
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MALTA: PROSPERITY AND PROBLEMS*

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A fundamental difficulty with the history of eighteenth-century Malta is that no major sustained research on it has been published; no institution or individual has made a serious overall approach to the extensive materials.¹ The standard modern treatment is contained in two chapters of a general history of Malta by Brian Blouet, whose brief account was based on a thesis covering the years 1530 to 1798 in which the emphasis was on the period before the eighteenth century.² Fr. Andrew Vella's *Storja ta' Malta* presents a more recent general approach.³ A number of works by lawyers, doctors, architects and others treat various particular topics, most of them probably chosen either because they are glamorous in themselves or because they are conveniently well documented; many such publications are of high quality and interest, but they do not add up to a history of Malta which can be regarded as satisfactory in an age when social and economic rather than political, religious or cultural topics are at the centre of the historian's concern. An independent Malta presumably needs a public which has a correct consciousness of its past as a point of reference for its modern problems. The basis for such a history lies in the Maltese archives,⁴ and the results of preliminary assaults on the wealth of documents there are available in a number of important but unpublished theses presented

* The present essay seeks merely to identify certain major problems and to outline a working hypothesis. That hypothesis, which is scarcely an original one, is based on crude and approximate figures, most of them taken at second-hand and many of them ignoring the effects of inflation, exchange-rates, currency variations and other confusing factors; inevitably it will require detailed revision and correction. Victor Mallia-Milanes, Roger Vella Bonavita, and Godfrey Wettinger most kindly gave advice on various points.

1. No attempt is made here to present a full bibliography; P. Xuereb, *A Bibliography of Maltese Bibliographies* (Malta, 1978), provides a point of departure.
2. B. Blouet, *The Story of Malta* (3rd ed: Malta, 1981); unfortunately this work lacks annotation.
3. A. Vella, *Storja ta' Malta*, ii (Malta, 1979).
4. On the sources, see *Maltese History: What Future?*, ed. A. Williams — R. Vella Bonavita (Malta, 1974).

both in Malta and abroad.⁶

An especially awkward problem is that of the relation between the history of the Order of Malta and that of the Maltese people. The Maltese have, understandably, reacted against a vision of their past conceived in terms of the dominant foreigner, and historians of Malta have tended more recently to write a history of the Maltese from which the Knights are omitted. However, this trend can be taken too far since there can be no doubt that without an understanding of the Knights and the utilization of their archives many fundamental aspects of Maltese history cannot properly be appreciated. Though there is much to be done on the Order's history, solid starting points have been provided by Roderick Cavaliero's book⁶ and by the financial details given by Alison Hoppen.⁷ Another work of value, published in 1836, is W.H. Thornton's *Memoir on the Order's finances between 1778 and 1788*; it contains calculations and researches which have not been reworked and which have not always been sufficiently appreciated by subsequent historians.⁸ Some consideration of the Knights' financial contribution is crucial to any serious study of Maltese economic history. Economic grievances played some part in Maltese resentments against the Order, resentments which should also be understood through a consideration of Maltese "proto-national" sentiment, of the people's religiosity and of their growing cultural and linguistic self-awareness.

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The Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, which had ruled and defended Malta since 1530, had no exact parallel. It was an aristocratic religious corporation of Roman Catholic brethren bound together by their vows and governed by a Grand Master elected for life. Their numbers were limited. 226 Knights were at Malta for the election of De Rohan in 1775 and 239 for that of Von Hompesch in 1797; there were 332, of whom about 200 were French and some fifty were too old

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5. Lists of theses in *Storja* 78 (Malta, 1978), 138-153; the present author is most grateful to those who have permitted their theses to be used below.
 6. R. Cavaliero, *The Last of the Crusaders: The Knights of St. John and Malta in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1960). C. Engel, *Knights of Malta: a Gallery of Portraits* (London, 1963), provides excellent studies of individual Knights and their milieu.
 7. A. Hoppen, *The Fortification of Malta by the Order of St. John* (Edinburgh, 1979).
 8. W. Thornton, *Memoir on the Finances of Malta under the Government of the Order ...* (Malta, 1836). Thornton, 42-44, assumes a silver scudo to be roughly 2 shillings sterling, although the British fixed it at one shilling and eight pence in 1800; Hoppen, 169. Note that currency matters were complex and fluctuating. In 1741 both the Roman and Sicilian scudo were said to be worth two Maltese scudi: text in M. Sant, *Coinage Problems facing the Order of St. John in Malta* (MA thesis: University of Malta, 1967), 326 n. 1.

or ill to fight, when Napoleon landed about 40,000 men in 1798.⁹ The Hospital held estates and properties throughout Catholic Europe which were organized in commanderies, priories and *langues*, and which provided the manpower, the knights, priests and serjeants, as well as the *responiones* and other incomes which supported their Convent or headquarters in Malta. Within the Order, the Grand Master was a constitutional monarch subject to the Rule and Statutes, to the various councils at Malta and to the Chapter-General; the latter, however, was not once convoked between 1631 and 1776. On Malta the Grand Master was a quasi-despotic prince whose powers were limited only by an allegiance to the pope, by a theoretical dependence on the Sicilian Crown which derived from the grant of Malta in 1530, and by a Congregation of State which ruled the island but whose membership the Grand Master himself could control. The Master's arbitrary powers were enshrined in the *Code de Rohan* issued in 1782. The Hospitallers' Convent was the city of Valletta which they themselves had built, with their Conventual church, their *aubenges* and their magnificent hospital. The Grand Harbour was the centre of their fleet, their troops, their slave-gangs and their extended system of defensive fortifications which even in the eighteenth century were still occasionally threatened by the Turks; there were major scares in 1722 and 1761, for example.

Grand Masters were usually old and rich, and once elected they exercised an extensive patronage. Somewhat surprisingly, between 1697 and 1775 there was no French Grand Master, and even Emmanuel de Rohan, elected in 1775, had been born in Spain of a Spanish mother and had spent several years in Spanish service. The others were Spaniards or Portuguese, except for the Italian Zondadari who secured the Grand Mastership in 1720 when two Portuguese, Manoel de Vilhena and Pinto de Fonseca, corruptly blocked each other's election. On Zondadari's death in 1722 Manoel de Vilhena, a cousin of the King of Portugal, hastily convened the council and secured his own election within twenty-four hours while Pinto de Fonseca was abroad.¹⁰ Pinto was elected later and died in 1773 aged ninety-one. Ximenes de Texada then outbribed his rivals, made fair promises and abused the French candidate Saint-Simon; his election was unanimous.¹¹

The Order was responsible for defence and foreign affairs, and it maintained a navy, an arsenal and a work-force of several thousand

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9. Thornton, 46-47; Hoppen, 156, 158, accepting Bosredon de Ransijat's apparently exaggerated figure of 600 Knights, 400 of them French, in 1798.
 10. A. Mallia, *Zondadari and his Times: 1720-1722* (BA thesis: University of Malta, 1976), 10-11, 126.
 11. P. Fava, *Francesco Saverio Ximenes de Texada: Problems facing the Order of St. John during his Grandmastership (1773-1775)* (BA thesis: University of Malta, 1970), 14-18, 251-259. Not enough is known about how Magisterial elections were decided.

slaves. In the eighteenth century the great empires of Spain and Turkey were in decline and the newer powers of Britain and Russia were intervening in a Mediterranean world in which the balance of political and economic forces had greatly changed.¹² Maltese affairs were affected by plagues, famines and political changes in Sicily, especially when these provoked grain shortages and high prices in Malta. Commercially and politically Malta was predominantly a French colony indispensable to France's Levantine commerce, and the bulk of the merchant shipping entering the port of Valletta was French.¹³ France was glad to use Malta as an entrepot and to have the Knights control piracy, but it became more and more difficult to maintain the Order's own licensed *corso* in the face of Franco-Turkish alliances and ententes. Faced with such problems, the Knights were tempted by risky schemes in Corsica, the West Indies and in Ethiopia, but had the good sense to resist most of them. Other projects did not succeed: in 1776 De Rohan, desperately in debt, acquired the commanderies of the hospitaller Order of St. Anthony which, in the short term at least, proved costly;¹⁴ he negotiated with the Russians; and in 1794 he unsuccessfully sought both British and American alliances.¹⁵ Yet De Rohan and his efficient finance minister Bosredon de Ransijat planned so well that by 1788 "the finances of the Order had reached a high degree of prosperity under the economical government of De Rohan, who succeeded in procuring a large available fund to the Treasury, after the outlay of very considerable sums to promote the future income of the Order."¹⁶ Before 1792 decline and decay were not so evident in Malta itself.

The year 1790 saw the publication of a pamphlet entitled *A qu'on bon l'Ordre de Malte?* The ignominious way in which the Knights lost Malta in 1798 seemed to prove the soundness of judgement of those who had pointed to the Order's lack of purpose, its internal dissensions and its growing unpopularity with the population. However, similar judgements had been advanced in every previous century and the "decline" of the Knights was never so unmitigated a process of decay as it may have appeared.¹⁷ In a sense the whole history of the crusade

12. Excellent brief survey in J. Mathiex, "The Mediterranean", *New Cambridge Modern History*, vi (Cambridge, 1970).

13. Hoppen, 157-163, and J. Godechot, "La France et Malte au XVIII siècle," *Revue Historique*, ccvi (1951); Godechot, however, utilizes only the quarantine registers as his source.

14. Thornton, 22.

15. A. Vella, *Malta and the Czars: 1697-1802* (Malta, 1972); P. Cassar, *Early Relations between Malta and the United States of America* (Malta, 1976), 5-9; B. Vella Bonavita, "Britain and Malta: 1787-1798," *Hyphen*, i (1977).

16. The judgement of Thornton, 24-25.

17. The notion of "decline" which dominates much of the literature should be interpreted with reservations; it should not be transferred to the social, economic and cultural development of the Maltese themselves.

from the First Crusade onwards had shown a continuous pattern of decline, yet on Malta itself the finances had been reformed by the Chapter-General of 1776, after which the *corso* was also revived; the population had continued to grow and trade to prosper; while the island seemed reasonably safe and well protected. The insoluble problems lay outside the island, and in the Order's constitutional inability either to change its own nature and constitution or to adapt itself to changes abroad. The philosophies of the time and the doctrines of the French Revolution certainly had some effect on the Maltese, as indeed among the Knights themselves, but in the end it was the confiscation of the Order's French estates in 1792 which removed nearly half its incomes and marked a final, decisive and, it proved, irrevocable disaster.¹⁸ The Knights still defended Malta and acted as a Christian deterrent in the Central Mediterranean; precisely because they had a good navy and strong forts, they were never attacked. It was partly true that the Order was an anachronism which had lost much of its crusading *raison d'être* in an age when the holy war had tacitly been forgotten, and it seemed to exist merely because it existed; it was an integral part of the Ancien Régime and collapsed with it. The bumbling and demoralized response of the last Grand Master on Malta Von Hompesch, who was unable to lead French Knights against a French army in 1798, reflected a situation in which the Order could no longer continue to rule in Malta.

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The indigenous population of Malta and Gozo seems to have risen from 49,500 in 1680 to 91,273 in 1788, almost doubling in 100 years; in addition several thousand foreigners, including the Knights and their followers, slaves and merchants, lived in Malta.

| | Malta | Gozo | Total |
|---------|--------|--------|-------------------------|
| 1680 | 43,800 | 5,700 | 49,500 ¹⁹ |
| 1693 | — | — | ca.60,000 ²⁰ |
| 1725 | 62,807 | 7,603 | 69,810 ²¹ |
| ca.1772 | 68,800 | — | — ²² |
| 1788 | 79,180 | 12,093 | 91,273 ²³ |
| 1807 | 80,225 | 12,829 | 93,054 ²⁴ |

18. Thornton, 25-28, provides financial details.

19. B. Blouet, *The Changing Landscape of Malta during the Rule of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem: 1530-1798* (Ph.D. thesis: University of Hull, 1964), 137.

20. F. Gemelli Careri, *Giro del Mondo*, i (2nd ed: Venice, 1719), 24.

21. Mallia, 109.

22. G. Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata*, i (Malta, 1772), 254-321, as calculated in H. Bowen-Jones *et al.*, *Malta: Background for Development* (Durham, 1961), 135.

23. Mallia, 109.

24. *Almanacco delle Isole di Malta e Gozo per l'anno MDCCCVII* (Malta, 1807),

The 1680 figure had been depressed by the death of possibly as many as 8,500 people in the plague of 1676,²⁵ but the rate of increase and the expectancy of life were high. The population of Żurrieq rose from 2270 in 1741 to 3544 in 1788; at Paola and Tarxien the growth was from 696 in 1699 to 939 in 1760, after which there was a decline.²⁶ At Gudja some 60 percent of those who died between 1770 and 1815 were under five years old, but about 18 percent of those born lived to over 60.²⁷ The population of Gozo rose especially fast, which may have reflected the prosperity of agriculture, while on Malta it was the towns which continued to grow; in 1725 the combined populations of Valletta, Vittoriosa, Senglea, Bormula, Mdina and Rabat stood at 31,654 almost exactly the equivalent of the rural population of 31,735.²⁸ This continuous demographic expansion was doubtless due to comparatively reasonable living standards, which discouraged emigration, and to excellent health and quarantine services, which prevented major occurrences of plague between 1676 and 1813.²⁹ Paradoxically enough, the success of the Order's medical expertise created an extraordinary increase in the number of people to be fed and employed. At a critical moment of accelerated population growth, which was well above Mediterranean averages, Grand Master Zondadari referred obliquely to the plague as the only possible solution to this dramatic economic problem.³⁰

The Maltese people were governed during the eighteenth century with considerable success. Even though the population was too small to

8. The table given above certainly requires refinement. The 1741 total of 110,000 mentioned in Bowen-Jones *et al.*, 135, is surely exaggerated, as must be the 114,000 for 1798 given in L. de Boisgelin, *Ancient and Modern Malta*, i (London, 1805), 107, and of 130,000 for 1785 given in a Venetian manuscript cited in V. Mallia-Milanes, "Towards an Economic History of Eighteenth Century Malta:", *Hyphen*, ii (1978), 4; this last work contains important bibliographical references. [F.E. de Saint-Priest], *Malte par un voyageur françois*, part 2 (s.l., 1791), 41, gave a total of around 90,000. Blouet (1981), 75, reports that the *status animarum* for 1784 gave 87,749 souls and that for 1797 gave 96,534, implying a total population of nearly 100,000. A. Anderson, *A Journal of the Forces* (London, 1802), 156, gave a total for ca. 1801 of over 90,000, of which 16,000 were on Gozo. There had, in fact, been much famine and sickness during resistance to the French in 1799 and 1800: P. Cassar, *Medical History of Malta* (London, 1964), 519-527.

25. Blouet (1964), 132.

26. M. Zammit, *Żurrieq: 1750-1801* (BA thesis: University of Malta, 1976), 7-8; K. Sant — M. Vassallo, "Tarxien in the XVIII Century: a Statistical Portrait", *Melita Historica*, vii no. 4 (1979), 365.

27. P. Farrugia — F. Boffa, *Parish of Gudja: 1770-1800* (BA thesis: University of Malta, 1973), 128-135; Blouet (1981), 81, gives figures for other villages.

28. Mallia, 109.

29. Cassar (1964), 175 *et passim*.

30. Cited in Mallia, 107.

provide a secure market for local industries, the Order fed and defended a large and growing population for which it maintained a sufficient standard of life on two small and rocky islands. Foodstuffs had to be imported and paid for; money was pumped into the island; employment was provided; Sicilian grain was acquired free of duty; agriculture was encouraged; and profits were made on commerce, on the port services, on the corso and in the cotton industry. Population was the fundamental factor in the economic equation and cotton was the key to prosperity. Statistically, the financial significance of investment in fortifications or of prizes in the corso was relatively small, but marginal profit or loss could be vital. For example, any kind of extraordinary military or naval preparations at once caused financial problems. These can be difficult to elucidate because of the considerable confusion between the Knight's Treasury, the Grand Master's personal purse, the various trusts or *fondazioni*, and other financial institutions on the island; even at the time any attempt to draw up a national "budget" must have been extremely approximative. Only at the end of the century under Bosredon de Ransijat was the attempt made.

The annual income of the Order's Treasury stood at 1,921,642 scudi in 1762, at 1,073,920 in 1767 and at 832,049 in 1771, but it had been restored to well over 1,300,000 by 1790. The *responsiones* theoretically due from the European priories were raised to 500,000 scudi a year in 1776, and in addition there were fluctuating sums for the death duties and passage monies of the Knights, taxes raised in Malta, the sale of European properties, profits from the manipulation of the Maltese currency, and so forth; almost half these incomes derived from the French priories.³¹ Grants and subsidies came from the papacy and from foreign powers. Some Knights were themselves very rich, and individual brethren brought to Malta money which was expended on houses, servants, food, clothes and various luxuries. Early in the century the Grand Master's own incomes, the *Ricetta Magistrale*, were estimated at 100,000 scudi a year, of which 30 percent came from the customs dues, the *dogana*;³² a visitor to Malta gave the total, exaggeratedly perhaps, as up to 300,000 scudi in 1775.³³ By 1792/6 the *Ricetta Magistrale* amounted to 234,897 scudi a year, of which 33,573 came from outside Malta and 201,324 were derived from the islands, including 86,536 scudi out of landed incomes, 78,131 from the customs and 4,279 as one tenth of prizes taken in the corso. As European sources of income were in-

31. Hoppen, 143-144, 158; only a limited proportion of the Order's total European surplus incomes could be remitted to Malta.

32. Mallia-Milanes (1978), 10-11. A manuscript in the possession of Roger Vella Bonavita, gives the income from the Magistral *secrezia* for the year 1773/4 as 52,834 scudi and expenses as 16,207 scudi.

33. [M.J.] de Borch, *Lettres sur la Sicile et sur l'île de Malthe*, i (Turin, 1782), 182.

errupted or threatened, money was increasingly invested in Malta itself, especially through the great *fondazioni* set up by Grand Masters and others to bring in a permanent income. The Treasury's average annual income between 1778 and 1788 was 1,315,299 scudi, all of which came from outside Malta, except for 34,302 scudi from the *fondazioni* and 16,617 scudi from the redemption of slaves; to this figure should be added 48,875 scudi from those *fondazioni* whose incomes did not pass through the Treasury's accounts, which gives a grand total of 1,364,174 scudi. Of this sum a yearly average of 467,876 scudi, that is about a third, was spent on galleys and ships; 195,339 on land forces and forts; 99,653 on hospitals; 38,264 on the slave prisons, for the slaves were not inexpensive; 34,546 on public works; 17,309 on alms; and 29,910 on the Conventual churches. Thornton estimated that around 1778 the Order was putting 825,253 scudi a year into the Maltese economy in the way of foreign money spent through the Treasury, plus perhaps nearly 1,000,000 scudi as the expenditure of individual Knights and in particular of wealthy Grand Masters.³⁴

The government had some choice of policies. Grand Masters Zondadari and Ximenes imposed large-scale economies, thereby risking discontent and even revolt. Vilhena purchased political peace by financing employment through public works and buildings. Pinto kept the price of bread down but ran the Order into heavy debts. On Vilhena's death in 1736 the Treasury was in debt by 278,646 scudi, a sum which had increased by a further 179,003 scudi at Despuig's death in 1741.³⁵ By 1776 the Order's debts stood at 1,183,456 scudi which incurred a large payment as interest, and there was an annual deficit of 120,098 scudi; these figures had been even higher in the years before 1773. Pinto's rule saw all manner of frauds and scandals in the affairs of the *Massa Frumentaria*, a fund in which the populace could invest at 3 percent and which had a monopoly on grain imports for which it was responsible. On Pinto's death in 1773 the commune or *Università* of Valletta, which controlled the *Massa*, was bankrupt and owed the Order's Treasury 600,000 scudi. Yet Pinto himself had taken 293,000 scudi from the *Massa*, 100,000 of them to complete the Auberge of Castile, while other loans from the *Massa*, for some of which there was not even a receipt, totalled at least 300,000 scudi.³⁶ Between 1709 and 1723 an average of some 345,000 scudi a year was being paid out for foodstuffs from abroad, even though the grain imported from Sicily was exempt from export dues in

34. Estimates published by Thornton, 4, 27-31, 38-49; the contributions of individual Knights are really incalculable, and Thornton's estimate is simply a guess. Thornton actually put the Order's total contribution at 1,850,000 scudi where Ramsijat had estimated only 1,640,000.

35. Fava (1970), 27.

36. P. Fava, "A Reign of Austerity: Economic Difficulties during the Rule of Grand Master Ximenes (1773-1775)," *Storja* 78 (Malta, 1978).

Sicily; if the *Università* had its monies commandeered by the Knights or if it was not allowed to recoup such sums through realistic bread prices or by subsidies from the Treasury, some sort of trouble was likely.³⁷ On the other hand, at the end of the century local taxation, imposed both by the Order and by the *Università*, was bringing in well over 235,000 scudi a year.³⁸

The coin or credit which went to pay for foodstuffs, for timber, armaments, manufactured goods, luxuries and other supplies had to be found somehow. The annual sums imported by the Order may have increased marginally but they were in any case insufficient, especially with a continually increasing population. Manipulating the fiduciary copper currency may have enriched the Order at the expense of the populace but it did not create wealth; nor did spending money on armed forces and a bureaucracy, on a fleet and on fortifications and buildings, even if those activities provided employment by encouraging the dockyard and the construction industry. It was more sensible to reduce such expenses. Thus the total expenditures on the upkeep of four ships of the line was cut from 359,131 scudi in the years 1719/21 to 262,663 in 1721/23,³⁹ and the cost of work on the fortifications was reduced from 36,000 scudi in 1765 to an average of 12,765 between 1778 and 1788.⁴⁰ Wealth was generated by encouraging commerce, by offering excellent dockyard and quarantine facilities, by building warehouses and reducing tariffs on trade, and by fostering the use of the Grand Harbour as a centre for the transshipment and storing of merchandise. In 1721/3 the merchant fleet was probably employing some 3000 men and the *corso* about 700 aboard ship.⁴¹ For much of the century the *corso* was in serious decline, but after 1776 it enjoyed a comparative revival. The Grand Master received 10 percent of the auctioned prizes, and a number of captives were enslaved or sold. Between 1792 and 1798 Malta's naval strength was about 25 fighting ships. In 1788 the Order's fleet still employed around 1900 men, and an average of 529 were at sea in the *corso* between 1792 and 1797; these were mainly Maltese. They won average annual prizes of 65,629 scudi between 1787 and 1797 with an estimated peak of 117,000 scudi in 1796; these are minimal figures derived from the auctions of prizes, and effective income may have been as much as double this, but there were also investments, expenses and losses.⁴² This was an important and glamorous marginal source of wealth,

37. Mallia, 97 *et passim*.

38. Thornton, 35.

39. Mallia, 69-75.

40. Hoppen, 153.

41. Mallia, 106.

42. P. Earle, *Corsairs of Malta and Barbary* (London, 1970), should be revised in the light of P. Caruana Curran, *The Last Years of the Maltese Corso: a Study of Privateering in Malta during the years 1787-1798* (BA thesis: Uni-

but it could not by itself have sustained the Maltese economy.

The astonishing rise in population naturally resulted in determined governmental efforts to expand food production, above all during the seventeenth century. Marginal and rocky lands were brought under cultivation; fields and terraces hewed from the rock; earth stolen; marshes drained; irrigation regulated; grazing encouraged; silk introduced; and poultry raised. There were very few trees on the islands, and vines and olives were comparatively rare. The population tended to concentrate in the larger villages, veritable mini-agrotowns. Mid-term and long-term leases in emphyteusis assured the farmer some security of tenure while demanding such improvements as the breaking of rocks, the building of walls, the planting of trees and the compulsory rotation of crops. All advances had constantly to be maintained and defended against storms, erosion and decay. Many projects foundered and others were scarcely rewarding; for example a property at Ghajn Tuffieha which had been rented for 4 years in 1657 at 400 scudi a year fetched only 160 scudi a year on a 29-year lease in 1769. Gozitan agriculture flourished in particular, with exports to Malta and a population which rose even faster than that of the Maltese.⁴³

The deficiency in Malta's balance of payments was largely made good through one single product: cotton. There were other exports, some ashes of kalimagnum and a few oranges for example,⁴⁴ but it was cotton, raw, spun and occasionally woven, which occupied the population. Between 1776 and 1797 exports, which paid 3½ percent duty, stood at a yearly average value of 1,711,800 scudi, and subsequently were seldom valued at less; the highest annual figure of 2,816,610 scudi came in 1787/8. In other words, cotton was bringing into the island more money than was the Order. Not all the cotton exported had been grown in the islands since some was imported raw for spinning and re-exported. The government took care to maintain high standards of production for the cotton which was exported, often by Maltese shippers, to Marseilles and above all to Barcelona where the customs dues were lowered in its favour. A comparatively small area of land planted with cotton could support a family and the crop fitted excellently into the island's agricultural economy. To some extent it displaced grain, leaving the production of barley and *mischiato* grains on the more marginal lands. Cotton was, however, rotated with other crops; furthermore the seed was used to fatten cattle imported from Sicily which provided meat and milk, and the stalks were burned as firewood. The raw cotton was spun at home as a cottage industry by the women and children, and the crop

versity of Malta, 1973), 41-47, 137, 201 *et passim*; see also G. Wettinger, *Some Aspects of Slavery in Malta: 1530-1800* (Ph. D. thesis: University of London, 1971), which unfortunately remains unpublished.

43. Blouet (1964), 70-119 *et passim*.

44. Mallia-Milanes (1978), 3.

supported a range of middlemen engaged in weaving it, emballing and weighing it, seeing it through customs, shipping it, and finally in selling it abroad. Cotton provided an ideal way of utilizing the limited agricultural area available, giving a living to the farmers and their families, and to the retailers and merchants. Investments in fields and cisterns, rising rents and land values testified to the cash value of cotton as a crop. Cotton brought in taxes to the Grand Master and a sum in foreign earnings which, presumably, went far to pay the rising costs of the food and wine imported to feed a continually growing population; to an increasing extent the Maltese were supporting themselves.⁴⁵

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The standard of living of the Maltese people is difficult to gauge. There were certainly complaints and grumbles, and there were serious crises when plague or famine in Sicily or mismanagement by the government in Malta led to food shortages and high prices. In 1715 the Bishop stated that the Maltese were heavily weighed down by taxation, and according to an obviously exaggerated complaint of 1709, "the majority of the Maltese are poverty-stricken and have to live by begging. Such families have to be content with barley-bread, at most. One may see women and even tender children, as well as men, half-naked in the rigorous cold of the winter."⁴⁶ There are indeed other examples of observations on country people surviving on a frugal diet, walking bare-foot, prostituting their daughters and so on.⁴⁷ Doubtless, as elsewhere in the Mediterranean, the peasants lived close to the bone and were hard-hit at moments of crisis when the poor had to eat barley and even carobs.⁴⁸ Yet the population continued to rise at a remarkable rate and there is little sign of any systematic emigration; in fact the island also contained numerous foreigners among the Knights, their troops and followers, galley-convicts and slaves, and independent foreign merchants. Valletta was a cosmopolitan metropolis, an administrative and cultural centre,

45. Important materials, including the export statistics, in J. Debono, *Aspects of the Cotton Trade in Malta: 1750-1800* (BA thesis: University of Malta, 1976). Other details in Blouet (1964), 54-58, 78, 265-270; Cavaliero, 85-86; V. Mallia-Milanes, "Some Aspects of Veneto-Maltese Trade Relations in the XVIIIth Century", *Studi Veneziani*, xvi (1974), 505-508; see also A. Curmi, *Malta as seen by Foreigners during the Period of the Order and the Early Years of British Rule: 1530-1815* (BA thesis: University of Malta, 1973), 218-222; A. Vella, "The Cotton Textile Industry in Malta," *Melita Historica*, iv no. 3 (1966), 210-214; and P. Voltres, "El Algodón de Malta y la Industria Textil Catalana", in *Journal of the Faculty of Arts: University of Malta*, iv no. 4 (1977), 201-205. Potato cultivation had recently been introduced in 1801: Blouet (1964), 80 n. 2.

46. Cited in Sant, 210, 211 n. 2.

47. Eg. Curmi, 126-128, 198-199, 204-205, 214; Fava (1970), 191-192.

48. P. Muscat, *Aspects of Municipal Government in Malta: 1720-1780* (BA thesis: University of Malta, 1975), 44 n. 2.

and the Three Cities its industrial suburbs. There was a notable sense of security. The countryside was less affluent, cut off from the capital and less directly dependent on the Knights; it was the townspeople who received employment from the Order. The government provided for justice and education, defence, health and welfare. There were aqueducts and hospitals, a theatre, a library, a university and so forth. The quality of urban life reached a high degree of sophistication on a European scale and Malta enjoyed continental contacts which British rule was later to inhibit. A surplus of wealth in town and village was demonstrated in private palaces and houses, in the quality and quantity of their furnishings, their gold, silver and artisan products, in florid parish churches opulently decorated, and in a wealth of rural chapels.⁴⁹ For many people material life was rather well provided for, judging by the standards of the eighteenth-century Mediterranean world.

The lack of political liberty and participation in government was another matter. Unrest was not incompatible with a certain prosperity. The Order's rule became increasingly absolute, despotic and overcentralized, while the residual rights of the ancient *università* were diminished under Pinto and Ximenes, and in 1777 De Rohan formally abolished the *consiglio popolare*. Some contemporary observers harped, exaggeratedly no doubt, on the theme of sexual exploitation of Maltese women by the Knights and the resentment it provoked.⁵⁰ The common people, largely inarticulate, may not often have resented their foreign governors, but there were groups such as the lawyers, doctors and professors which did. The nobles, many of whose titles were very recent creations, mostly had amicable relations with the Knights. The nobility quite often occupied public or ecclesiastical office. However, it had little power and lamented its exclusion from the Order, a policy which the Knights maintained for many centuries, being sensibly reluctant to create an element within the Order which would have ties of kinship or interest with those who held land or office on the island.⁵¹ The church provided more serious opposition. The Bishop and the Inquisitor were never Maltese, but they opposed the Grand Master in an endless series of jurisdictional squabbles which had politically unsettling effects.

49. Q. Hughes, *The Building of Malta: 1530-1795* (2nd ed: London, 1967); V. Denaro, *The Houses of Valletta* (Malta, 1967); *idem*, *The Goldsmiths of Malta and their Marks* (Florence, 1972).

50. The literary evidence appears to be contradicted by very low statistics for deaths of illegitimate infants: A. Micallef — J. Vella Bondin, *A Social Study of the Death Records of the Parish of St. Dominic — Porto Salvo: 1790-1815* (BA thesis: University of Malta, 1973), 21-27.

51. Cf. J. Montalto, *The Nobles of Malta: 1530-1800* (Malta, 1979), which contains a great deal of information, drawn from private archives, on a wide variety of topics. Cavaliero, 156, provides no evidence for the assertion that the nobles offered to help crush the 1775 rising.

Though some of the clergy were active in the professions, for example as teachers and professors, the church with its priests, friars, nuns and lesser clergy constituted economically a largely unproductive class, while it controlled a considerable portion of the island's wealth and property. The Bishop's income stood at 14,588 scudi in 1757.⁵² There were 1262 *sacerdoti* in 1725;⁵³ some 6000 "patentees" in 1775;⁵⁴ and 1156 *sacerdoti* and 567 *chierici*, of whom 195 were married, in 1777.⁵⁵ The Jesuits were expelled in 1768 and other matters were scarcely satisfactory: the Bishop held no synod between 1703 and 1800; the clergy claimed exemptions from militia service and from certain taxes; and the Bishop's and the Inquisitor's "patentees", who were beyond the jurisdiction of the Order, were often involved in criminal activities for which they could not be punished effectively.

There were various classes of popular grievance, often expressed by the clergy. One prototype of these was Canon Pietro Ristri's *discorso* of 1646. Major complaints among the many he voiced were the Order's manipulation of the copper currency; illegal and unfair taxes on the people; the abolition of the privileges granted, or supposedly granted, to the Maltese before 1530; the wealth allegedly hoarded by the Knights and their immoralities; expenditures on fortifications which, it was held, were directed against the people rather than against the Turks; the Order's reduction of charity and its extravagances; and its oppression of the clergy by insisting that they provide military service.⁵⁶ Most of this was exaggerated, untrue or unfair, and it looked backwards to an imaginary medieval Utopia rather than forwards to a social revolution, but there were real problems. In 1775, with debts standing high, with poor harvests in Sicily and grain unobtainable or very expensive, with the Bishop forced into exile and with provocations from certain Knights, a small, discontented, poorly organized group from the lower clergy launched a revolt. There was genuine suffering and hardship on the island, and the leaders apparently expected a general insurrection but, despite their initial success in taking Fort St. Elmo, no one rose to support them.⁵⁷ Presumably this was not because there were no grievances but because the grievances were not sufficiently serious and were, indeed, too clerical in character. The eighteenth century in Malta had

52. A. Bonnici, *History of the Church in Malta*, ii (Malta, 1968), 7; some lesser incomes are given in V. Borg, *The Seminary of Malta and the Ecclesiastical Benefices of the Maltese Islands* (Malta, 1965), 18-32.

53. Mallia, 109.

54. Cavaliero, 129.

55. Fava (1970), 274-276.

56. Details in Sant, 179-181, 193-196; cf. Hoppen, 148-150.

57. F. Laferla, *Una Giustizia Storica: Don Gaetano Mannarino nella luce dei Documenti* (Rome, 1926); P. Callus, *The Rising of the Priests: Its Implications and Repercussions on Ecclesiastical Immunity* (Malta, 1961); additional materials and documents in Fava (1970), 178-233, 263-298.

been a peaceful one, the revolutionaries had no leadership or prestige, and there was no evident alternative to government by the Order. The Knights were foreigners but Malta was their base and it was in their interest to administer and defend it rather than merely to loot it. Many of the more articulate Maltese were presumably tired of the Knights, and by the end of the century they knew of a revolutionary world in which men claimed rights and freedoms. They hoped the French might bring these, and when they did not they turned against them and sought such advantages from Britain.

Undoubtedly there was an element of resentment against the Knights, for proto-national sentiments had gradually developed among the Maltese. There were threats of revolution and at one point the slogan *Poveri Maltesi, in che miserie vi ha portato questo Gran Maestro* was daubed on the walls of Ximenes' palace.⁵⁸ Even in the first half of the seventeenth century Maltese clerics such as Filippo Borg, Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela were developing a historiographical tradition which, explicitly or implicitly, criticized the Knights and sought to establish the identity of the Maltese people.⁵⁹ Those who were born in Malta and spoke Maltese were distinguished from most Africans by their intense Christian religiosity and from Europeans by their Semitic tongue. The eighteenth century saw the effective beginnings of a Maltese literature with Agius de Soldanis and others studying Maltese history, language and folklore; in 1752 the catechism was published in a Maltese translation. In fact eighteenth-century Malta enjoyed an active and vigorous cosmopolitan development of cultural activity in which various Maltese collaborated in academic activities with the Knights. Neither the nobility nor the upper clergy gave the Maltese a political lead; that had always been the function of the lower clergy, the natural leaders of the people. The government of the Knights was benevolently despotic and in some ways efficient. There were grievances and complaints but life was seldom intolerable, and revolution on a small, isolated island had no obvious hope of success without foreign assistance. Prosperity itself encouraged the emergence of a bourgeoisie which fomented attitudes of discontent in which there was much ambiguity.⁶⁰

58. Fava (1978), 56.

59. G. Wettinger, "Early Maltese Popular Attitudes to the Government of the Order of St. John," *Melita Historica*, vi no. 3 (1974); A. Luttrell, "Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela: Tradition and Invention in Maltese Historiography", *ibid.* vii no. 2 (1977).

60. At the end of the century the works of the *philosophes* were available in Malta but probably only a few scholars read them; Montalto, 293-302, 339-348, discusses French culture and Freemasonry. Mikiel Anton Vassalli, an intellectual who became "enlightened" abroad, was concerned for education and the Maltese language. He did not originally advocate the expulsion of the Knights; he wanted political rights for the people, the acceptance of the

The Order lost its hold on Malta because it was unable to alter its own fundamental character in order to meet the new demands of a changing world; the crusade was over, the island could not be industrialized, the Mediterranean had become a backward lake, Malta was too dependent on France, and the Ancien Régime in Western Europe had largely collapsed. The Knights left Malta with a vastly overgrown population but with a fortified base which would attract a new ruler in the future. For the Maltese the eighteenth century was not one of decline but rather a period of relative prosperity and of growing, if as yet not fully conscious, political awareness and frustration. To the inhabitants it inevitably seemed as if the Knights were exploiting them, as in many ways they were, but their paternal rule was not entirely unenlightened. The Knights brought wealth to Malta, an increase in immigration and population, a more urban, cosmopolitan quality of life and, above all, a prosperous and comfortable middling and professional class which was in close touch with the world of the Knights and the culture of France and Italy. The contrasting quality of existence on Gozo, which remained backward, provincial and highly insular suggests what Malta might have been like without nearly three centuries of rule by the Knights who played a vital role in the development of the Maltese islands.

Maltese in the Order, and commercial relations with Muslim countries designed to make Malta a flourishing entrepot: A Cremona, *Vassalli and his Times* (trans: Malta, 1940), 23-33.