistance. Siġġiewi's role as both a spiritual and geographical refuge is thus confirmed through this entry, as the parish absorbed and recorded the lives of outsiders caught in the upheaval.

The record also highlights the tensions between pastoral care and social judgement. While the parish fulfilled its duty to baptise the child, ensuring spiritual inclusion, the formula *patre ignoto* preserved the stigma of illegitimacy in perpetuity. At the same time, the explicit identification of Antonia as a widow underscores the vulnerability of women whose marital protection had been lost. Widows who bore children outside wedlock faced compounded social marginalisation, yet the register's preservation of their names paradoxically ensured that their identity endured in the historical record.

This case study illustrates how parish registers can be read as microhistorical testimonies of disruption, where individual family crises intersected with collective upheaval. It encapsulates the fragility of family life under siege conditions, the stigma attached to illegitimacy, and the mobility of displaced populations, all mediated through the authority of the parish priest. As such, it exemplifies the value of baptismal registers as sources not only of demographic data but also of the social, gendered, and political dimensions of family life in late eighteenth-century Malta.

This case resonates with broader Mediterranean patterns in which widowhood, honour, and gendered vulnerability intersected, as shown in comparative analyses by Kertzer and Saller (1991) and Gélis (1996), highlighting how women bore disproportionate social pressures during periods of crisis.

Twin Baptisms and Family Naming Practices

On 30 March 1790, the baptismal register of Siggiewi records the births of Maria Antonia Aquilina and Philippa Veneranda Aquilina, twin daughters of Nicolaus and Anna. Both entries are listed separately yet marked with the Latin term *gemelli* (twins), indicating the rarity of multiple births and the parish's care to record them precisely. This case is valuable not only as a record of an unusual family event but also as an illustration of naming practices and devotional influences in late eighteenth-century Malta.

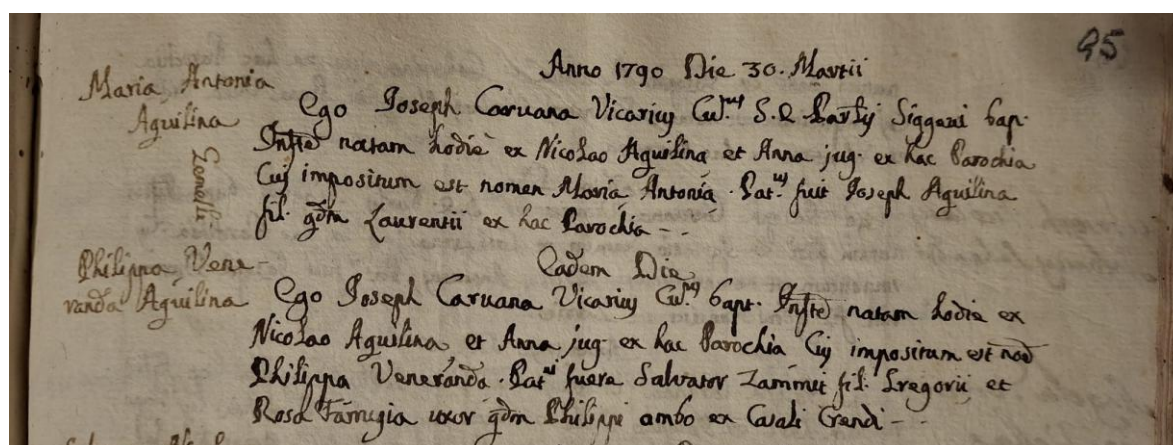


Figure 2, Entry for the twin infants Maria Antonia and Philippa Veneranda Aquilina, recorded on 30th March 1790, from the *Liber Quartus Baptizatorum*, 1780 – 1820.

Source: Siggiewi Parish Archives. Photograph by the author, reproduced with permission of Siggiewi Parish Archives.

The names chosen for the twins reflect the intersection of religious piety and familial identity. Maria Antonia combines Marian devotion with the popular saint's name Antonia, reflecting the widespread practice of invoking the Virgin alongside a protective patron saint. Philippa Veneranda, by contrast, is more unusual: the name Philippa may invoke a less common saintly intercessor, while *Veneranda* (venerable) functions as a devotional epithet, imbuing the child's identity with a spiritual quality. The careful differentiation of the twins' names illustrates the importance attached to individual spiritual identity, even within the shared event of a twin birth.

The family name Aquilina, one of the long-established lineages in Siggiewi, further situates this entry within the continuity of local families. The presence of such prominent

surnames across decades of parish registers underscores the stability of community structures, where baptism functioned both as a religious rite and as a means of perpetuating local kinship networks (Cassar, 2000). The Aquilina twins' baptisms show how the register operated as a social marker of identity, ensuring that even extraordinary circumstances such as multiple births were faithfully documented.

For the historian, these entries highlight the role of parish registers in capturing the intersection of family, devotion, and community identity. They provide a microhistorical glimpse into how unusual family events were incorporated into the rhythms of parish life, while also reflecting broader cultural patterns in naming and devotion. The careful recording of the twins demonstrates that the parish was not only safeguarding sacramental obligation but also affirming family continuity and communal belonging in eighteenth-century Siggiewi.

The symbolic weight of these naming choices corresponds with wider European interpretations of devotional naming and familial identity, as noted by Stone (1977) and Goody (1983), underscoring the cultural significance of baptismal identity in early modern Catholic communities.

Emergency Baptism and the Risks of Childbirth (1791)

An entry dated 11 December 1791 in the baptismal register of Siggiewi records the baptism of a child from the Balzan family, born to Cajetano and Maria, with the marginal note *bapt. oblat. statim mater*. This formula, expanded as *baptizatus oblatus statim mater*, indicates that the baptism was performed immediately because of the mother's condition. The note implies that either the mother was in grave danger during childbirth or the infant's survival was uncertain, necessitating the sacrament without delay.

Such emergency baptisms reflect the fragility of childbirth in the eighteenth century, when maternal and infant mortality rates were high, and priests were frequently summoned

to administer baptism urgently. In some cases, these baptisms would have taken place outside the main church ceremony—often at home or in the sacristy—before the full rites could later be completed. The explicit reference to the mother’s condition (*statim mater*) is particularly revealing, as it links the administration of the sacrament directly to the medical and social realities of childbirth, providing rare archival evidence of maternal vulnerability.

This entry underscores both the pastoral responsibilities of the clergy and the devotional anxieties of families. The Church insisted that no child should be deprived of baptism in the face of imminent death, and the formula used here illustrates the urgency with which priests responded to such situations. At the same time, it reflects the fears of parents who, in a society deeply shaped by Catholic teaching, regarded baptism as essential for the child’s eternal salvation.

For historians, notes such as *statim mater* are invaluable, as they reveal how parish registers functioned not only as sacramental records but also as witnesses to medical and social crises. They offer insights into the precariousness of family life in late eighteenth-century Malta, where childbirth was fraught with risk, and baptism served as both a religious safeguard and a pastoral response to uncertainty. This case thus enriches the study of birth and baptism practices in Siggiewi, highlighting how extraordinary circumstances were inscribed into the fabric of parish life.

Midwives and Emergency Baptism (1798)

The baptism registers of Siggiewi during the late eighteenth century also provide rare glimpses into the otherwise hidden contributions of women within parish and family life. One particularly valuable entry records Margarita Borg as an *obstetrix* (midwife). The explicit designation of her profession is highly significant, since women’s occupations are seldom preserved in Maltese ecclesiastical sources of this period. Midwives, though essential to

childbirth and the safeguarding of maternal and infant health, are generally invisible in archival records, and their presence in baptism registers offers historians a crucial insight into gendered roles within the community. A similar example occurs earlier, in 1784, when Catherina Borg is likewise identified as a midwife. Such annotations demonstrate how parish registers did more than record sacramental events: they also served as documents of social identity, situating women within networks of profession, kinship, and marital status. These references highlight the continuity of identity markers in parish documentation, where women might be described simultaneously as wives, widows, or in this case, as midwives, thus embedding female agency within the fabric of family and community life (Cassar, 2000).

On 16 March 1798, the baptismal register of Siggiewi records the baptism of Domanica Victoria Rosa Borg, daughter of Nicolaus Borg and Maria Gambin as *baptizata ab obstetrice*, indicating that the baptism was performed by a midwife. This note signifies that the infant's life was considered at risk and that a priest was not available in time to administer the sacrament. The record also demonstrates that the parish priest later recognised and validated the baptism, thereby ensuring its canonical legitimacy.

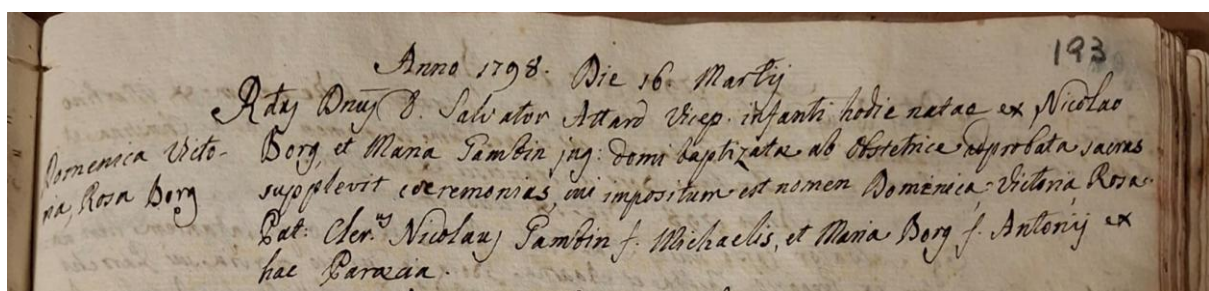


Figure 3, Entry for Domenica Victoria Rosa Borg, recorded on 16th March 1798, from the *Liber Quartus Baptizatorum*, 1780 – 1820.

Source: Siggiewi Parish Archives. Photograph by the author, reproduced with permission of Siggiewi Parish Archives.

This case provides a rare but important glimpse into the active sacramental role of women in eighteenth-century Malta. Midwives (*obstetrices*) were entrusted by the Church to baptise in cases of emergency, safeguarding the child's soul should death occur

before a priest could arrive. Their interventions, though extraordinary, were essential in communities like Siggiewi where childbirth was precarious and mortality rates were high. By recording the midwife's involvement explicitly, the register not only affirms the seriousness of her role but also preserves evidence of female agency within pastoral care, a dimension often overlooked in official ecclesiastical hierarchies.

The entry also illustrates broader trends in record-keeping. Both parents are fully named—Nicolaus Borg and Maria Gambin—reflecting the post-1798 shift towards including maternal surnames alongside paternal ones. This practice enhanced genealogical precision and increased women's visibility within parish documentation. Furthermore, the child was given a compound name, Domanica Rosa Victoria, which reflects contemporary naming practices shaped by religious devotion and the desire to invoke multiple protective or saintly associations.

In historical perspective, this baptism encapsulates the fragility of childbirth, the pastoral responses of the Church, and the crucial role of women in safeguarding both life and faith. Parish registers thereby reveal not only demographic and sacramental routines but also the intersections of gender, devotion, and emergency ritual within family life in late eighteenth-century Siggiewi.

This visibility of midwives within the register complements insights by Elisabetta Benigni on Italian parish record-keeping, where women's roles in safeguarding sacramental continuity often surface only in moments of crisis, revealing a gendered dimension of ecclesiastical practice.

The *Expositi* Spike of 1801

The baptismal registers of Siggiewi reveal a striking anomaly in 1801, when five cases of abandoned infants (*expositi*) were recorded. This figure is unusually high when compared to the preceding decade, during which the number of *expositi* rarely exceeded one

or two per year. The sudden increase in 1801 must be understood against the backdrop of the French blockade of 1798–1800 and its immediate aftermath.

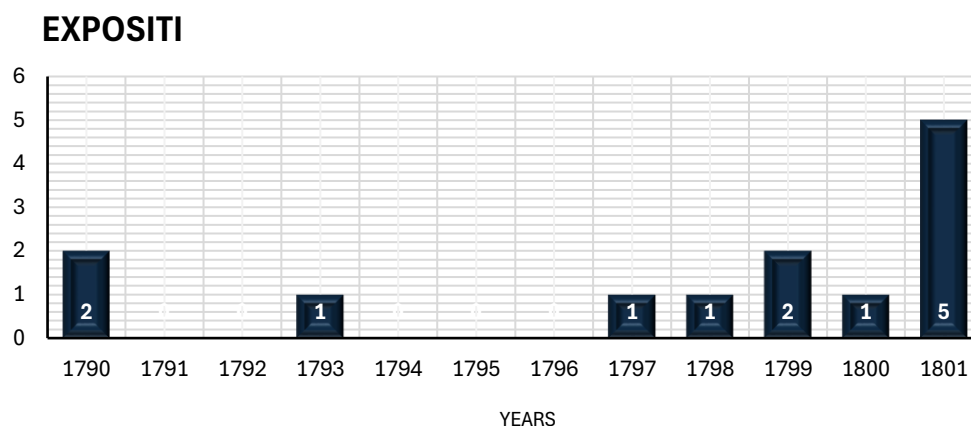


Figure 4, Expositi Graph, 1790-1801.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the *Liber Quartus Baptizatorum*, 1780 – 1820, from the Siggiewi Parish Archive.

The blockade left Malta devastated by famine, siege, and economic collapse. Agricultural cycles had been disrupted, food supplies curtailed, and trade routes severed, creating widespread scarcity. Villages such as Siggiewi, which served as strongholds of resistance, also sheltered displaced families from Valletta and Floriana, as evidenced by contemporary notes in the registers referring to *suburbio Vilena* (the suburb of Floriana) during the *tempora revolutionis*. These circumstances placed extraordinary pressure on rural households, which were forced to absorb outsiders while struggling to meet their own subsistence needs. In such conditions, child abandonment was sometimes a desperate response to the combined burdens of hunger, illegitimacy, and poverty (Cassar, 2000).

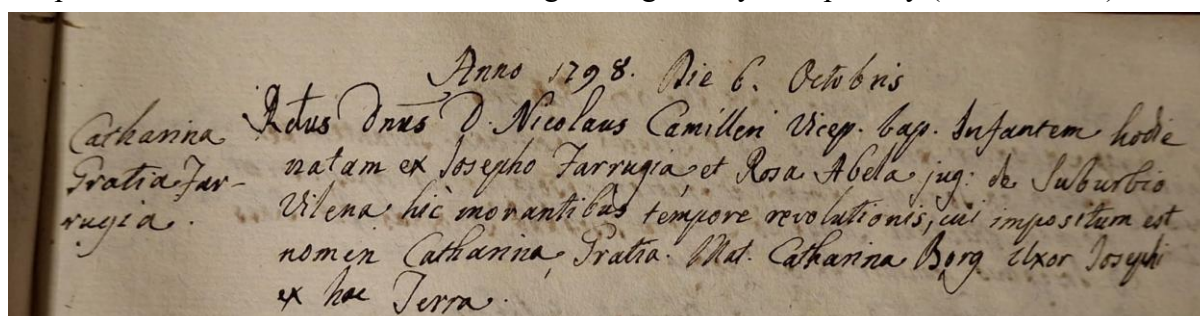


Figure 5, Entry for Catharina Gratia Farrugia, recorded on 6th October 1798, from the *Liber Quartus Baptizatorum*, 1780 – 1820.

Source: Siggiewi Parish Archives. Photograph by the author, reproduced with permission of Siggiewi Parish Archives.

The year 1801 was also a transitional moment in Maltese history. Although the French had surrendered in September 1800 and the island had passed under British protection, political stability had not yet brought material relief. Bread shortages and famine continued to affect families into the early British period. The surge in abandoned children thus reflects not simply isolated family crises but a collective demographic aftershock of the blockade. It is possible, too, that parish priests became stricter in distinguishing *expositi* from illegitimate births in the aftermath of the revolutionary years, as part of an effort to restore social order.

The heightened number of *expositi* in 1801 reveals how political upheaval penetrated the most intimate aspects of family life. Parents unable to sustain additional dependants turned to abandonment, leaving infants in churches or public spaces where they could at least be baptised and cared for under ecclesiastical oversight. These children were incorporated into the Christian community through baptism, but their status as *expositi* was indelibly recorded. In this way, parish registers became silent witnesses of collective trauma, capturing the social consequences of famine and displacement when few other sources spoke of the hardship endured by ordinary families. The 1801 spike in abandoned children must therefore be read not only as a demographic anomaly but also as evidence of how war, poverty, and breakdown of social structures left their imprint in the sacramental records of Siġġiewi.

Such patterns align with David Reher's (1998) analysis of familial crisis strategies in Southern Europe, where abandonment and fluctuating fertility often accompanied periods of acute demographic stress. Reher further demonstrates that communities exposed to famine, war, or political upheaval frequently experienced temporary contractions in nuptiality and fertility, a dynamic that closely parallels the demographic disruptions observed in Siġġiewi in the years surrounding 1801.

Baptism and the Liturgical Calendar (1800)

An entry dated 31 May 1800 records the baptism of Joannes Michael Mamo, son of Nicolaus Mamo and Maria Fava, with the additional note *post benedictionem fontis sub Pentecoste*—after the blessing of the font at Pentecost. This annotation situates the baptism not only within chronological time but also within liturgical time, linking the sacrament to one of the most solemn moments of the Church’s calendar. Pentecost, together with Easter, was one of the two annual feasts when baptismal fonts were ritually blessed, and the note demonstrates the parish’s determination to embed family life within the wider sacred rhythms of the Church.

The inclusion of both paternal and maternal surnames—Mamo and Fava—also reflects the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century trend toward greater precision in record-keeping, particularly following the reforms introduced around 1798. This ensured clearer family lineage while giving greater visibility to maternal identity in a patriarchal system (Cassar, 2000). The case thus provides both a genealogical record of a Siggiewi household at the turn of the nineteenth century and an example of how liturgical markers shaped the meaning of sacramental events.

The timing of this baptism is especially significant, as 1800 fell at the height of the French blockade, when the island was besieged, famine was widespread, and the population endured severe hardships. Yet, even under such extraordinary pressures, the parish register shows that the liturgical calendar continued to frame daily life and religious practice. The priest’s note affirms the continuity of sacred ritual despite political and social disruption, underscoring the resilience of community identity.

For the historian, this entry illustrates the dual recording of time in parish registers: the chronological notation of 31 May 1800 and the liturgical reference to Pentecost. It demonstrates how baptismal registers operated not only as genealogical tools but also as

cultural texts, embedding family and community life within the universal rhythms of Catholic worship. This case complements those tied to political upheaval, such as the displacement of Floriana refugees or the spike in abandoned infants, by showing that parish registers mediated simultaneously between history, society, and sacred time.

The baptismal registers of Siggiewi between 1790 and 1800 provide a window into both the continuities and disruptions of family life at the close of the eighteenth century. On the one hand, they reflect stable demographic patterns, long-standing kinship lineages, and the integration of the liturgical calendar into parish rhythms. On the other hand, they bear witness to the fragility of this stability in the face of crisis: the sharp decline in births during 1799, the rise in abandoned children in 1801, and the baptisms of refugee families displaced by the French blockade all testify to the profound impact of political and social upheaval on family structures. The registers also illuminate the margins of society, documenting illegitimacy, foundlings, and the pastoral interventions of midwives in moments of danger, thereby capturing experiences often absent from other records. Finally, their evolving form — from the inclusion of maternal surnames to the adoption of Siggiewi’s civic title as *Città Ferdinanda* — shows how these books were dynamic instruments of memory and identity, shaped by both ecclesiastical practice and civic pride. As such, the baptismal registers are not merely sacramental records but multifaceted historical sources, mediating between the sacred and the secular, the personal and the communal, and the ordinary and the extraordinary in late eighteenth-century Siggiewi.

The Marriage Register 1790 - 1800

We can examine the marriage register data from the parish of Siggiewi for the tumultuous decade 1790–1800. Siggiewi, a village in southern Malta, provides a revealing case study of how historical events affected local marriage patterns. During this ten-year span, a total of 186 marriages were recorded in the Siggiewi parish.

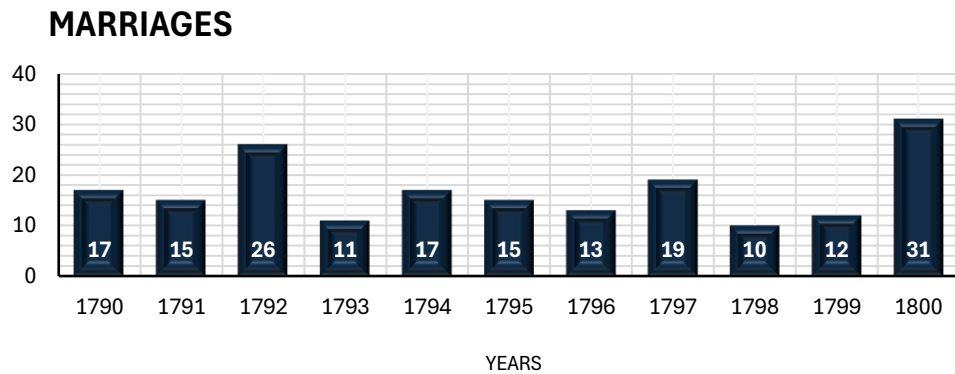


Figure 6. *Marriages Graph recorded annually in Siggiewi Parish, 1790-1800.*

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the *Liber Quartus Matrimoniorum, 1784 – 1835*, from the Siggiewi Parish Archive.

Several striking fluctuations are immediately apparent in this data. First, the lowest numbers of marriages occurred in 1798 and 1799, with only 10 and 12 marriages respectively. By contrast, 1800 saw 31 marriages, the highest count of the decade (nearly triple the previous year's). The year 1792 also stands out with an unusually high 26 marriages, well above the typical annual figure of around 15. These peaks and troughs beg explanation: what was happening in those years that might have influenced villagers' decisions (or ability) to marry?

The most dramatic influence was the French occupation of Malta (1798–1800) and the Maltese rebellion against it. In June 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte seized Malta from the Knights of St. John, and soon after, the Maltese rose up in rebellion (starting September 1798) and besieged the French garrison. This two-year episode plunged the islands into warfare, economic blockade, and political upheaval. Siggiewi, like other villages, was directly affected by these events. The precipitous drop in marriages in late 1798 and early 1799 correlates with the crisis conditions during the French occupation and the subsequent blockade of French-held Valletta. In fact, the Siggiewi register shows no marriages at all between October 1798 and April 1799, a period of about six months with no weddings. This is unsurprising given that Malta was in turmoil: normal parish life was disrupted and basic survival took precedence. Contemporary accounts confirm that the final years of the 18th

century were a time of great hardship. A medical history of Malta notes “much famine and sickness during resistance to the French in 1799 and 1800”. The countryside, under blockade conditions, suffered shortages of food and outbreaks of disease, and many families likely postponed festivities like weddings until calmer times. It is also possible that some clergy were unavailable or church services limited during the rebellion – indeed, the French authorities had expelled many clergy and virtually suppressed the local Church hierarchy by late 1798. Napoleon’s administration had attempted to impose French Revolutionary policies: papal jurisdiction was abolished, new priests under 30 were barred from ordination, foreign clergy (such as Italian friars or knights who served as priests) were expelled, and civil marriage was declared legal (a radical change in a Catholic society). These measures alienated the devout Maltese, and the Church as an institution was in disarray for a time. Given this context, villagers in Siġġiewi likely avoided marrying during the height of the upheaval – either because priests were scarce or because couples simply chose to wait rather than marry under impious French decrees. The abrupt fall in marriages in late 1798 reflects this hesitation and chaos.

Once the French were expelled and order restored (the French garrison surrendered in September 1800), marriages surged. The year 1800 saw 31 marriages in Siġġiewi – the highest annual number by far, and indeed more than double the yearly average of the 1790s. This can be interpreted as a backlog or “catch-up” effect. Numerous couples who had deferred their weddings during the troubled months likely rushed to marry as soon as conditions allowed in 1800. Such a rebound is a well-known demographic phenomenon after wars or crises: when normalcy returns, delayed marriages (and often a boom in baptisms) follow. The end of the French occupation lifted the uncertainties and removed the French-imposed constraints on the Church, so the sacramental life of parishes like Siġġiewi resumed fully. It is telling that 1800 not only exceeded the previous lean years but even overshot

typical pre-war levels – suggesting that some marriages that would have taken place in 1798–1799 were essentially “bunched up” into 1800 once peace came. In summary, the French occupation had a direct, suppressive impact on marriage numbers, and the data from Siġġiewi’s register captures how profoundly even a small rural community felt the shock of an international conflict.

Another intriguing question is why 1792 was a particularly high-marriage year in Siġġiewi (26 marriages, significantly above the trend). Unlike 1800, 1792’s spike does not immediately align with a clear local crisis or resolution. Malta in 1792 was still under the stable rule of Grand Master de Rohan of the Knights of St. John, and there were no domestic upheavals. If anything, 1792 corresponds to the very beginning of the French Revolutionary

Wars in Europe, but those distant events hadn’t yet directly disturbed Malta’s economy (Malta remained neutral until 1798). One possible explanation is demographic: the late 1780s were a period of population growth and perhaps good harvests, yielding a larger cohort of young adults by the early 1790s. Indeed, Malta’s population was rising steadily in that era – it grew from about 79,000 in the 1770s to over 91,000 by 1788. This means many children born in the prosperous 1770s reached marrying age around 1790–1792. Siġġiewi’s own population of young people may have simply peaked then, resulting in more weddings than usual in 1792. It could be that a number of families had children of marriageable age who all happened to pair off in that year (sometimes demographic surges produce such clustering). Another factor could be economic optimism – the late 1780s under the Knights saw relative prosperity (the Knights had introduced agricultural reforms and Malta was not at war, allowing trade to flourish). A good economic spell often encourages higher marriage rates, as couples feel more confident in starting a family. Conversely, we see that by 1793 the number of marriages dropped to just 11, which might indicate some local adversity or simply a natural correction after the previous year’s spike. It’s worth noting that small

communities can have significant random fluctuations in marriages from year to year, especially if a few large wedding celebrations were postponed or advanced due to personal reasons (for example, a death in a family might delay a planned wedding into the next calendar year). Without specific archival evidence of a crisis in 1793, the low number that year might be the mirror image of 1792's high: a cluster of weddings in 1792 meant fewer couples left to marry in 1793, thus a dip. In any case, no major epidemic or famine is recorded in Malta for 1792–1793 (unlike the well-documented famine and disease of 1799–1800), so the 1792 peak likely reflects social timing and demographic cycles rather than an external shock.

In summary, the Siggiewi marriage register of 1790–1800 vividly illustrates how wider historical events can penetrate even the intimate sphere of village life. The French occupation and Maltese uprising created a marriage vacuum in 1798–1799, followed by a compensatory boom in 1800 once stability returned. Aside from that, year-to-year variations – like the mini-boom of 1792 – can hint at underlying demographic patterns (a large cohort coming of age) or communal decisions. For a dissertation, these observations allow us to argue that marriage trends are sensitive barometers of societal conditions: wars, economic well-being, and population structure all left their imprint on the frequency of nuptials.

Family Names and Social Insights from the Register

Beyond raw numbers, the marriage register data from Siggiewi offers a window into the social composition of the community – particularly through the surnames of grooms recorded. In the 1790–1800 register excerpt, a total of 68 distinct male surnames appear among the 186 marriages. This indicates a moderately diverse set of families in the village. Some surnames, however, occur far more frequently than others, revealing the presence of large extended families or clans in Siggiewi. The most common

surnames among grooms in this decade were *Cammilleri* (modern spelling *Camilleri*) with 14 grooms, *Borg* with 12, *Zammit* with 11, followed by *Farrugia* (8), *Mallia* (8), *Mic(h)allef* (modern spelling *Micallef* - 7), *Schembri* (5), and *Muscat* (5). These are all traditional Maltese surnames and even today rank among the most widespread surnames in Malta. Their prominence in Siggiewi's records suggests that in the late 18th century a few family networks dominated the village's demographic landscape. For example, Camilleri being the top surname (14 out of 186 marriages, or about 7.5%) hints that multiple Camilleri households existed in Siggiewi – likely several related nuclear families or branches of a larger kin-group. It was not uncommon in Maltese villages for a handful of surnames to recur often, as generations of extended families continued to reside in the same locale. This could lead to many cousins carrying the same last name, all marrying and starting new families in the parish. The data here could be used to explore if these frequent-surname grooms married brides from similar backgrounds or if there was a pattern of intermarriage among the leading families. For instance, did Camilleri men often marry into the Borg or Zammit families (forming kindred alliances), or did they marry women from outside the village? These are questions that primary source data can address by cross-referencing bride surnames and family connections.

Conversely, the register also records some uncommon or even surprising surnames that appear only once or twice, suggesting individuals or families who were not typical of the local stock. Notable among these are *(De) Inguanez* (2 grooms), *Bondi* (1 groom), and *Meisunier* (1 groom). The surname Inguanez is interesting because it is associated with an old Maltese noble family; seeing it in a village register could indicate that either minor nobility were present in Siggiewi or perhaps members of that family married commoners there. Since Inguanez appears twice, it might be that two brothers from that

family married during the decade – perhaps into local families, which could imply a noble or genteel lineage integrating into the village society. Bondi, also appearing once, is a known Maltese surname but not particularly common in Siġġiewi; its single occurrence might represent a family that moved into the parish or an isolated marriage where the groom (or his father) carried a less typical name for that region.

The most striking is “Meisunier” – recorded for one groom – which does not resemble any native Maltese surname. In fact, this seems to be a variant spelling of Meissonier (or *Missonier*), a *French* surname. Indeed, genealogical research confirms a *Carlo Meissonier* married in Siġġiewi in 1795 to a local woman (Alessandra Borg). This foreign surname stands out as evidence of Malta’s cosmopolitan connections: even a rustic village like Siġġiewi saw at least one foreigner (likely of French origin) taking a Maltese bride. How would a Frenchman end up in Siġġiewi in 1795? It’s quite possible he was among the many expatriates or employees associated with the Knights of St. John. During the Knights’ rule, Valletta was a magnet for people from across Europe – not just aristocratic Knights themselves, but also soldiers, merchants, craftsmen and adventurers from Italy, France, and beyond. Some of these foreigners settled in Malta and occasionally intermarried with locals.

By the late 18th century, Malta had a population approaching 100,000 and hosted merchants from all over the Mediterranean coming in with their goods. Although Siġġiewi was not a port town, a French or foreign individual could have found his way there, possibly through agricultural enterprises or through personal connections (perhaps working on an estate or as a military man quartered inland). The marriage of *Carlo Meissonier* to a *Borg* illustrates that even in a traditional village, not all grooms were born and bred locals – there was some degree of mobility and integration from outside.

In conclusion, the Siggiewi marriage register of 1790–1800 encapsulates the delicate interplay between continuity and disruption in late eighteenth-century Maltese society. The overall stability of marriage customs – celebrated publicly in church, usually in the third decade of life, and embedded within family networks – reflects the enduring strength of Catholic and communal structures. Yet the sharp decline in weddings during the French occupation, followed by an exceptional surge in 1800, demonstrates how external crises directly shaped the most intimate milestones of village life. The register thus not only records nuptials but also bears witness to the anxieties of war, the resilience of families, and the community's determination to restore normal rhythms once political turmoil subsided. Furthermore, the distribution of surnames reveals both the dominance of certain kin groups and the permeability of the village to outsiders, indicating a society at once deeply rooted and subtly connected to wider currents. Ultimately, the marriage records of Siggiewi in this decade confirm that matrimonial patterns function as a sensitive barometer of demographic cycles, social cohesion, and historical upheaval, offering vital evidence for reconstructing the lived experience of a Maltese parish on the cusp of modernity.

The Death Register 1790 – 1800

The Siggiewi *Liber Mortuorum* provides an essential window into mortality patterns during the decade 1790–1800, recording a total of 1,001 deaths. The annual distribution demonstrates significant fluctuations: the lowest count was in 1794 with 50 deaths, while the most dramatic surge occurred in 1799, when 206 burials were registered. This peak coincides with the aftermath of the French occupation and subsequent blockade (1798–1800), which imposed severe strains on food supply, living conditions, and public health across Malta (Ciappara, 2000).

These pressures were compounded by the continued presence of epidemic disease within the central Mediterranean. Smallpox, in particular, had long been endemic in the Maltese Islands and periodically assumed epidemic proportions during the eighteenth century, causing significant mortality and long-term debilitation, especially among children (Cassar, 1964). Although no parish-level medical statistics permit the precise attribution of deaths in Siggiewi to smallpox during this decade, the disease formed part of the wider epidemiological environment within which late eighteenth-century Maltese communities experienced illness and death.

The Siggiewi figures are thus reflective not only of ordinary demographic rhythms but also of extraordinary historical pressures.

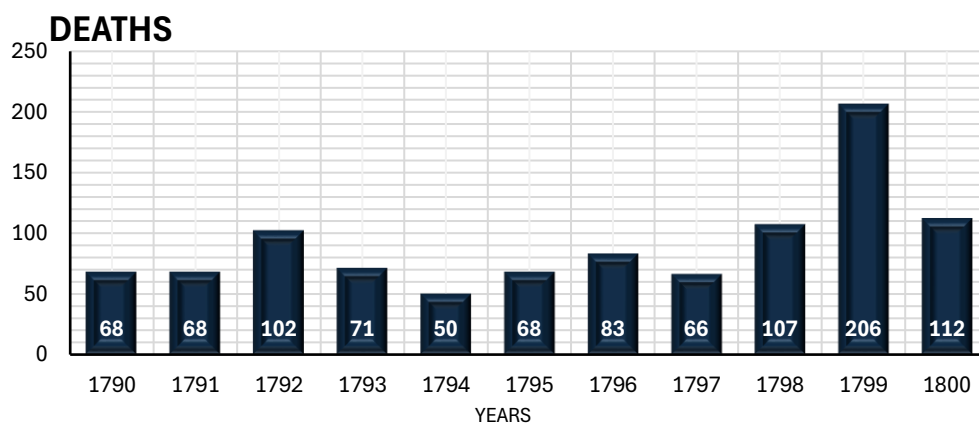


Figure 7, Death List Graph, 1790-1800.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the *Liber 4 Mortuorum*, 1760 – 1820, from the Siggiewi Parish Archive.

The structure of mortality by age is striking. Out of the total 1,001 deaths, 546 (54.5%) involved children aged ten or under. Of these, the largest category was infants (*infantes*), defined here as children from birth up to two years, accounting for 399 burials. The register frequently shows that these deaths occurred within days of birth, underscoring the fragility of early life and the limitations of medical care in late eighteenth-century Malta (Cassar, 2000). Among these were two *expositi* (abandoned infants) in 1795 and 1799,

revealing both the social phenomenon of foundlings and their high vulnerability to early death.

For older children, the register uses gender-specific labels: *puellula/puella* for girls (71 deaths) and *puerulus/puer* for boys (76 deaths). The near balance between sexes suggests no significant gender bias in childhood mortality rates at Siggiewi during this period. Together, these categories of infant and child deaths highlight a demographic reality common to early modern Europe: more than half of all deaths were concentrated in the youngest age cohorts (Wrigley and Schofield, 1981).

The year 1799 merits particular attention. The total of 206 burials, more than triple the annual average of the early 1790s, suggests an acute mortality crisis. Contemporary accounts describe widespread hardship caused by the French blockade, shortages of grain, and outbreaks of disease (Ciappara, 2000). It is therefore highly plausible that the elevated death toll recorded in Siggiewi reflects this conjuncture. The following year, 1800, still saw a heightened total of 112 deaths, before numbers began to decline as stability returned.

The data from the *Liber Mortuorum* therefore paints a vivid picture of demographic vulnerability, especially among the youngest members of society. It also reflects how local mortality patterns were intertwined with broader historical events, such as famine, warfare, and foreign occupation. For Siggiewi, the decade 1790–1800 was marked not only by the ordinary cycle of birth, marriage, and death but also by the extraordinary pressures of crisis, which left their mark on the parish registers.

Clerical and Religious Mortality

The *Liber Mortuorum* also provides valuable insight into the mortality of clergy and religiously affiliated women in Siggiewi during the decade 1790–1800. In total, nineteen priests died in the parish over this period. Their annual distribution reveals two notable

concentrations: three deaths each in 1790 and 1793, and a particularly heavy toll in 1799, when seven priests passed away. This latter concentration coincides with the crisis years of the French occupation and subsequent blockade, when famine, hardship, and disease placed exceptional strain on the population.

The ages at death reveal contrasting patterns. In non-crisis years, priests often reached advanced ages, with several deaths recorded in the seventies and eighties (for example, 84 years in 1793 and 89 years in 1794). Such longevity suggests that, compared with much of the laity, priests may have benefited from relatively greater stability, lighter physical labour, and more secure living conditions (Ciappara, 2000). By contrast, the year 1799 also claimed several comparatively younger priests, with deaths recorded at ages 43, 46, 54, and 58. These premature deaths may reflect heightened vulnerability during the blockade, when malnutrition and epidemic disease affected all social groups, including the clergy.

Alongside priests, the register records the deaths of twelve religiously affiliated women. These are identified primarily as members of the *Tertiaria Ordinis Praedicatoris* (Third Order of St Dominic), as well as women associated with other religious orders, including the Augustinians (*Ordo Eremitarum Sancti Augustini*) and Carmelites (*Ordo Carmelitarum*). It is important to clarify that such women were not cloistered nuns, but belonged to semi-religious lay categories, commonly referred to in Malta as *terziarie* or *bizzoche*, who typically lived in their own homes or with relatives rather than within enclosed monastic communities. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, these women occupied an intermediate religious status, combining devotional practices and, in some cases, the wearing of a habit, with continued integration within lay society (Caruana Dingli, 2025).

The earliest deaths among these women occurred in 1793 and 1794, involving individuals in their eighties, reflecting the capacity of such semi-religious vocations to endure into advanced old age. The most significant concentration, however, again occurred in 1799,

when seven religiously affiliated women died. Particularly striking is the cluster of deaths recorded between 13 and 31 May 1799, during which three women were buried within less than three weeks, all annotated with the phrase *sepultura cœmeterii infecta* (buried from the infected cemetery). This notation strongly suggests exposure to epidemic conditions, likely exacerbated by overcrowded burial grounds and unsanitary practices during the blockade, when mortality rates surged across Malta (Cassar, 2000).

These records underscore the vulnerability of religiously affiliated women living within the community during periods of crisis. Unlike cloistered nuns, tertiaries and *bizzoche* did not benefit from institutional enclosure or regulated communal care, and their exposure to disease was closely tied to conditions affecting the wider population. The mortality of both priests and semi-religious women in 1799 thus illustrates how the upheavals of occupation, famine, and epidemic disease transcended social and religious boundaries, affecting the full spectrum of Siġġiewi's society.

Victims of the French Blockade and Fighting (1798–1799)

The *Liber Mortuorum* of Siġġiewi records a number of men killed during the French occupation and subsequent uprising, providing rare parish-level testimony of how the conflict left its mark on the village. The earliest entries date to 10 June 1798, just two days after the French seizure of Malta, when three Siġġiewi men were killed: Michallef Nicolau (aged 35, husband of Angela, daughter of Eugenius), Schembri Antonius (aged 18, son of Antonius), and Caruana Nicolau (noted as *in proelio gesto* — slain in battle). On the following day, 11 June, another villager, Camilleri Franciscus (aged 30, husband of Maria, daughter of Angolus), was recorded as killed *inficlio rulmore in lettoo Dellimara* — most likely referring to an attack or skirmish near Delimara on the same date. These early deaths correspond with the widespread resistance to the French landing and immediate confrontations between villagers and occupying troops (Ciappara, 2000).

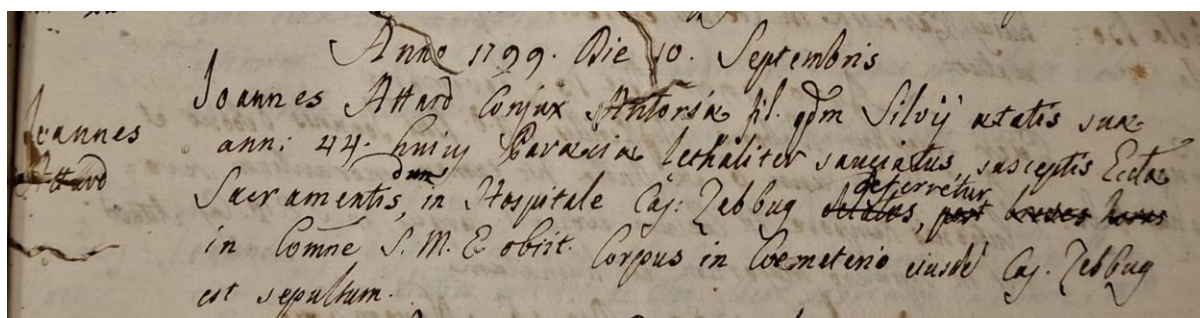


Figure 8, Entry for Joannes Attard, recorded on 10th September 1799, from the *Liber 4 Mortuorum*, 1760 – 1820. Source: Siggiewi Parish Archives. Photograph by the author, reproduced with permission of Siggiewi Parish Archives.

Further casualties continued through 1798–1799. On 19 September 1798, Farrugia Michael (aged 25, son of Joannes Maria) was buried, followed by Grech Joannes Maria (aged 45, husband of Maria, daughter of Rosario) on 15 December 1798. The toll continued into 1799: Vassallo Joseph (aged 30) was buried on 11 January, with the entry noting *sepultus in cœmeterio Tarxien*, suggesting that he died or was first interred in another parish before commemoration in Siggiewi. One day later, Zammit Antonius (aged 56) was buried, followed by Bartolo Joseph on 22 February and Vella Paulu (aged 35) on 12 March. Finally, on 10 September 1799, *Attard Joannes* (aged 44, husband of Antonia) was buried with the specific annotation *lethaliter suscepti sauciatus* — mortally wounded from injuries sustained — a phrase that underscores the violent nature of his death.

Altogether, at least ten identifiable Siggiewi parishioners are explicitly recorded in the death register as victims of the French fighting. Their ages range from 18 to 56 years, indicating that both young men and mature householders took part in the resistance. The careful notations by the parish priest — sometimes specifying battle, wounds, or place of conflict — show how the trauma of war was incorporated into the sacramental record. The French blockade thus emerges not only as a national event but as a deeply local tragedy, felt in the burial grounds of Siggiewi itself.

From a demographic perspective, the loss of adult men in their prime working and reproductive years would have impacted both family structures and the labour force in

Sigǵiewi. From a cultural perspective, their commemoration in the *Liber Mortuorum* constitutes an act of local memory-keeping, embedding the French occupation within the parish's own historical identity. As Cassar (2000) and Ciappara (2000) argue, the uprising against the French was sustained in large part by rural communities such as Sigǵiewi, whose sacrifices are captured not only in chronicles but in the daily pages of the parish registers.

Selected Case Studies from the *Liber Mortuorum* (1790–1800)

While the quantitative evidence of the *Liber Mortuorum* highlights broad mortality patterns, individual entries also provide unique insights into the lived realities of late eighteenth-century Sigǵiewi. Several cases stand out for their social, cultural, and historical significance.

On 18 March 1790, the register records the burial of Anna and Rosaria Schembri, twin daughters (*gemelli*) of Joseph and Maria, who died at only four days old. Their deaths illustrate both the high fragility of neonatal life and the fact that multiple births, though less common, were not unusual. The entry is also a reminder of the heavy emotional burden families faced when confronted with infant loss, especially in cases where more than one child perished simultaneously.

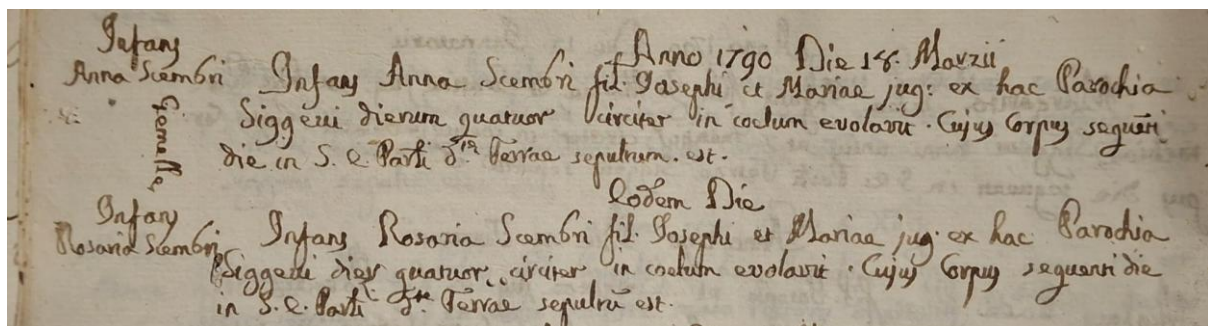


Figure 9, Entry for the twin infants Anna and Rosaria Schembri, recorded on 18th March 1790, from the *Liber 4 Mortuorum*, 1760–1820.

Source: Sigǵiewi Parish Archives. Photograph by the author, reproduced with permission of Sigǵiewi Parish Archives.

Another case demonstrates the importance of nicknames in Maltese society. On 24 June 1790, Franciscus Zammit, aged 70, is referred to as *alias tal-Galani*. Such bynames were widely used in early modern Malta to distinguish families with common surnames and to embed individuals within a broader kinship and social network.

Their appearance in the death registers underlines the interweaving of official ecclesiastical record-keeping with the oral culture of everyday identity (Ciappara, 2000).

Occupational identity and confraternal membership also emerge. On 18 July 1790, Joseph Farrugia, aged 60, described as a *piazzante in S. Angela*, was buried. The entry further notes *sepultus ta' S. Angela in Sacris Reliquiis Hierosolymitanis*, suggesting he was associated with the church of St Angela and linked to relic cults connected to the Order of St John. Such entries reveal how professional roles, confraternities, and spiritual affiliations accompanied villagers into death, reinforcing their social status even at burial (Mallia-Milanes, 1993).

The death of Nicolaus Cutajar, a priest aged 37, on 24 November 1790, highlights the dangers of everyday life. He drowned while fishing, having fallen into the sea after casting his line. This case illustrates the risks clergy also faced in their leisure or subsistence activities, and the frank way in which such accidental deaths were recorded by the parish priest. Similarly, in August 1794, Nicolaus Bonello, aged 51, died after falling into a well (*in fugrerio... in puzoli*), another reminder of the prevalence of accidental mortality in rural settings.

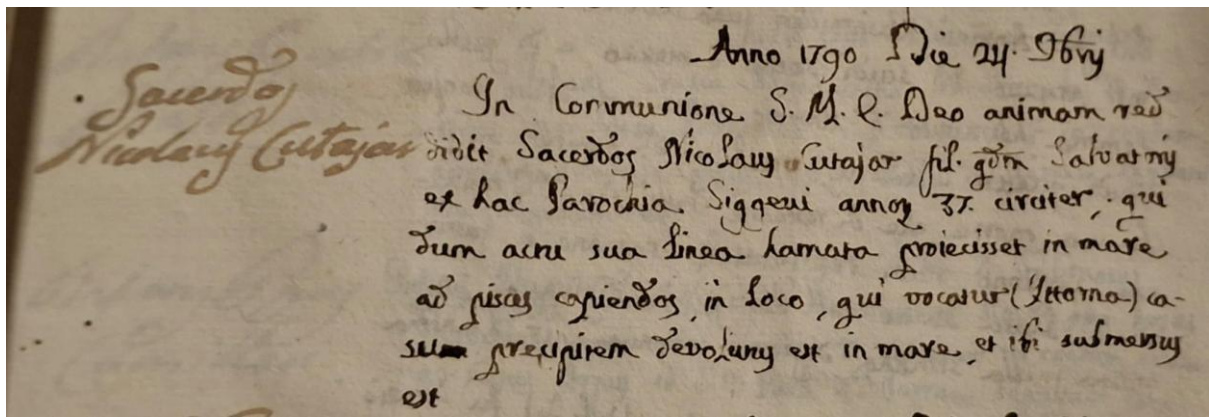


Figure 10, Entry for *Sacerdos Nicolaus Cutajar*, recorded on 24th November 1790, from the *Liber 4 Mortuorum*, 1760 – 1820. Source: Siggiewi Parish Archives. Photograph by the author, reproduced with permission of Siggiewi Parish Archives.

The years 1798–1799 provide a cluster of dramatic entries tied to the French occupation and subsequent blockade. On 10 June 1798, three Siggiewi men — Nicolaus Micallef, Antonius Schembri, and Nicolaus Caruana — were killed during clashes with the French at Delimara, noted in the register as *ceciderint in conflictu cum Gallis in litore Delimara*. Camilleri Franciscus, killed in the same event, is described as having suffered *inflicto vulneribus in litore Delimara*. One entry even specifies that Caruana’s body was burned and left unburied, a detail that conveys the brutality of the fighting and the disruption of normal burial practices.

Other wartime victims include Nicolaus Attard (26 August 1797), killed by a falling stone (*lapide obtestus*), and Michael Farrugia (19 September 1798), described as *lethaliter sauciatus in pugna cum Gallis* — mortally wounded in battle with the French. On 15 December 1798, Joannes Maria Grech was wounded in war and taken to Hospital Saura, where he died, indicating the transfer of wounded villagers to urban institutions for treatment. In January and February 1799, further casualties were noted: *Joseph Vassallo*, killed by cannon shot (*pila tormenti bellici*); Joseph Bartolo, fatally wounded by a firearm during the revolution (*ballista sauciatus tempore revolutionis*); and Paulus Vella, aged 35, wounded in a brawl by musket pellets (*ignes globulo*). These entries demonstrate both the scale of

violence and the priest's insistence on recording its causes, embedding wartime suffering within the sacramental framework of parish life.

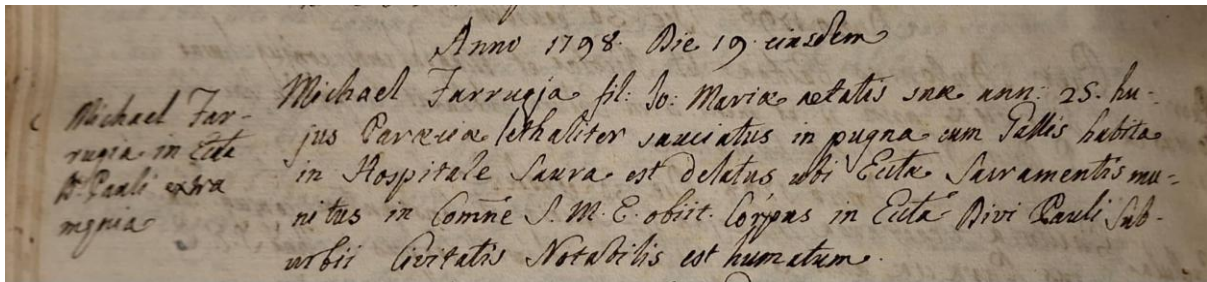


Figure 11. Entry for Michael Farrugia, recorded on 19th September 1798, from the *Liber 4 Mortuorum*, 1760 – 1820. Source: Siggiewi Parish Archives. Photograph by the author, reproduced with permission of Siggiewi Parish Archives.

Taken together, these case studies illustrate the diverse mortality landscape of Siggiewi. Infant twins dying within days of birth, a villager remembered by his nickname, confraternal associations, accidents at sea or in wells, and the extraordinary violence of the French blockade all appear side by side in the same parish register. This juxtaposition highlights the interweaving of the ordinary and extraordinary, and the way in which parish priests sought to record not only the fact of death but also its context, meaning, and causes. In so doing, the *Liber Mortuorum* of Siggiewi becomes not just a demographic record but also a narrative of community memory, where family, faith, occupation, accident, and war were all inscribed as part of the village's collective experience.

Hospitals and Charitable Institutions

The Siggiewi *Liber Mortuorum* also preserves numerous references to hospitals and hospices, often noted with the term *xenodochium*, a late Latin word meaning house for strangers, widely used in early modern Malta to denote charitable hospitals. These entries reveal that a significant number of parishioners did not die in their own homes but in institutional care facilities, underscoring the embeddedness of rural life within the island's wider medical and charitable infrastructure.

The principal hospital recorded is the Sacra Infermeria in Valletta, the Hospitallers' grand hospital, also described as the *xenodochium Hierosolymitanum*. Alongside this appear

references to the *Hospitale Pauperorum* (hospital of the poor), suggesting the existence of specialised wards or institutions for destitute patients. These entries demonstrate the role of the Hospitaller medical system in extending care to villagers such as those from Siggiewi, even in their final days.

At a more regional level, other hospitals are mentioned: the Hospitale Casalis Żebbuġ, serving the nearby town of Żebbuġ; and the *Sacrum Hospitale Sancti Spiritus sub Notabili*, almost certainly the Santo Spirito hospital at Rabat, a long-standing medieval foundation that continued to serve the sick into the late eighteenth century. Further institutions included the Hospitale Saura in Valletta, a charitable home for poor women founded by the noblewoman Fra Antonia de Saurà, and the Passerini Hospital at Floriana, established through the legacy of Fra Giovanni Battista Passerini of the Order of St John. Finally, the register records deaths at the Hospitale Sancti Dominici sub Notabili, the Dominican hospice situated outside Mdina.

The inclusion of these hospitals within the parish death register demonstrates how Siggiewi's mortality was not confined to the village. Instead, illness and end-of-life care often drew parishioners into Valletta, Floriana, Rabat, Mdina, and Żebbuġ. This dispersal reflects the interconnectedness of Malta's rural and urban landscapes: villagers might seek treatment in larger towns or be transferred there in cases of serious illness or injury. In turn, their deaths were carefully inscribed back into the Siggiewi registers, maintaining the integrity of parish memory. Such evidence underscores the dual role of the *Liber Mortuorum*: as a local record of death, and as a window onto the island-wide structures of charity, medicine, and religious care in late eighteenth-century Malta.

The Siggiewi *Liber Mortuorum* for 1790–1800 reflects both structural mortality patterns and the disruptions of crisis. Infant and child deaths dominated, accounting for more than half of burials. Priests and *terziarie/ bizzoche*, while often living into old age, were not

immune to famine and epidemic conditions, particularly during the blockade. War casualties, unusually detailed in the register, demonstrate the immediacy with which national events penetrated local communities. Case studies highlight the hazards of rural life, the persistence of nicknames, and the intertwining of social, occupational, and spiritual identities with death.

Finally, the record of hospital deaths illustrates the interconnectedness of rural Siggiewi with Malta's urban charitable institutions. Taken together, the death register emerges not simply as a ledger of mortality but as a collective memory of resilience, fragility, and identity at a time of profound upheaval.

Final Reflections

The study of Siggiewi's parish registers between 1790 and 1800 reveals how the cycles of birth, marriage, and death were experienced, recorded, and remembered within a single Maltese village at the end of the eighteenth century. These records demonstrate both the ordinariness of demographic rhythms and the disruptions of historical crisis.

Baptismal entries emphasised the centrality of the parish in marking the arrival of new life, embedding infants not only within their families but also within the wider liturgical framework of the Church. Marriage registers reflected the importance of kinship alliances, the persistence of ecclesiastical regulation through dispensations, and the resilience of family formation even amidst external uncertainty. The *Liber Mortuorum* then provided a mirror of fragility, with more than half of all deaths involving children under ten, yet also offering glimpses of longevity among clergy and elders, as well as vivid accounts of accidents and war casualties.

What emerges most strongly is the dual character of parish registers. On one hand, they functioned as sacramental and demographic records, preserving the essential markers of family life. On the other, they acted as community chronicles, capturing details of

occupation, nicknames, confraternities, accidents, and the violence of the French occupation. These layers reveal that the parish priest was not only a registrar of sacraments but also a custodian of local memory, inscribing into the official record the lived realities of ordinary and extraordinary times alike.

The chapter demonstrates that family in late eighteenth-century Siggiewi was both resilient and vulnerable. Resilient, in the ways kinship and marriage persisted through famine, war, and occupation; vulnerable, in the high rates of infant mortality and the loss of men during conflict. Above all, the registers show how life in Siggiewi was deeply interwoven with wider Maltese and Mediterranean structures — of religion, charity, warfare, and health — while remaining rooted in the intimate rhythms of village households. By following the trajectory of life from baptism to marriage to death, this chapter highlights the ways in which family was both the foundation of social organisation and the primary site where historical upheaval was most acutely felt.

Chapter 4: Religion and Religious Devotions

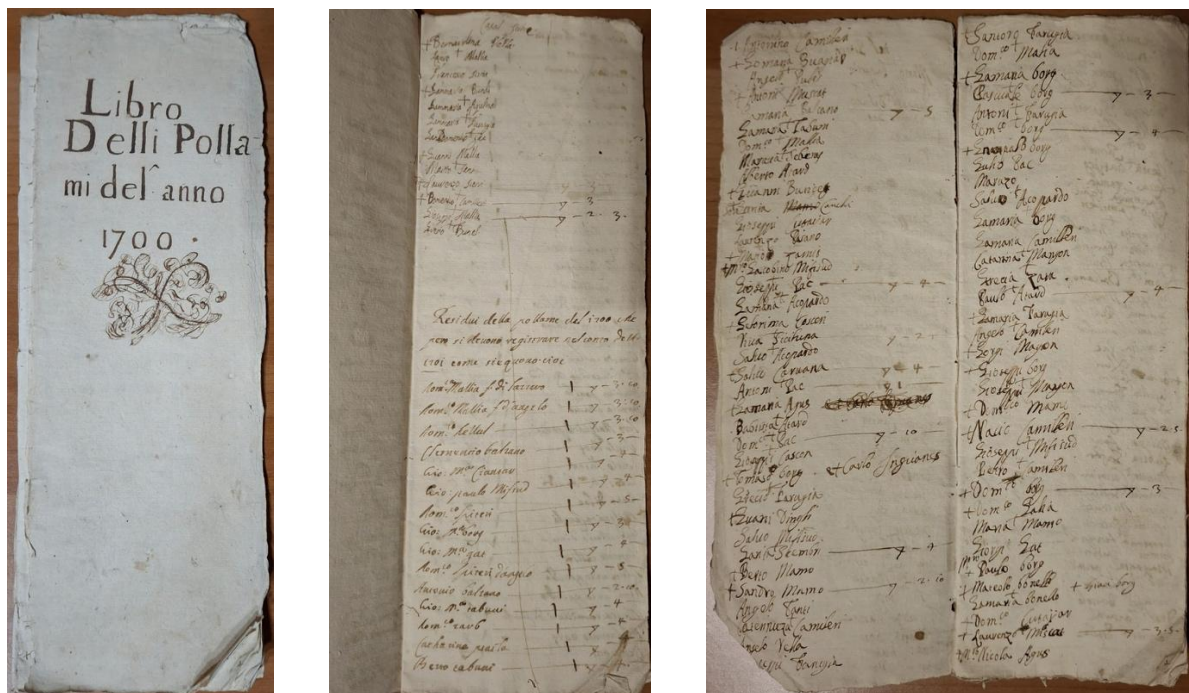
Religion permeated every dimension of village life in late eighteenth-century Malta. In rural communities such as Siggiewi, devotional practice structured the rhythms of the day, shaped communal identity, and provided the institutional framework through which villagers engaged with one another. The decade 1790–1800 was marked by political upheaval—the final years of Hospitaller rule followed by the brief but disruptive French occupation—yet these external changes scarcely altered the deeply rooted religious culture of the parish. This chapter explores the principal components of that culture: the daily and annual cycles of devotion; the central role of the parish clergy; the organisational and spiritual significance of confraternities; and the transmission of religious knowledge through catechesis. Together, these elements reveal a community whose social cohesion, values, and sense of belonging were anchored in long-standing religious structures. Siggiewi serves as the primary case study, with reference to parallel practices across Malta to highlight both local particularities and broader island-wide patterns of Catholic life.

A Seventeenth-Century Parish Financial Ledger as Contextual Evidence

During the course of research in the Siggiewi Parish Archives, a manuscript predating the chronological focus of this dissertation was identified:

Libro delli Pollami dell'anno 1700. Although outside the period 1790–1800 examined here, the document offers valuable contextual insight into the long-term administrative and economic practices of the parish. In early modern ecclesiastical usage, *pollami* did not refer strictly to poultry but functioned as a category for minor dues, small tithes, and miscellaneous payments owed to the parish. The ledger shows the systematic recording of such obligations, the delegation of their collection, and the manner in which outstanding balances (*residui*) were carried forward between accounting years. Of particular relevance to the present study is the way this earlier manuscript reflects continuities in parish financial culture. The

terminology, structure of entries, and mechanisms of transferring responsibility for the collection of dues illuminate the longstanding administrative routines that underpinned rural parish life in Malta. Although outside the chronological frame of this study, the 1700 *pollami* ledger is valuable because it demonstrates long-term administrative continuity within the parish. Its structured recording of dues, the handling of residui, and the delegation of collection responsibilities reveal practices that remained fundamentally unchanged by the 1790s. This continuity underscores that Siggiewi's rich devotional life rested on established and durable financial routines, providing the administrative stability necessary for sustaining parish rituals, confraternities, and feast-day obligations.



Figures 12, 13 and 14, Photos of the Libro delli Pollami del'anno 1700.

Source: Siggiewi Parish Archives. Photographs by the author, reproduced with permission of Siggiewi Parish Archives.

Religious Practice in Daily Life and Yearly Cycle

Religious devotions structured the daily routine and annual calendar of Siggiewi's inhabitants. Each day was punctuated by practices such as the ringing of the *Angelus* bells in the morning, at midday, and in the evening – calls to prayer that

villagers heeded as a matter of habit and faith. Contemporary observations confirm that even centuries later in Malta, it was common to see a shopkeeper pause in reverence when the church bells pealed the Angelus, underscoring how deeply faith was integrated into daily life (aleteia.org). In the late eighteenth century, such pauses for prayer and the ubiquitous presence of sacred images and home altars would have been a normal part of the rhythm of life in Siġġiewi. Ordinary people often recited the rosary in the family in the evenings and taught their children basic prayers, blending domestic life with devotional acts. This integration of domestic routine and devotional practice illustrates how Catholicism operated as a framework of everyday behaviour rather than as an isolated set of rituals.

Sundays and feast days were the high points of the weekly and yearly cycle. On Sundays, by Church precept, villagers attended Mass at the parish church of St. Nicholas, filling its baroque interior that they or their forebears had labored to build and adorn. The current impressive parish church (dedicated to St. Nicholas of Bari) had been erected in the late XVII century by the villagers' own efforts and funds, reflecting the community's piety and pride. By the 1790s, that church was the vibrant center of religious life: each Sunday and holy day, the congregation gathered for the liturgy, after which the rest of the day was spent in rest, family visitation, and often further devotional activities (such as saying the rosary or attending Vespers in the afternoon).

Feasts of saints and the major liturgical festivals (Christmas, Carnival's eve liturgies, Lent and Holy Week, Easter, etc.) punctuated the year with elaborate celebrations. In Siġġiewi, the feast of the patron St. Nicholas was the principal annual feast. The celebrations typically extended over a week and followed a well-established format: a solemn triduum (three days of preparatory sermons), Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and a *Te Deum*, solemn Vespers on the eve, and a High Mass on the feast day, followed by a

grand procession through the village streets. By longstanding tradition, the statue of St. Nicholas – reportedly one of the earliest processional titular statues introduced in Malta specifically for a patron saint (Mercieca, 2010)– was carried shoulder-high by the confraternity members. Simon Mercieca’s study notes the importance of the old statue of St. Nicholas in Siggiewi, which may have been the very first processional statue of a patron saint commissioned in Malta (apart from statues of the Virgin). This suggests that Siggiewi was at the forefront of developing the classic Maltese *fešta* tradition of a saint’s image borne in procession, indicating the village’s strong devotional identity. The procession, accompanied by clergy, confraternities in their distinctive habits, and crowds of faithful, wound through streets illuminated by lanterns and fireworks, as band music played – blending the sacred and civic rejoicing. While the fireworks and band were secular touches, the core of the *fešta* was profoundly religious: it was an expression of communal devotion and an assertion of Siggiewi’s patronal pride within the wider Catholic culture of Malta. The prominence of processions and public ritual demonstrates how devotional practice functioned as an expression of communal identity and reinforced social cohesion within the parish.

Notably, communal identity and religion were tightly interwoven. Each village had (and still has) intense loyalty to its patron saint and parish. Frans Ciappara observes that the communal dimension of the parish was rooted in the people’s devotion to their own town; despite Malta’s small size and villages being close together, parishioners strove to retain their separate identities (*Ciappara, 2008*). In the eighteenth century, newcomers to a village remained “outsiders” in subtle ways – for instance, one Giuseppe who moved to Siggiewi from the nearby town of Mosta was forever nicknamed “il-Mosti” (the man from Mosta) by Siggiewi residents (*Ciappara, 2008*). This underscores how tightly knit these communities were, and how patron saints’ cults were symbols of local identity. A person’s village of origin, marked by its patron, was a defining trait; immigrants were seldom fully

absorbed into their adopted parish community (Ciappara, 2008). Thus, religious devotion was not only a matter of personal faith but also of collective identity – to be from Siggiewi meant to be a devotee of St. Nicholas, just as being from Qrendi meant loyalty to the Assumption of Our Lady, etc. These loyalties sometimes bred rivalry or at least a strong sense of distinction between villages, reinforcing the notion that each parish was a world of its own under the patronage of its particular saints.

The liturgical year in late eighteenth-century Siggiewi was densely packed with devotions. Aside from the patronal feast, parishioners took part in numerous other observances: the feasts of Our Lady (Candlemas, Annunciation, Assumption, and others), the Holy Week rituals and *Good Friday* procession, Corpus Christi, the feasts of popular saints (such as St. Mary Magdalene, St. Roch, St. Paul's Shipwreck, etc., many of which were celebrated island-wide). They also observed devotional trends of the era, such as the growing cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. For example, at the nearby village of Ghaxaq, a zealous layman Angelo Zammit in 1773 personally funded the expenses of the new feast of the Sacred Heart and even commissioned a painting of Jesus for veneration, "for the great affection he professes towards the Divine Heart of Jesus and to propagate this devotion in the heart of the people" (Ciappara, 2008, pg 681). Siggiewi's faithful were part of this broader Counter-Reformation spirituality; in 1769 a pious woman, Maria Vella of Siggiewi, donated 364 *scudi* to the local Archconfraternity specifically to institute an extra Eucharistic devotion – a sermon on the Blessed Sacrament every fifth Sunday, followed by Benediction with the *Pange Lingua* hymn being chanted in adoration (Ciappara, 2008, pg 680). This example shows how lay initiative enriched the devotional life: the laity not only attended the church services, but often sponsored additional rites or decorations to honor God and the saints.

Indeed, historians note that the laity “initiated much of the Catholic practice” and willingly paid for a “dense liturgical year” of rituals and celebrations (Ciappara, 2008, pg 677). Devotional life was expressed in processions, extra Masses, adornment of images, and acts of charity. Many of these practices were funded by the people themselves through offerings or bequests. For instance, devout individuals frequently left in their wills sums of money to finance annual masses, lamp oil for altars, or bread and alms for the poor on certain feast days (Ciappara, 2008). During parish feasts, it was customary for the well-to-do to host or sponsor public distributions of food and drink. In 1790s Malta, on a major feast in a village, “*the poor were frequently entertained at the expense of the rich... fruit and wine were distributed*” to the less fortunate (Ciappara, 2008, 674). Charitable obligations were seen as part and parcel of celebrating a holy day. Likewise, wealthy testators sometimes established legacies to provide dowries for orphaned girls or to sustain a charity – an expression of the Christian duty of charity interwoven with the festal cycle (Ciappara, 2008). In Siggiewi and elsewhere, there was a pious understanding that honoring God and the saints also meant caring for neighbors in need, especially during sacred times.

Another important aspect of daily religious life was the intersection of faith with folk beliefs. The populace’s faith was sincere, but often intermixed with folk religion and practices that today might be termed superstitious. Parish priests noted that sometimes their presence was requested in unusual contexts – one account notes that a priest’s presence might even be sought in quasi-magical rituals, for instance to read the Gospel over the sick or to bless fields and animals, reflecting how people saw sacramental power as a protection in all facets of life (Ciappara, 2008). This continuity between orthodoxy and popular belief reflects a pattern identified across Catholic Europe, where pastoral reform coexisted with deeply rooted folk religiosity. While Enlightenment ideas were penetrating Europe in the late 1700s, rural Malta remained profoundly traditional. Jean Delumeau’s work on early modern

Catholicism similarly demonstrates that the persistence of fear, sin, and ritual protection formed a central component of popular devotion across Europe, placing Siggiewi within a broader Mediterranean pattern of resilient, tradition-focused piety (Delumeau, 1977). Frans Ciappara's research on private life and religion in this era indicates that even as a small educated elite in the cities toyed with Enlightenment rationalism, the common folk maintained age-old devotions and were largely untouched by new secular philosophies (Ciappara, 1994). The tumultuous events of 1798 bear this out: when the French occupiers, inspired by revolutionary secularism, attempted to confiscate church treasures and curtail the public role of religion, the Maltese (led by village clergy) rose in armed rebellion. The strong reaction against French anti-Church measures underscores how indispensable the Catholic faith was to Maltese daily life and identity. In the countryside, devotions continued unabated during the uprising; indeed, besieging French forces in 1799, Maltese villagers carried banners of saints and invoked divine aid in their struggle. Religion thus provided not only spiritual solace but also a unifying framework for community resilience in times of crisis.

The Parish Clergy and Their Role in Community Life

Clerical Office and Tridentine Expectations

In late eighteenth-century Malta, the parish priest—sometimes an archpriest in larger villages—stood at the centre of religious, social, and administrative life. In Siggiewi, the parish priest functioned as spiritual leader, educator, and administrator of the parish's temporal goods. By the 1790s, the reforms of the Council of Trent, transmitted to Malta through diocesan synods of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had firmly shaped clerical expectations. Bishops such as Girolamo Molina and Vincenzo Labini (Bishop of Malta 1780–1807) demanded resident clergy, moral probity, doctrinal training, and regular reporting on parish conditions.

Sacramental Duties and Pastoral Presence

The clergy's foremost responsibility was the administration of the sacraments. Parish priests celebrated Mass, heard confessions, distributed Holy Communion, baptised infants, witnessed marriages, and conducted funeral rites. These duties inserted the priest into every household's life-cycle: from birth to death, he mediated divine grace, moral guidance, and communal cohesion.

Pastoral presence extended beyond scheduled liturgy. Priests could be summoned at any hour for emergencies, particularly to administer the last rites. As Ciappara notes, the village priest was seen as "*indispensable ... he read the Gospel over the heads of the sick*" and even assisted in certain folk rituals intended to ward off evil (Ciappara, 2008, p. 677). Their role encompassed moments of crisis—including droughts or pest infestations—during which the clergy led public prayers for relief. Spiritual leadership, therefore, was inseparable from everyday life.

Administrative and Economic Responsibilities

Beyond ritual duties, the clergy managed the material and financial administration of the parish. They oversaw the maintenance of the church fabric, sacred vessels, vestments, and ecclesiastical property. Income derived from benefices, donations, and customary dues, all of which required systematic record-keeping.

The Libro delli Pollami of 1700 from Siggiewi's archives provides an early example of this administrative culture. It documents dues, offerings, arrears, and annual transfers—revealing a long tradition of fiscal accountability. By the 1790s, financial administration had become even more formalised, with annual accounts submitted to episcopal authorities listing income (rents, confraternity contributions, alms, stole fees, etc.) and expenditure (liturgical supplies, repairs, feast expenses, charity). As Ciappara observes, the spiritual mission of the parish was underpinned by rigorous economic management (Ciappara, 2008). The church

was at once a centre of devotion and a complex institution with budgets, assets, and obligations.

Clergy Income and Social Standing

The income of parish priests derived from benefices, stole fees, and most notably the *décima* or *ghexur*, often paid at Easter. Ciappara notes that parishioners “*paid [the priest] handsomely, with the tithe or Easter offerings*” (2008, p. 677). Minor dues recorded in the 1700 ledger formed part of this broad system of parish offerings. Although many clergy complained of poverty, those serving large agricultural parishes—such as Siġġiewi—were relatively comfortable by contemporary standards. Siġġiewi’s growing prosperity, culminating in its elevation to *città* status by Grand Master Hompesch in 1797, only reinforced the respectable social position of its clergy.

Some anecdotes from the period suggest that certain priests hosted feast-day banquets while still pleading financial hardship when approached for diocesan contributions (Ciappara, 2009). Though perhaps exaggerated, such stories illustrate the nuanced economic position clergy occupied: respected, moderately secure, and central to the village’s social fabric.

Clergy–Laity Dynamics: Cooperation and Conflict

Clerical authority was not absolute. As Ciappara argues, “*the main reason for the rivalry between the faithful and the pastor was that the people themselves took an active role in the parish*” (2005, p. 1). Maltese parishioners regarded the church as *their* communal institution, with the priest serving as steward rather than proprietor. Churchwardens — often selected informally by villagers — acted as intermediaries, and confraternities exercised influential oversight.

Conflicts did occur. In Żejtun in the 1770s, the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament mobilised villagers to lock their priest, Don Francesco Xuereb, out of the church,

forcing episcopal intervention. In Bormla, another priest was resisted by the Confraternity of the Holy Crucifix, which withheld customary fees until he relented (Ciappara). These cases illustrate John Bossy's view of early modern Catholicism as a "social system" in which confraternities acted as counterweights to clerical authority (Bossy, 1985).

There is no evidence of such extreme conflict in Siggiewi during the 1790s. Instead, the relationship appears characterised by mutual collaboration and occasional negotiation rather than confrontation.

Local Roots and Collaboration in Parish Governance

Many priests in Siggiewi originated from local families, strengthening their connection with parishioners. Their familiarity with community dynamics fostered trust and cooperation. Day-to-day functioning relied heavily on lay support: churchwardens oversaw finances and maintenance; sacristans ensured order; and local midwives and charitable workers complemented the clergy's spiritual responsibilities. This collaborative model helped stabilise parish life and distribute responsibilities among multiple actors.

Preaching, Catechesis, and Moral Regulation

Clergy also shaped religious education and moral instruction. Bishops required regular Sunday homilies, Lenten preaching series, and catechetical sessions for youth. Pastoral visitations questioned priests on their teaching methods and the spiritual condition of the flock.

Siggiewi's clergy appear to have fulfilled these duties diligently. Archpriest Francesco Saverio Vella is noted for organising well-attended sermons, maintaining order, and leading public devotions—including processions for rain during the drought of 1797 (Ciappara, 2008). These practices reinforced the priest's position as guardian of communal morality.

Clerical Leadership in Times of Crisis

The clergy's role extended into moments of political upheaval. During the French occupation (1798–99), Ecclesiastical figures, including Bishop Labini, played a role in fostering spiritual resilience during this period, encouraging perseverance and framing feast days as occasions for communal prayer and reflection. This involvement illustrates how clerics remained crucial actors in sustaining collective morale and religious identity during times of uncertainty.

Overview of Key Insights

The parish clergy of Siggiewi embodied a multifaceted role: spiritual authority, administrative stewardship, moral guide, and mediator within a dynamic church–community relationship. Their work was supported—and sometimes challenged—by an active laity, demonstrating the shared ownership of parish life characteristic of eighteenth-century Malta. Through routine sacramental practice and extraordinary leadership during crises, the clergy provided continuity, stability, and cohesion, anchoring community life within a deeply rooted Catholic framework. Their effectiveness is evident in the vitality of devotion in Siggiewi in the 1790s, where established administrative traditions, strong pastoral engagement, and collaborative governance sustained a robust religious culture even amid the upheavals of the era.

Lay Participation: Confraternities and Devotional Societies

Confraternities in Maltese Parish Life

One of the defining features of Maltese Catholicism in the early modern and late eighteenth century was the prominence of confraternities—lay religious brotherhoods that animated parish devotion and provided organised structures for lay participation. In Siggiewi, as in all Maltese parishes, confraternities involved ordinary parishioners directly in the

spiritual, ritual, and social functions of the Church. Although membership was generally male, many parishes also hosted parallel female sodalities.

Confraternities became standard in Malta following the Council of Trent. Apostolic Visitor Pietro Dusina (1575) mandated the establishment of a Blessed Sacrament confraternity in every parish, and by 1588 Bishop Gargallo ensured the universal presence of a Rosary confraternity (Agius, website). A Sodality of Christian Doctrine also emerged in most parishes to teach catechism, especially to children. By the late eighteenth century, Siggiewi possessed all these groups, together forming a structured and vibrant confraternal landscape.

Major Confraternities in Siggiewi

Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament (Tas-Sagrament)

Founded by the late sixteenth century, this confraternity was the senior and most prestigious group in the parish. Its mission was the promotion of Eucharistic devotion, including organising Corpus Christi celebrations, monthly Eucharistic processions, and the Forty Hours Adoration (Agius, website). Members wore a white tunic with a red mozzetta and performed works of mercy such as accompanying the priest carrying Viaticum to the sick—an act considered one of their sacred duties. Their role made them central to Siggiewi's liturgical life and to the public expression of Eucharistic piety.

Confraternity of the Holy Rosary (Tar-Rużarju)

Established in Siggiewi in 1585, this confraternity promoted Marian devotion through collective rosary recitation, upkeep of Marian altars, and organisation of October devotions and the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary (Agius, website). Members wore a blue mozzetta over the white habit and carried rosary beads in processions. Their activities supported the parish's Marian calendar and reinforced the prestige of Marian worship within the village.

Confraternity of St Joseph

Founded in 1745, the St Joseph confraternity reflected the growing eighteenth-century devotion to St Joseph as protector of families and patron of a holy death. Though newer, it became active by the 1790s and participated in the feast of St Joseph on 19 March. Members carried a blue banner and likely assisted with sermons, liturgies, and processional responsibilities associated with the saint (Agius, website). Siġġiewi's early foundation made it one of the island's earlier Joseph confraternities.

Sodality of Christian Doctrine (L-Għaqda tad-Duttrina)

Probably founded in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, this sodality was dedicated to catechesis rather than processional ritual. Open to children, youth, and sometimes adults, it ensured systematic religious instruction on Sundays. Although supervised by clergy, much of the teaching was carried out by lay catechists, making it an essential mechanism for transmitting Catholic doctrine across generations (Agius, website).

Organisation, Membership, and Economic Resources

Membership in confraternities was broad and generally open to any respectable male parishioner upon paying a modest fee. Each confraternity had its own internal structure—typically including a prior, assistants, secretary, and treasurer—and maintained separate financial accounts. Some accumulated assets through donations or benefactors, funding candles, feast decorations, banners, and charitable works.

Confraternities enhanced parish ritual life through their investment in regalia—processional banners (*vexilla*), embroidered insignia, coloured mozzettas, and reserved spaces within the church. The visual presence of confraternities during processions, carrying candles

and banners, reinforced community identity and fostered a sense of shared participation that transcended social class.

Their economic contributions were significant. When Siggiewi recast its great church bell in 1726, confraternities contributed financially alongside villagers, helping raise over 1,235 scudi (Ciappara 2008). Elsewhere, confraternities funded improvements such as organs, vestments, or structural repairs. In Qormi, a confraternity even administered a benefactor's legacy for dowries, explicitly independent of the parish priest—a sign of their semi-autonomous status (Ciappara, online).

Clergy–Confraternity Relations

The relationship between clergy and confraternities could be cooperative or contentious. While the parish priest typically acted as spiritual moderator, confraternities retained control over their internal governance and finances. This autonomy sometimes led to conflict—especially if either party felt its prerogatives challenged.

Maltese history provides several notable examples. In Żejtun, the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament spearheaded opposition to their parish priest in the 1770s, even locking him out of the church. In Bormla, confraternity members withheld customary fees to pressure a pastor with whom they disagreed. In one dramatic incident, a confraternity in Żejtun reinterred their deceased priest away from the place of honour he had chosen for himself (Ciappara, Confraternal). Although such extremes were rare, they illustrate confraternities' ability to act as checks on clerical authority—a phenomenon consistent with Bossy's (1985) interpretation of confraternities across Europe as lay structures that balanced clerical power.

By contrast, there is no evidence of similar conflicts in Siggiewi during the 1790s. The available records suggest a climate of collaboration: confraternities provided manpower and resources for parish devotions, while clergy offered spiritual guidance and public recognition of their contributions.

Confraternities as Vehicles of Popular Piety and Social Cohesion

Confraternities played a central role in shaping Siġġiewi's religious culture. They regulated devotions, organised feast-day processions, and ensured continuity in rituals and charitable activities. They also fostered strong bonds of fraternity: nobles, farmers, and craftsmen could all do the same habit, creating a temporary equality within the hierarchical structure of the Church.

Their importance extended beyond ritual, offering laypeople a structured and dignified way to participate in the governance and spiritual life of their parish. In this sense, confraternities democratised religious expression, making devotion an activity enacted not only by clergy but by the community itself. Their endurance into the modern era testifies to their deep-rooted significance in Maltese parish life.

Lay participation through confraternities formed a cornerstone of Siġġiewi's devotional environment in the late eighteenth century. These groups blended spiritual purpose with social cohesion, economic support, and communal identity. Their activities mirrored broader Mediterranean patterns of lay agency described by Delumeau and Bossy, situating Siġġiewi firmly within wider European models of parish religious culture. Through confraternities, the laity were not passive recipients of clerical instruction but active contributors to the religious life that defined their community.

Religious Education and Catechesis

Religious devotion in Siġġiewi was buttressed by ongoing religious education, which ensured that each generation understood the tenets of the faith and the meaning of the rituals they practiced. Formal schooling in a modern sense was limited in 1790s rural Malta – there were only a few small private schools and informal teachers, and widespread public education would not arrive until the late 19th century. Catechesis by the Church, therefore, was the primary educational experience for most villagers.

From a young age, children in Siggiewi were taught their prayers, the catechism (Q&A on Catholic doctrine), and basic Bible stories, usually by parents at home and then in more organised fashion by the parish. The Confraternity (or Sodality) of Christian Doctrine mentioned earlier was the vehicle for this. Typically, every Sunday afternoon, or on designated weekdays, children would gather at the parish church (or an adjacent hall or oratory) for *dottrina* (doctrine class). Surviving records from various parishes indicate that by the 1780s this was a well-established routine across Malta: local clergy, sometimes assisted by literate laymen or the schoolmaster (if the village had one), would quiz the children on the catechism. They used printed catechisms approved by the Bishop (in the late 18th century, a Maltese-Italian catechism by Bishop Vincenzo Labini was in circulation). There was also a strong emphasis on memorisation of prayers (Our Father, Hail Mary, Creed) and the Ten Commandments. Catechesis thus ensured continuity of religious knowledge and internalised the normative values promoted by post-Tridentine Catholicism.

The importance of catechesis was repeatedly stressed by Church authorities. The Council of Trent had decreed that pastors must ensure parishioners are instructed, and Malta's bishops echoed this. In pastoral visit reports, Siggiewi's priest would have been asked how many children attended catechism and whether they knew their Christian doctrine. The lay confraternity for doctrine often helped organise an annual prize or small celebration for children who performed well or to mark milestones like First Holy Communion. For instance, in some parishes the feast of St. Aloysius Gonzaga (patron of youth) or St. Anne (patron of Christian mothers) was linked to the catechism groups – a special Mass might be held for children and they would participate by answering catechism questions publicly, demonstrating their learning (Ciappara, 2008). It's recorded that St. Aloysius' cult was popular and his feast on June 21 was celebrated in many villages with youth-focused devotions (Ciappara, 2008); as noted earlier, the Siggiewi parishioners even petitioned the

bishop to move St. Aloysius' feast celebration to a Sunday so that everyone (especially the youth) could attend without hindrance. This indicates both the commitment to involving youth in devotional life and the flexibility the local church tried to exercise to maximize participation in religious education and feasts.

Religious education was not confined to children. Adults too were the object of continuing instruction through sermons and missions. The Sunday sermon (in Maltese vernacular) was a key means for the priest to teach the congregation about scripture, morality, and correct practice. Preachers might denounce lingering superstitions or moral lapses (such as blasphemy, quarrels, or not observing holy days) and exhort the faithful to live virtuously. Additionally, the late 18th century saw the rise of parish missions – intensive weeks of preaching by visiting missionary priests (often Jesuits or Franciscans invited from abroad or from Valletta) who would catechise the whole community with fervor. There is evidence that in the mid-1790s, a mission was held in Siggiewi (as part of a wave of missions conducted around 1794–1797 in Malta) which drew huge crowds and led to emotional renewals of faith, such as villagers going to confession in large numbers and public bonfires to burn occasions of sin (for example, superstitious charms or immoral books) (Ciappara, 1994). These missions supplemented the regular catechetical instruction and were memorable spiritual events for the populace.

For those who could read (a minority, likely the village notary, some clergy, a few educated laymen), there were also devotional books and pamphlets available – often in Italian, as Maltese language material was scarce beyond oral tradition. However, literacy was not necessary for religious formation due to the strongly oral and visual pedagogy of the Church: the extensive use of imagery (paintings, statues, tableaux) in the church taught biblical narratives and lives of saints at a glance; and the rituals themselves, repeated annually, imparted a deep familiarity with core Christian mysteries (for example, every Holy

Week the people watched the reenactments of the Passion in processions, which reinforced their understanding of Christ's sacrifice).

In Siġġiewi, the presence of the confraternities also meant peer education – older members would mentor the younger ones in how to serve at the altar, how to lead the rosary, or carry out processional duties. Many devotions (like the Rosary or litanies) were learned by participation: children would join the evening family rosary or the confraternity's public recitation and absorb the prayers by repetition.

Overall, religious education ensured that the devotions practiced were not just external rituals but carried meaning for the faithful. By the time a Siġġiewi youth reached adulthood around 1800, he or she would have internalised a comprehensive worldview centered on Catholic teaching: creation, sin and redemption, the intercession of the Virgin and saints, the necessity of the sacraments, and the hope of heaven. This knowledge was not merely academic – it was woven into the fabric of life through the very devotions and communal practices we have described. The effectiveness of this system is apparent in the consistency of Maltese piety: visitors to Malta even in the early 19th century, under British rule, remarked on the extraordinary attachment of the common people to their religion and how even those of little formal schooling could explain the basics of their faith and would salute images of saints with genuine fervor.

The religious world of Siġġiewi in 1790–1800 emerges as a tightly woven system in which faith shaped social life, identity, and communal action. Daily devotions, parish feasts, and the liturgical calendar gave structure and meaning to village routines. The clergy embodied both spiritual and administrative authority, ensuring continuity in worship while maintaining the institutional foundations that supported parish life.

Confraternities provided the laity with a formal role in organising devotions, sustaining charitable works, and asserting communal identity; their participation both

complemented clerical leadership and acted as a counterbalance when necessary. Religious education, delivered through catechesis, preaching, and parish missions, ensured the transmission of doctrine and reinforced the moral framework that underpinned these practices.

Despite the political turbulence of the 1790s, this local religious system demonstrated remarkable resilience. The longstanding habits of devotion, the administrative continuity evident in parish records, and the active collaboration between clergy and laity all contributed to a stable and deeply rooted Catholic culture. In Siggiewi, as in much of rural Malta, religion functioned not merely as belief but as the organising principle of community life—a source of identity, solidarity, and endurance that carried the parish through both routine times and moments of crisis.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore the lived experience of Siġġiewi's inhabitants during a critical transitional period in Malta's history, specifically the decade 1790–1800. Through a life-course and microhistorical approach, it has reconstructed how this rural Maltese village navigated the intersection of demographic stability, familial organisation, religious devotion, and socio-political upheaval. The conclusion that emerges is one of enduring continuity shaped by temporary episodes of strain, wherein Siġġiewi's institutions and social structures displayed a capacity for adaptation even when confronted with famine, war, and regime change.

Social and Familial Continuity

Marriage and family life in Siġġiewi reflected both local specificities and broader Maltese patterns. Parish and notarial records confirm that the nuclear household predominated, with men typically marrying in their mid-twenties and women in their early twenties (Ciappara, 2011). Kinship networks structured much of village social life, although the regular presence of celibacy, widowhood, illegitimacy, and remarriage complicates any static or idealised model of the eighteenth-century Maltese family (Fiorini, 2003; Wettinger, 1980). These dynamics became particularly visible during the French occupation and blockade (1798–1800), when baptisms declined markedly and marriages were deferred (Ciappara, 1988). The registers indicate a sharp fall in weddings during 1798–1799, followed by a rapid rebound in 1800, while mortality rates increased in 1799 in line with famine and disease (Cassar, 2000). Such fluctuations mirror demographic patterns observed elsewhere in rural Mediterranean communities during periods of political instability or food shortage, suggesting that Siġġiewi's experience fits within broader regional responses to crisis. Yet,

despite these pressures, the village's familial structures did not fracture; rather, they adjusted in ways that allowed social cohesion to remain intact.

Religion as Anchor and Resistance

The centrality of Catholicism in structuring both daily routines and seasonal rhythms is one of the clearest findings of this research. Religious devotion permeated everyday life: the ringing of the Angelus, processions, confraternal rituals, and feasts such as that of St Nicholas collectively shaped communal identity (Pace, 2023; Vella, 2002). Even during the French occupation, when anti-clerical measures posed a direct challenge to local customs, villagers continued to participate in the sacraments, at times clandestinely (Frendo, 1998).

Religious festivals and confraternities not only reinforced moral order but also sustained communal solidarity through ritual and charitable obligations (Ciappara, 2011). Their persistence during a period of political disruption demonstrates how religious practice functioned simultaneously as spiritual reassurance and as a subtle form of cultural resistance. This aligns with wider Maltese reactions to French reformist policies, where opposition was often articulated through religious symbolism and collective devotion (Frendo, 1998).

Methodological Strengths and Limitations

The adoption of a life-course approach enabled this study to trace the interconnected trajectories of individuals and families from birth through marriage to death. This holistic method made it possible to observe patterns that would have remained obscured had each life stage been examined in isolation (Fiorini, 2003). The microhistorical focus on Siggiewi likewise allowed for a fine-grained reconstruction of how global events filtered into village

life, revealing the ways in which ordinary people responded to broader political and demographic pressures (Ciappara, 2000).

Nonetheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on ecclesiastical sources—baptism, marriage, and death registers—means that this study primarily captures those integrated within Church structures. Groups such as transient labourers, the very poor, women whose experiences were not formally recorded, or individuals at the margins of parish life appear only faintly or not at all. Their relative absence inevitably shapes the conclusions offered here, which reflect the perspectives of those whom the institutional Church documented most consistently. Additionally, the exclusion of economic life due to scope constraints limits the extent to which social patterns can be linked to material conditions, even though such connections are undoubtedly significant (Aquilina et al., 2015). Finally, any generalisation beyond Siggiewi must remain cautious; similarities with other Maltese villages are likely, but not guaranteed, without targeted comparative investigation.

Historiographical Contribution

This research contributes to Maltese social history by shifting attention from elite institutions towards the lived experiences of ordinary villagers. Whereas earlier scholarship tended to focus on the Order of St John, the French invasion, or British administrative reforms, this dissertation repositions these events within the daily realities of a rural community. The findings support recent historiographical trends that emphasise continuity within Maltese society despite the turmoil of the late eighteenth century.

The study also reveals the complexity and flexibility of rural life. Refugees appearing in the registers, the baptism of illegitimate or abandoned children, and references to war casualties illustrate how Siggiewi absorbed external shocks while maintaining its social

fabric. Such evidence underscores that resilience did not imply rigidity; rather, it consisted of adaptive practices that enabled continuity under changing circumstances.

Future Research Directions

The findings of this dissertation indicate several promising avenues for further research. First, economic life warrants detailed examination if we are to understand how households sustained themselves materially during and after periods of crisis. Notarial contracts, landholding records, and data on agricultural production could illuminate how families navigated scarcity, managed resources, and engaged in exchange networks (Aquilina et al., 2015).

Second, comparative microhistories of other Maltese villages such as Qrendi or Birkirkara would help determine whether Siggiewi's demographic and religious dynamics were typical or exceptional (Ciappara, 1988). Including Gozo in such comparisons would further enrich the analysis by highlighting regional variation.

Third, extending the chronological frame into the early British period could reveal whether the patterns identified in this study persisted, intensified, or diminished. The question of whether British rule reinforced or gradually transformed pre-modern social structures remains largely unanswered for rural communities.

Finally, engagement with oral histories, memory studies, and folklore may provide insight into how events such as the 1798 uprising were transmitted across generations. These cultural traces offer a different form of evidence—one that connects archival records with the long-term shaping of local identity.

Final Remarks

In conclusion, the decade 1790–1800 was not marked by a rupture in Siġġiewi's social order but by a capacity to maintain continuity while confronting external pressures. Although political upheaval, famine, and shifting regimes introduced temporary distortions in demographic and religious patterns, the fundamental structures of family and Church remained central to the community's functioning.

Revisiting the research questions posed at the outset—how family life, religious devotion, and demographic change intersected during a decade of crisis—this study has demonstrated that Siġġiewi's experience was shaped by both stability and adaptation. It shows how ordinary villagers interpreted and navigated historical change using longstanding cultural frameworks, and how these frameworks, in turn, mediated their resilience.

Ultimately, Siġġiewi's history during these years provides a compelling case study of how small rural communities encounter and respond to wider political and social transformations. In a period increasingly defined by modernity and revolution, this dissertation underscores that continuity—anchored in household structures, devotional practices, and communal ties—remained one of the most powerful forces shaping the lived experience of Maltese society at the close of the eighteenth century.

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