

Migration, surnames and marriage in the Maltese island of Gozo around 1900.

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Abstract

The marriage records in the Public Registry in Gozo have been used to count the frequency of surnames. Children with poliomyelitis and their controls from the same villages have been traced to their great grand-parents. These records have been used to trace migration to and from the larger island of Malta and the extent of consanguinity in each village.

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Introduction

To the north-west of Malta is the smaller island of Gozo (Fig 1), with an area of 67 square kilometres and about one tenth the population of Malta. In November 1942 poliovirus was introduced to the islands from Egypt and more than 420 children were paralysed. There were later, but smaller epidemics, until mass immunisation with the Sabin vaccine ensured that there have been no cases since 1964. I have found the records of 1070 polio children and traced them to their great grand-parents to study genetic susceptibility. Each polio child was paired with a control from the same parish who was followed in the same way. The polio children on Gozo and their controls form the basis of this study: some parents and grand-parents of polios and controls had migrated from Gozo to the main island of Malta and have been included. I have used the data to compare migration patterns and the frequency of surnames in the villages.

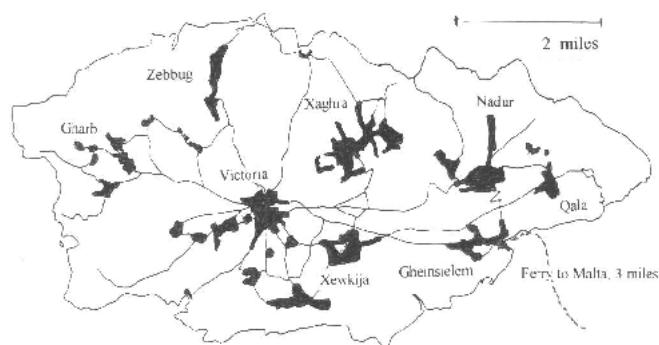


Fig. 1: Gozo with built-up areas about 1940.

Before WW II and especially in the late 19th century, villages in Gozo were very isolated. In WW II Gozitan men were conscripted into the army in Malta, but there was no permanent military presence on Gozo until a US airstrip was bulldozed near Xewkija in 1943. Since the war, there has been a frequent ferry service to Malta, with many foreign tourists and a much higher standard of living. There are buses, but they radiate from Victoria.

Materials

A register in the Gozo Health Department gave details of 100 children who had contracted paralytic poliomyelitis. Cases from 1909, 1918, 1921, 1932, 1938, 1939 and 1940 were found in hospital records where they had later received treatment as adults. One teenager, born in Detroit, was paralysed on holiday in Gozo: he was traced through his uncommon surname. The father of one polio child was a British soldier and 3 fathers of controls were born in the UK.

On Malta itself I traced another 963 polio children including 2 who had contracted polio on Malta, but whose parents came from Gozo. The children were traced to their great grand-parents through the parish records of baptisms and marriages. For each child with polio, a control child was found either five baptisms before or after in the same parish and traced in the same way. Dispensations for consanguinity were found in the parish records for marriages.

The indexes of marriages in the Public Registry in Victoria, Gozo were used for the frequency of surnames.

Migration from Malta to Gozo: Ninety one Gozitan parents and 80 grand-parents migrated to Malta, but only 13 parents and 3 grand-parents the other way. Migrants came from 14 different Maltese towns with 6 to Xaghra, 4 to Qala and 3 to Xewkija. Two grandmothers (one related to 2 polios) went to Zebbug (Gozo) and one father to Nadur.

Migration from Gozo to Malta:

Victoria was the chief town and with the nearby villages, was the home of 40 % of the adults (Table 1) in 1901. Nadur and Xaghra were the next largest villages, but communication between villages must have been difficult. There were 600 more women than men, and some men and women would have been unmarried clergy or nuns.

Table 1: The numbers of adults 20 to 49 years of age in Gozo, census of 1901.¹

<i>Town/village</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Victoria (also known as Rabat)	832	1069	1901
Kercem #	183	220	403
San Lawrenz #	127	111	238
Sannat #	198	235	433
Nadur	472	573	1045
Xaghra (also known as Caccia)	428	496	924
Xewkja	258	332	590
Gheinsielem	212	205	417
Qala	199	240	439
Gharb	190	205	395
Ghasri *	73	82	155
Zebbug	133	142	275
Total	3305	3910	7215

[# with small numbers in my samples, these three villages were included with Victoria: and Ghasri * has been combined with Gharb].

There was a steady flow of emigrants to Malta among the grand-parents and parents with about equal numbers of both controls and polios (Table 2). Some who left for Malta may have returned to be married in their local church. Some moved several times to different villages on Malta, so that it is difficult to know the exact pattern of migration. That several men and women from the same village migrated to the same Maltese town suggests that they met their partners or jobs on visits to their friends who had previously taken abode there eg four from Gheinsielem who went to Hamrun/Marsa and three women who went to Mosta. Among the grand-parents, more men than women married and emigrated to Malta, but with easier travel etc, this was reversed among the parents. Mellieha, the nearest town in Malta, attracted few from Gozo whereas the bigger centres of Valletta and Hamrun were the most popular: the harbour at Marsa was part of the large parish of Hamrun. Migration to the much larger sister island of Malta was common, but not to the nearest village of Mellieha.

¹ Anon. (1903) *Census of the Maltese Islands taken on Sunday the 31st March 1901 under Ordinances No. X of 1900 & No. III of 1901.*

People and produce would have taken a boat to Marsa or to the wharves at Valletta and Floriana rather take the short distance to Mellieha with the long, rough road journey afterwards.

In my sample there were no migrations from the most westerly village of Gharb.

Table 2: Emigration from Gozo to Malta among the polios and controls

<i>Emigration to towns in Malta</i>	<i>Parents</i>		<i>Grand-parents</i>	
	Men	women	men	women
Hamrun/Marsa	9	10	9	2
Valletta and Floriana	4	8	7	7
Sliema, Saint Julian and Gzira	4	5	2	2
Zabbar	3	3	4	2
Birkakara and Attard	3	7	3	3
Mosta, Naxxar, Mgarr and Saint Paul's Bay	2	1	3	4
Ormi	4	2	3	2
Senglea, Cospicua, Kalkara and Vittoriosa	4	1	6	5
Zurrique, Zebbug and Siggiewi	-	6	-	2
Tarxien and Paula	1	5	6	1
Msida	-	1	-	-
Zeitun	3	2	1	1
Mellieha	1	1	2	1
Rabat and Dingli	1	-	-	2
Gudja and Qrendi, each	-	-	1	1
Total	39	52	45	35

Surnames

One striking feature of the Maltese Islands is the relatively few surnames, although some are very common. The Maltese often know the original family village from both Christian and surnames – children were often given the name of the village saint and many surnames were found only in a particular village. Since World War II, first names are no longer confined to the religious and surnames are more scattered. The infant mortality was high until after WW II and will have affected different income groups. Some families produced more daughters than boys: in one village there were 16 female great grand-parents of polios and only 5 males of the same surname. There was a surplus of females on the island (Table 1). Only Gheinselem and San Lawrenz had more men than women. A seminary for young priests or a convent in a village would distort the gender ratio.

There were 1098 great grand-parents of polios and 1121 of controls, with 1434 marriages 1900-1904 counted in the Public Registry. My samples were based on polio cases and there may have been biases which affected both the polios and the controls: there were only 28 polio and 31 control great grand-parents named Galea although the sample from the Public Registry (PR) contained 49. I have therefore chosen the PR numbers to indicate the most common surnames on Gozo. The number of marriages varied from year to year, eg. 244 in 1901 and 348 the next.

The differences in proportions of surnames between the Gozitan marriages of 1900 -1904 and those from the recent Maltese electoral register reflect the different populations of the islands. There have been changes over the years as some families have low or high fertility, more girls than boys and the proportions joining the church or remaining unmarried.

Micallef, a surname very common on Malta, was rare in these Gozo samples. Some 39 common Maltese surnames were absent from my three samples eg Abdilla, Baldacchino, Balzan, Catania, Chircop, Grixti, Tanti as well as Barbara and Giordamaina which were from limited villages on Malta. On Gozo, rare surnames were concentrated in Victoria.

Borg, Debrincat and Gatt were mainly from Victoria.

Camilleri was found all over Gozo, but especially in Nadur.

Muscat and Said were found especially in Nadur.

Grima and Grech were common in Nadur and Victoria.

Buttigieg, the commonest surname on Gozo was found mainly in Nadur and Qala and less so in Victoria.

Bajada was found mostly in Xaghra.

Cordina and Zerafa were found mainly in Gheinseilem,

Hili in Nadur and Xewkija.

Vella, a very common name on Malta was found in all the villages, but mostly in Nadur, Victoria and Zebbug.

Zammit, another common Maltese name, was absent from Gheinseilem, Nadur and Qala.

The fairly common Gozo surnames of Sultana and Haber were probably brought to Malta from Gozo: Sultana was found mainly in Nadur and Xaghra, and Haber in Xewkija. Cini was concentrated in Zebbug.

Table 3: The most common surnames of those marrying in Gozo 1900-1904 (from the Public Registry). In brackets are the most common surnames in Malta derived from the database of the Electoral Office. ²

1 Buttigieg	6 Farrugia (4)	11 Azzopardi (12)
2 Camilleri (2)	Grima (26)	Borg (1)
3 Attard (9)	Spiteri (10)	13 Mercieca
4 Galea (6)	9 Mizzi	14 Cassar (11)
5 Grech (8)	10 Portelli	15 Muscat (15)

[Note: Cassar³ gives the names derived from the *2001 Malta telephone directory* as (for Gozo, with the Maltese in brackets):

1 Camilleri (1), 2 Vella (4) 3 Attard (10)]

The frequencies of surnames change over the years and it is difficult to find suitable databases for comparisons. Counts based on telephone directories do not include those without telephones and will include only one, usually male, from each household: young adults living at home, including married will be excluded. Counts of births of children will not reflect the future population as some die and others emigrate: infant mortality was very high until after WW II. Counts based on the Electoral Register will include many old people whereas it is only the younger adults who bear the children of the future. Until recently, the Electoral Registers contained only some adults. Until 1975, registration of marriages was not compulsory although since the war, few marriages were unregistered. However, I have

² Brincat, J.M. (2004) Surnames in Malta: what can they tell us? *The Sunday Times [Malta]* February 4; 48-49.

³ Cassar, M. (2003) *The surnames of the Maltese Islands: an etymological dictionary*. Book Distributors Ltd, Malta.

found that probably more than 10 % of marriages in the parish records before 1900 were unregistered. An advantage of using the marriage registers is that single people who rarely have children are not counted and the counts reflect future trends. In Malta there were many celibate men and women in the Church.

Some surnames were much more frequent among the polios than among the controls. The contrasts were most marked in particular villages, but were consistent through the island.

Consanguinity

Until recently, the very religious Maltese were married in church (civil marriages were illegal). For a proposed consanguineous marriage, a dispensation had to be obtained from the Vatican, through the Curia in Malta or Gozo. However, since 1917 there has been no prohibition of IV marriages. There have also been fewer consanguineous marriages in recent years so that there are far fewer among parents than among the grand-parents (Table 3). There were far fewer consanguineous marriages in the large town of Victoria, with many in the remoter, small villages of Qala and Zebbug. The bigger villages of Nadur and Xaghra also had many such marriages although the also remote villages of Gheinsielem and Gharb had fewer.

**Table 3: Consanguineous marriages in villages in Gozo.
(Data gathered from the parish registers)**

Village	parents			grand parents		
	No	Consanguineous		No.	Consanguineous	
Qala	13	2	15 %	28	11	39 %
Zebbug	16	3	19	32	12	37
Nadur	51	14	28	114	33	29
Xaghra	28	2	7	76	23	30
Gharb	14	2	14	33	8	24
Gheinshelem	17	2	12	37	7	19
Xewkja	24	1	4	76	4	18
Total	163	26	16%	396	108	27 %
Victoria	51	4	8%	123	7	6%

In general, there were more consanguineous marriages among the parents of polios and many more among the grand parents. Counting the numbers of marriages in each generation, either from the parish records or from the records in the archives at the Curia, does not reveal the complexities in different parishes. A few families, particularly in Nadur, showed multiple consanguinities in both parent and grand parent marriages. Although Qala and Zebbug showed the highest frequency of consanguineous marriages, these were generally scattered throughout the population. However, in Nadur there were 21 polios and 12 controls in a tangled web of consanguineous and other relationships which will be examined in later papers on consanguinity and on poliomyelitis.

Macelli, Inglott, Sammut said of Zebbug that ‘intra-village marriages up to the war [1940] were 80%’ and ‘new households set up in the village as close to the core as possible’.⁴

⁴ Macelli, T., Inglott, P.S. & Sammut, N. (1979) *Gozo – the Human ecosystem on an island*. Report submitted to UNESCO. see p 47 [University of Malta Melitensis collection]

Vella, reporting a high incidence of thalassemia minor, said that ‘Zebbug was described by a prominent educated villager as one large family’.⁵ My study shows that Gozo communities were complicated: Nadur, with its much larger population, was much more interbred than either Qala or Zebbug.

Isonymy

There was little difference in the number of isonymous marriages between controls and the polios (Table 4). The number of isonymous marriages was highest in Nadur and was low in Victoria, similar to consanguinity. Five of the 12 parent and 13 of the 26 grand parent isonymous marriages were consanguineous.

Table 4: Isonymous marriages in villages in Gozo
Polios *Controls*

Parents	grand parents	great grand parents	Parents	grand parents	great grand parents
3	12	24	9	14	19

In small communities, counts from marriage registers of isonymous marriages may include many which are consanguineous. However, although an isonymous marriage with a rare surname may well indicate common sharing of genes, this may not apply with more common surnames. There may well be many non-intermarrying groups eg among Buttigieg (see Table 3), which may include both rich and poor. The Maltese surnames of Catania and Messina were possibly given to immigrants from those towns in Sicily, but immigrants with these same Maltese surnames may be unrelated and came at different times.

Conclusion

Studies of consanguinity based on Curia records⁶ and opinions should be supplemented by surveys based on marriage records over more than one generation. Although Gozo is so close to Malta, in history, religion and position, its people are proud of its uniqueness – it even has its own bishop.

When I have completed this research, the cards, printed computer records and other material will be deposited in the Melitensis Library of the University of Malta.

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MZ 34n].

⁵ Vella, F. (1962) ‘The frequency of thalassemia minor in the Maltese Islands’, *Acta haemat* 27: 278-288.

⁶ Vassallo, L. (1973) *Studies on Maltese consanguinity*. Privately printed and republished in *Malta Med J* 2003;15: 36-37.