

Malta Historical Society Proceedings of History Week 2011. By Joan Abela, Emanuel Buttigieg, Krystle Farrugia (eds.). Midsea books. 2013. 157 pp. ISBN 978-99932-7-439-1.

This publication of History Week Proceedings by the Malta Historical Society offers a multi-perspectival, temporally layered representation of the social environments and political challenges in Malta, spanning from early sixteenth century to the first half of the twentieth. The collection of papers opens a window onto power dynamics; struggles for symbolic and cultural capital; descriptions of individuals' ambitions, pride, and entrepreneurial spirit; shifting concepts of nationhood; and tensions between emergent cultural identities. The individual papers presented are diverse in style, length and focus yet they hang together comfortably, one complementing the other, often raising questions that are echoed in the next.

The first two papers concentrate on the Order of St John – primarily with the built environment as the focus, which, however, offer much more in the way of nuanced insights into the importance of symbolic architectural statements and the social environments within which they existed.

Vella Bonavita's piece on Capitano Francesco Laparelli and Valletta offers an in depth account of the genesis of Malta's capital city, highlighting the power conflicts and internal machinations within the Order's council surrounding this new project.

The value of symbolic capital rooted in the built environment is echoed in Mallia's paper 'The survival of the Knights' church in Tripoli' which focuses on the Ottoman campaign to establish dominance over Christendom in the 16th century and highlights the symbolic appropriation implicit in the decision to include and transform sections of the Knights Chapel in the construction of the *Mosque of Sidi Dragut*.

After these accounts of power and control, Valentina Lupo focuses on familiar artefacts with her paper on the wooden statue of St John the Baptist. This offers a scientific account of process of investigation on what, at first glance, appears to be a humble brown statue of St John,

hidden away in the sacristy of the parish church of Ħad-Dingli. The beauty and poetry of the piece, however, is rooted in the imagined visual images it projects and the questions it instigates.

The title of the next paper, by Paul Catania, sets the scene for the paradox that runs through the core of the account – ‘Don Juliano : parish priest, money lender and land owner’. The man Catania brings to life was clearly irreverent, ruthless and eventually, immensely rich and powerful.

The editors choose at this point, to follow on from the personal and idiosyncratic by focusing on the higher order debate of relevance and change. With his pithy piece: ‘An order in decline? An alternative perspective’, Aleks Farrugia tackles the issue of relevance of the order by focusing on its ability to adapt to the changing economic, social and political environment that it operated in. Discourse analysis is applied to the narratives of spectacle of war to highlight the shift from the Knight as a model of selfless virtue fighting for the greater cause of Christianity, to the triumphant spectacle of glory and heroic fervour, and on to the discourse on sovereignty and nation which emerges as an evolving bond between the sovereign rulers, the people and the territory.

Adrian Scerri expands on this theme with his paper ‘Of Briefs and Privileges’ in which he explores the paradoxical relationship of identity and relevance of the Order of the knights. He does this by focusing on events in the career of Frà Marcello Sacchetti in order to highlight how conserving the Order’s privileges hinged on carefully titrating this conceptual dialectic.

The editors then take us up into the 18th century with Carmel Vassallo’s paper which concentrates on the Maltese business community in Spain at the time when the Maltese occupied a particular niche in the trade of cotton and cloth. Vassallo’s nuanced account draws attention to the particular liminal quality of the Maltese trade diaspora – occupying a social space characterised by their Eastern Semitic language and western, Catholic religion - which they used to their advantage.

Liminality is also a feature in Liam Gauci’s paper: ‘Shipwreck, enslavement and an angry wife’ whose protagonist is a lieutenant on a felucca in Malta’s *Corso* in the 18th century. Here the author pieces together the moving, human elements in the story of this corsair,

offering poignant details that have survived because ‘the angry wife’ was involved in legal wrangling with his mother, leaving two enthralling letters in the paper trail conserved in the Notarial archives in Valletta.

The editors then cut to the broader perspective – calling on the reader to consider the power dynamics that constrain, inform or potentiate individuals’ power to act within the social and political environment in late 19th and early 20th century Malta.

Michael Refal oues a Gramscian perspective to explore how these power dynamics are rooted in the tension between the two major foci of social control: the coercive power of the British colonial administration, in dynamic tension with the hegemonic power of the local Catholic Church. The key point Refalo makes is that it is the clear delimitation of boundaries between this subtle and all-pervading source of control-by-shared values (the hegemonic Church) and the coercive administration of the British colonisers that made for stable peaceful collaboration.

Power dynamics and control are also the key themes in the final paper: ‘How Malta lost self government 1930-1933’ where Dominic Fenech offers a nuanced exploration of the political and cultural environment in Malta that led to the suspension of self government in 1933, with acritical interpretation of the ideological underpinning and political motivations that drove the dynamics. The contagion of local tensions into the field of delicate international negotiations at that time, created a threat to diplomatic relations that Britain could not tolerate. Quite simply, to quote Fenech, ‘If Malta were to keep falling like the proverbial fly in the ointment of Anglo-Italian relations, then it must be swotted and removed’.

A quotable quote if there ever was one - deceptively simplistic, however loaded with ideological tension and conflicting power dynamics. It connotes much more than the facts described and attenuates the impact of the historical account in focus – a quality echoed through many of the papers presented here, turning this edited anthology into much more than a collection of events, dates, accords and declarations.

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