

*Nobility, Faith and Masculinity: The Hospitaller Knights of Malta c. 1580-c.1700.* By Emanuel Buttigieg. Continuum, 2011 (371pp+xvii) pp. ISBN

The merits of this work are various. The seventeenth century is largely unexplored territory in Maltese historiography. Historians of the early modern period have been more concerned with the drama of the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries often neglecting the intermediate hundred years during which a momentous change had significantly altered the course of life on the Maltese islands. It can be argued that the seventeenth century was the embodiment of Maltese 'early modernity'. The islands emerged from the social, economic and cultural structures of the middle ages as its ports assumed a strategic dimension in the Southern European-North African trade nexus. Successive grandmasters, emulating the attitudes and demeanour of other European princes, contributed to the painstaking assemblage of a modern state machinery, asserting their sovereign rights upon the islands.

Buttigieg provides the reader with an intimate insight into the mores and ideals of the ruling class of the time; an unprecedented task, ironically, in a historiographical tradition that boasts of the singular heritage of its early modern period. *Nobility, Faith and Masculinity* proposes a cultural history of a ruling class gathered from the echelons of European aristocracy in a unique set-up, that of a military order, on an island administered as sovereign territory. It is therefore an exploration that transcends the enclaves of the Maltese islands to delve into the wider reality of the mores and ideals lived by the aristocracy on the European continent. Buttigieg explores a world of rigid hierarchy that was often strained into compliance with the parallel realities of patronage and nepotism. He ably exposes the tensions that these could arise between the grandmasters, keen to keep discipline within ranks of the Order, and kings, princes or popes that wanted their kin or their court favourites to become members of the Order regardless of their eligibility or to get them promoted subverting the strict order of seniority to which the Order of St John adhered religiously.

Buttigieg goes into minute detail to contrast the ideal, as expounded by senior knights in manuals – such as that written by Caravita – a much diffused sort of literature at the time set to instruct the younger members on the proper demeanour of a knight of the Order, with the complex reality that emerges from the numerous micro-histories recorded in the archives of the Order and those of the Holy Inquisition. He does not overlook means of propaganda, like the numerous *relazioni* and *avvisi* that were published across Europe by the Order itself, intended to elicit the favours of the Order's European patrons by tickling their imagination through narratives of incomparable heroism and bravery, and the works of art that conveyed such ideals to the populace and members of the Order alike in public buildings of devotion and of administration.

Of major concern to Buttigieg is the way that the Order understood itself as a predominantly masculine institution. He sets out to explore the different dimensions of the concept as it was then understood within the peculiar context of a military order; from the discourse about honour and war – so intrinsic to the aristocratic bearing of the Order's members – to that of faith and piety of what was a privileged institution within the Church. Buttigieg discusses issues of 'purity of blood', of seniority and patronage, of discipline and order and does not shy away from presenting to his readers a very human institution, constantly under pressure to come to terms with a changing world and its changing values. Emanuel Buttigieg reveals how the Order often closed an eye on the sexual dalliances of younger knights and on their rowdy behaviour; how the knights' conduct often led to serious rifts between grandmaster and inquisitor, particularly when knights irrupted into the inquisition's dungeons to free some one of their peers that fell afoul of that institution; and how issues of succession, promotion to rank and national rivalries ended up in the lap of foreign potentates and the subject of intrigue and diplomatic meddling.

Buttigieg consciously steers away from the controversy about the Order's relevance, as a creature of crusading warfare, in the context of the early modern world. If that ever became a serious issue during most of the eighteenth century, it certainly was not during the seventeenth. In fact, Buttigieg shows clearly that till then the Order was favourably looked upon by its European patrons and their constant interference

with its affairs is evidence enough of their interest to have Malta on their side.

The cosmopolitan, military, aristocratic and religious character of this ruling class had cultural, economic and social effects across the whole milieu of Maltese life. Aware of this, Buttigieg closes his book with a conclusion that in reality might be taken as an opening salvo for a sequel that would in turn explore the extent to which rulers and ruled influenced each other's world. In his conclusion, Buttigieg calls for a critical engagement with the cultural history of the Order of St John, where he proposes an ambitious study of the complex relationship formed between the Order and the island reality of their 268 year stay in Malta.

It is neither the traditional history of rulers nor that which is commonly called 'history from below'; it is rather a history that cuts through the point where the two meet – a history of meeting points between different cultures within a shared world. That said, *Nobility, Faith and Masculinity* becomes a historiographic challenge to historians of Maltese early modernity by setting forth a new agenda that has been long in waiting.

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