

From the
Great Siege
to the
Battle of Lepanto

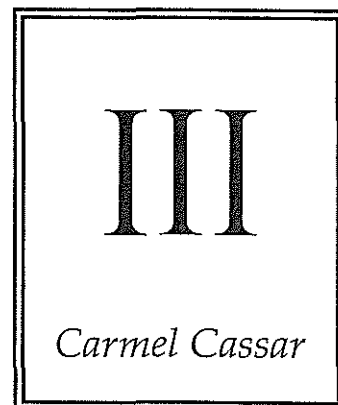
The life and times of Malta and the Order of St John
1565-1571

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Ritual, splendour and religious devotions: The Siege of 1565 and festival celebrations in 17th century Malta



Victory Day Commemoration in 1645

In 1645, a couple of days after the celebration of the festival associated with the *Otto Settembre* – 8th September, the feast of the Virgin Mary's Nativity and Victory over the Ottoman Siege of Malta of 1565 – Inquisitor Gori Pannellini reported the details of the activity to the Holy See. Thanks to the report we learn that the feast served as a display of patriotic feelings. The day began with a procession in which a knight of Auvergne carried the standard of the Order of St John, as was customary, to the Conventual Church of St John, followed by the sword and stiletto which Philip II had awarded to Grand Master la Valette in recognition of his victory over the Turks. The Inquisitor noted that the reigning Grand Master Lascaris (1636-1657) wished to celebrate the Victory over the Turks with great pomp. The Inquisitor does not elaborate but it could well have been an excuse to commemorate the event with special solemnity as it marked the eightieth anniversary of the Siege. Lascaris even felt the need to show his magnanimity by releasing three Italian knights from prison.¹

The celebration may suggest that the spirit of Grand Master La Vallette's heroic successful stand against the Ottoman Turks and their North African allies remained an inspiration of long standing among his successors. The Siege served as a memorable point in time to those who passed through the terrible months of 1565 as evinced in the Inquisition criminal records of the late sixteenth century. Thus in 1574 Fra Simon Provost, a member of the Order who served as Master of the Mint, admitted to having kept a concubine since the time of

the siege. Likewise in 1599 Isabetta Caruana claimed that she had been teaching catechism to girls at an Mdina convent since the time of the siege.² The 1565 victory over the 'Turks' remained a major focal point throughout the long period of the knights in Malta. It was idealized as a heroic event in the years immediately after the siege and came to serve as a strong motive of Maltese ethnic identity well into the eighteenth century and beyond.

More than two centuries after 1565 the Maltese could still talk of a protracted crusade against the Muslim 'infidel', enemy of both the Maltese and the Order – a crusading spirit that united the people and the Order in a common aim.³ Canon Agius De Soldanis gives a valuable insight of this feeling in one of the dialogues he prepared for the revised manuscript version of his *Della lingua punica* (1750), entitled *Nuova scuola della lingua punica*. It records the dialogue held between two ladies of rank, whom he describes as *puliti* (well-bred), and refers to the fear of an Ottoman invasion in 1760. One of the ladies is made to say:

"Ma nistax nemmen li jigu.

Stambur wisq bghid minn Malta.

Is-salib bezzieghi.

*Qatt ma ghamlu l-prova meta haduha maghna."*⁴

[I could never believe that they (the Turks) will come.

Istanbul is too far away from Malta.

The Cross (the Order) frightens them.

They never managed to win against us.]

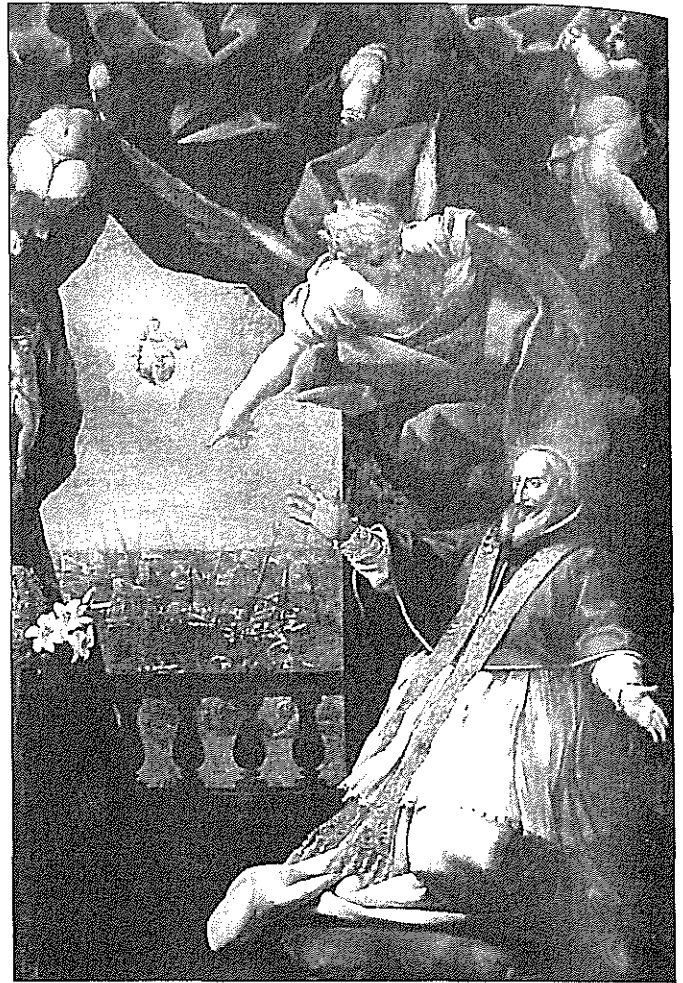
The celebration of the eightieth anniversary of the victory in 1645, may suggest that

the island's identity was already forged on perceptions of holy war – a crusade – in the eyes of the Maltese of the seventeenth century. In the case of Malta, ethnic values seem to have been associated with the norms of war that depended on a system of symbols that, when employed in ritual actions, help to make the ritual useful in fostering solidarity. In short, symbols – in this case the celebration of a festival – can have strong emotional impact on people, who rally around the organizational entity (the Grand Master), in spite of the fact that different social groups within society (the knights and the Maltese) may interpret the symbols differently.

As often happens in many societies, many rites associated with war are staged by a single side, identifying the enemy, recounting their moral inferiority while glorifying the celebrant's own group. Such rites keep alive political antagonisms without necessarily exacerbating them to the point of physical hostilities. In Malta, for example, among the most frequent occasions for public festivals were celebrations of past victories in war. Through these celebrations, the knights regularly defined the 'Turks' as their enemies. The aim was to associate the 'Turks' with a variety of derogatory symbols, while trumpeting the virtues of their own polity.⁵

Elaborate festivities staged at the time reflected the social ideology propagated by the authorities. The distinction between 'Turk' and Christian emphasized boundaries which symbolically made all those falling within them feel that they respectively shared common bonds. Various potent symbols were manipulated in the rituals like the crusaders' red flag with a white cross of the Order especially so after the Christian victory in the Ottoman siege of Malta of 1565 when somewhat to the astonishment of both sides, the Ottoman forces besieging Malta were catastrophically repelled – an event that left a permanent mark on Maltese identity.⁶

Festivities, in which the masses participated actively, often included military parades with the Grand Master and the other dignitaries of the Order participating actively. These celebrations helped to mirror important hierarchical distinctions in society and also brought together the masses of people and



Pope Pius V in a painting by L. Baldi commemorating the Christian victory over the Turks

presented them with potent symbols of social identity, besides nourishing a sense of ethnic belonging and also of the legitimacy of the Order's presence in Malta. But it would be wrong to assume that such celebrations were over exaggerated. In a study on Shakespeare's *Othello*, Daniel J. Vitkus argues that despite feeling "safely removed from any direct Islamic threat early modern English authors frequently refer to the menace of the Ottoman conquerors in terms that express a sense of immediacy."⁷ By way of example Vitkus refers to the series of common prayers for delivery from Turkish attack by the Protestant ecclesiastical authorities in Elizabethan England. The first of these refers to a common prayer recited in one English diocese which asked God:

"to repress the rage and violence of Infidels, who by all tyranny and cruelty labour utterly to root out not only true Religion, but also

the very name and memory of Christ our only Saviour, and all Christianity; and if they should prevail against the Isle of Malta, it is uncertain what further peril might follow to the rest of Christendom."⁸

When news of the lifting of the siege reached England, the archbishop of Canterbury ordered another form of prayer to be read "through the whole Realm" every Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday. The prayer expresses thanks to God for delivering Malta from "that wicked monster and damned soul Mahumet and our sworn and most deadly enemies the Turks, Infidels, and Miscreants", but warns of catastrophic consequences should the Turk succeed in Hungary.⁹ Thus it would be misleading to assume that Malta was in any way unique.

Ritual and Devotion in the 17th century

But the celebration of Victory Day in 1645 is better understood if discussed within an early modern background extant in Malta and other neighbouring Catholic states. Indeed in any Catholic state festive rituals, usually in the form of processions, performed during and after a catastrophe, such as the outbreak

of an epidemic, or a violent revolt, retained a religious character because the rehabilitation of the natural and social order was attributed to divine powers, to which the participants directed their prayers and thanksgiving. All these assorted festive forms were usually directed by the local arm of the Church and the different monastic orders, which during the seventeenth century increased their efforts to sponsor festivals throughout Europe, while trying to match the splendour of the parallel actions of the absolutist rulers. However in order to induce the masses to participate both the Government and Church had to come to terms with the popular interpretation of such gatherings and include fireworks, horse racing, and similar activities. In turn merry-making activities were also enshrined in rituals merging the religious with the secular. As a result feasts were conveniently merged into the yearly cycle of activities and helped to break the humdrum of daily life. Thus for example, during a two month period covering the end of January to the end of March 1669 Inquisitor Carlo Bichi reported no less than three religious festivals to the Papal Secretary of State. The first of these celebrations commemorated the Conversion of St Paul (25 January), rather than the Saint's shipwreck on Malta (10 February). In the words of the



A solemn procession coming out of the Conventual Church of St John in Valletta

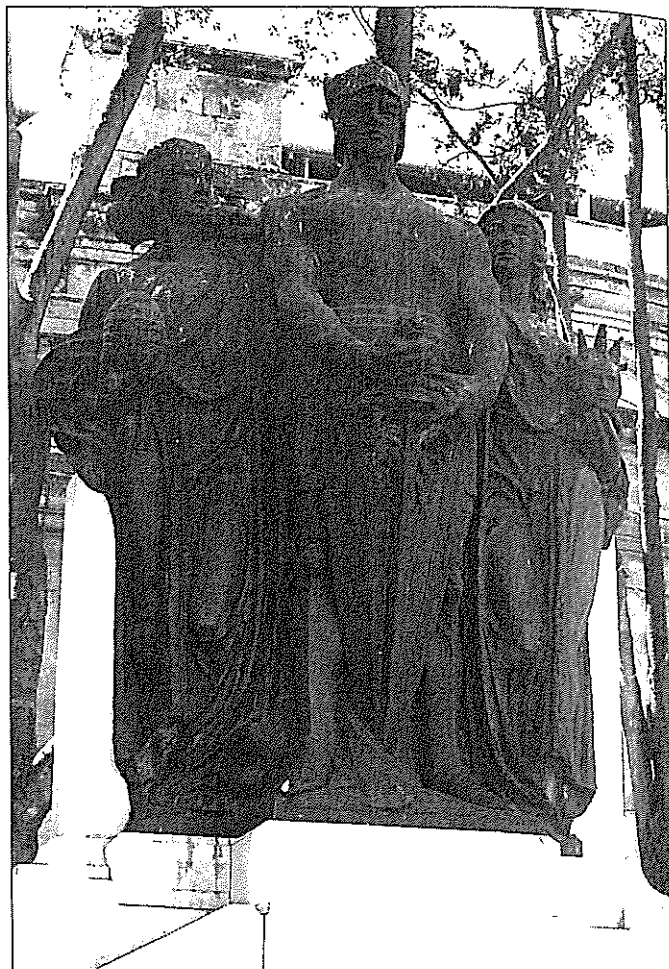
Inquisitor the feast was celebrated with pomp and great solemnity both in Valletta and at the Cathedral Church of Mdina.¹⁰

The centrality of the cult of St Paul, often described as the Protector of Malta, cannot be overstressed and it would be virtually inconceivable to speak of the civic identity of Malta without taking into consideration the cult of St Paul. According to Jean Quintin d'Autun, a French chaplain of the Order, who wrote a description of Malta in 1526, that was published a decade later, the Maltese were strongly attached to the Pauline cult. Quintin d'Autun claims that :

"Malta is consecrated to St Paul ... religion is wonderfully practiced in the whole island, both privately and publicly... Shrines are found all over the island. The people (guided as they claim by the annals of Luke) believe as firmly and with certainty that Paul has been in Malta just as much as they believe that Peter has been in Rome."¹¹

Quintin D'Autun's description confirms that even before the knights set foot on Malta the term 'Maltese' evoked connotations with St Paul and Christianity from both a cultural and a historical perspective. Devotion towards St Paul was so strong that the large community of Maltese settlers in Licata in Sicily dedicated their new parish to St Paul. The new quarter which they inhabited came to be known as the *Borgo dei Maltesi* or more precisely *Borgo di San Paolo* after the newly founded parish of St Paul in that area.¹² But it must have been customary for a relatively large community of people from the same town, area or island to identify themselves as a group by association to the patron saint of their home town. Thus the same Inquisitor Bichi reported that the community of Sicilian settlers from Catania in Malta celebrated their feast day of St Agatha (5 February), patron of the city of Catania, at the parish church of Porto Salvo in Valletta.¹³

As everywhere else in the Catholic world there was in Malta a strong devotion towards the Virgin Mary. In 1669 Inquisitor Bichi reported the celebration of the feast of the Annunciation of the Virgin (25 March). The Grand Master and the dignitaries of the Order



The Great Siege monument erected by the Maltese in 1927 to commemorate the victory in the Great Siege – the work of Antonio Sciortino, found in Valletta

congregated at the Conventual Church of St John where they sung the Vespers on the eve of the feast on 24 March, and heard high mass on the morning of the great day.¹⁴ Besides, we learn that each langue of the Order celebrated the feast of its patron saint. On 11 October 1668 the Langue of Aragon celebrated the feast of Our Lady of Pilar at the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel with great pomp and "exquisite" music which was attended by the Grand Master and a multitude of knights.¹⁵ The Grand Master likewise attended a Pontifical Mass at the Jesuit church in honour of the then still Blessed Francesco Borgia.¹⁶

Therefore, the Grand Master, the Grand Crosses, and knights together with the other dignitaries, like the Bishop and the Inquisitor as well as the nobility, all played an integral part in religious rituals. High masses were even sung to pray for victory at war against the Turks. In November 1668, before the

Order's galley squadron sailed to assist the Venetians in the War of Candia, high mass was sung at the Conventual Church of the Order in Valletta in the presence of the Grand Master. This was followed by the exposition of the Holy Eucharist for three consecutive days.¹⁷

Possibly two most celebrated feasts were the festival of St John the Baptist and the feast that commemorated the martyrdom of Saints Peter and Paul, both held within a few days from each other in the last week of June. The feast of St John the Baptist, patron saint of the Order proves to be an especially interesting feast since, apart from being the feast of the ruling knights, it even exhibits a common understanding on a cyclical, yearly basis. The Order celebrated the feast with Pontifical Mass and the collective communion of all the members of the Order at the Conventual Church of St John, but traditional bonfires were also lit in front of the Grand Master's Palace and the houses of the Grand Crosses in Valletta.¹⁸ This becomes more evident in a report of 1697 when only a few months after his election to the grandmastership, Ramon Perellos y Roccaful (1697-1720) attended the usual horse races – "*le solite corse de' palii*".¹⁹ Thus it would be misleading to assume that the feast was a strictly religious festivity, sponsored by the Order, with little or no relevance to the people of Malta. Furthermore religious themes were celebrated with a mixture of popular rites of probable pagan origins and the secular exaltation of the state which combined in a relatively harmonious mélange. In essence it was difficult to distinguish a religious from a civic celebration as things were not clear-cut – politics and religion went hand in hand throughout this period.²⁰

In 1697 the celebration of the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, known in Malta as *L-Innarja* (from Italian *luminaria*) was transformed into the formal possession ceremony of the old town of Mdina by the newly elected grand master. The festival began in the early hours of the designated day (29 June), with a cavalcade from Valletta to Rabat in which the Grand Master, in his carriage, and followed by representatives of the Town Council of Valletta on horseback, rode towards the suburb of Rabat and heard mass at the church

of the Augustinian friary.²¹ After mass the Grand Master and his retinue, walked in solemn procession towards the main gate of Mdina under a baldachin held by the jurats of the Mdina Town Council. Along the way the Grand Master was greeted with the firing of muskets by the militia squadrons, and the cannons of the old town. On reaching the main gate His Eminence was received by the Bishop of Malta in pontifical habit and accompanied by his clergy. After kissing the diocesan cross, and taking the solemn vow by which he declared he would observe the privileges of the islanders, the procession headed towards the Cathedral Church passing through a triumphal arch erected for the occasion by the Mdina Town Council. On arrival at the Cathedral the *Te Deum Laudamus* was sung. The Grand Master then sat on a throne and the Bishop brought the function to a close by blessing those present. The Grand Master then went on to hear mass privately and left the Cathedral in procession, passing through the main street of the town. At this point he freed many prisoners and through an act of charity and largesse distributed money to the poor. The Grand Master then left for the nearby *Boschetto* in his carriage where a lavish banquet which was attended by the Inquisitor and all the Grand Crosses was held. After Vespers the Grand Master and his guests attended the horse races normally held on the feast of Saints Peter and Paul for which the winners received the banners (*corsa de' palii*) and returned back to Valletta late that same night.²²

All this pomp and grandeur must have formed an integral part of 17th century Europe and possibly even more so of the Catholic Baroque. Grand formal civic ritual was the accepted way among ruling princes of the day and nowhere was it more evident than in Rome, the hub of the Catholic ceremonial where civic and religious ritual were embodied in the King and Pope.²³ The ritual was so impressive that it generated a great deal of interest in Catholics and non-Catholics who visited the Eternal City. John Evelyn, the English visitor to Rome, in November 1644 witnessed what he claims:

"Was the solemn and greatest ceremony of

all the State Ecclesiastical, viz., the procession of the Pope [Innocent X] to St John Lateran, [in which the Pope was accompanied by cardinals, prelates, dignitaries, nobles, pages and guards] ... then came the Pope himself ... carried in a litter, or rather open chair, of crimson velvet, richly embroidered, and borne by two stately mules ... [Evelyn could also admire two triumphal arches] I spent most of the day in viewing the two triumphal arches which had been purposely erected a few days before, and till now covered; the one by the Duke of Parma, in the Foro Romano, the other by the Jews in the Capitol, with nattering inscriptions. They were of excellent architecture, decorated with statues and abundance of ornaments proper for the occasion, since they were but temporary, and made up of boards, cloth, &c., painted and framed on the sudden, but as to outward appearance solid and very stately. The night ended with fire-works."²⁴

What strike us most are the similarities in the inauguration ceremony of Innocent X in 1644 and that of Grand Master Perellos in 1697. Admittedly the inauguration of the Grand Master would have been less pompous and grand than that of a pope. But one cannot deny that the inauguration and the two major feasts celebrated in Malta within less than a week in the month of June 1697 – the feasts of St John the Baptist (24 June), and that of the Saints Peter and Paul (29 June), – the religious celebration was completely fused with civic ritual. The motive behind the call for celebration may have been officially of a religious nature but most of the organization was carried out by the Grand Master's court, or at least it was giving the ruler's blessing. The fact that certain parts of the ritual were restricted to the higher dignitaries of the Order and the small privileged Maltese elite, confirms this point of view.

Descriptions of festival celebrations like the ones mentioned above suggest that the various social classes not only took part in the same celebrations but also shared cultural forms that dialectically combined 'elite' and 'popular' elements. Thus at both festivals – the one dedicated to St John the Baptist, and the celebration of *l-Imnarja* of 1697 – the Grand Master, his Grand Crosses,

the Bishop, the Inquisitor and the Maltese notables, started off the day as leading actors in the official ceremonies presided over by the Grand Master. Their role changed in the late afternoon when, after Vespers, horse races were held and the subject took over from where the elders had left. The festivals were thus transformed. The emphasis in the latter part of the festival lies in the active taking over by the people whose activities were normally strictly controlled by the authorities but who were given the chance to express themselves more openly during festivals. The first part of the festival was formal and presided over by the elite, led by the Grand Master. However these then retired and gave precedence to the common folk later in the day. The roles of the elite and the populace were thus inverted. During the evening activities the Grand Master and his retinue became simply privileged spectators.

The pattern in which the festival started off with official activities presided over by the Grand Master and ending as a popular activity, becomes even more evident on special occasions when the whole island rejoiced or mourned, on hearing the news of politically meaningful life-cycle events of the popes and the Catholic monarchs of Europe – especially the Most Catholic King of Spain, the Most Christian Kings of France, and the Austrian Habsburgs – such as the birth of royalty, accessions to the throne, royal marriages, or state funerals. Thus for example, when Antonio Pignatelli was elected Pope Innocent XII in 1691 elaborate religious functions were held both in Valletta and at the Cathedral of Mdina. The Bishop celebrated a pontifical mass at the Cathedral Church at Mdina accompanied by the Canons of the Cathedral Chapter on 10 August. The following morning the Grand Master sang the *Te Deum Laudamus*, accompanied by the Grand Crosses and all the knights at the Conventual Church of St John in Valletta, led by the Prior of the Church. However since Pope Innocent had served as Inquisitor in Malta popular celebrations were held on three consecutive nights mainly consisting of fireworks and pyrotechnic machines that were held not just in Valletta

but even at Vittoriosa which was the seat of the Inquisitor.²⁵ It is clear therefore that the social status of the participants, their relative numbers, and their degree of involvement, varied from event to event. Although in this case popular celebrations were ordered from above it would be wrong to assume that the popular masses were completely subjected to the ruler's designs or had in this case been deprived of any opportunity of self-expression. Popular celebrations with fireworks suggest that this was, as it still is today, a popular delight in Malta. It also shows that the people were neither detached from, nor antagonistic to, these activities. On the contrary they participated actively in official celebrations and it would be wrong to assume that celebrations were imposed from above. What transpires is that different social groups participated actively in the same festivals but they followed a different deportment and in most cases conveyed different messages.²⁶

Concluding remarks

The eightieth anniversary celebrations of the Ottoman Siege of Malta, which at face value suggests the nostalgic commemoration of a triumph that glorified the invincible military might of the Order of St John, was both a civic ritual and a Christian festival. Christianity combined with a crusading spirit may even have served as the vehicle that reinforced a sense of community among the Maltese.²⁷ But there were several other issues at stake, some

of which were of vital importance as they served the dual purpose of generating the popularity of and respect for the ruler among his subjects, besides inducing the people to fear and obey him.

Thus every occasion that presented itself served as an excellent excuse for celebration with elaborate rituals and great pomp in which all strata of the community were encouraged to participate. Fireworks, triumphal arches, horse-races, music, parades, processions and similar activities ensured that everyone could enjoy the spectacle. The continuous production of representational forms generated by the celebration of festivals sustained collective memory which, as Maurice Halbwachs argues, is shared, passed on and also constructed by the community.²⁸ At the same time one cannot fail to note that festivals and performances played a prominent role in the repertoire of absolutist regimes after the first third of the seventeenth century, when the latter reached the summit of their existence.²⁹ Despite Malta's small size and dependence on higher ranking monarchs like the King of Spain, the King of France, or the Pope, the Grand Masters of Malta emulated the great kings faithfully and were definitely in line with the rest of Europe in this regard.

By acculturating the middle and lower strata of society, the Order of St John managed to broaden its base and prolong its social life with myths, symbols, values and memories, cultivated over generations and which, by the seventeenth century, had become the heritage and cultural repository of the Maltese proto-nation.³⁰

References and notes

- 1 The knights were: Spreti, Carducci and Lanfranco. The first had been condemned for killing the knight Passerini, and the other two for a pasquinade which had led to the homicide. ASV SS Malta vol.14, f.245 (10.ix.1645).
- 2 C. Cassar, 'Popular perceptions and values in Hospitaller Malta', in V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.), *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798. Studies on Early Modern Malta and the Order of St John of Jerusalem* (Malta, 1993), 444. Cf. AIM Proc. Crim., vol.167, case 1, f.7, and *ibid.*, vol.147A, case 4, fol.50.
- 3 D. Cutajar & C. Cassar, 'Malta and the sixteenth century struggle for the Mediterranean', in G. Cassar (ed.), *The Great Siege 1565. Separating Fact from Fiction* (Malta, 2005), 42.
- 4 NLM Libr. ms. 144 f.195; G. Cassar-Pullicino, 'Id-djalogi ta' De Soldanis', *Il-Malti* (1947), 99-122 esp. 122.

- 5 A similar attitude was adopted in Renaissance Venice. Cf. E. Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton, N.J., 1981), 212–3.
- 6 In 1885, the *otto settembre*, (the day marking the victory over the Ottomans in 1565) became Malta's national day. C. Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta* (Malta, 2000), 283.
- 7 D.J. Vitkus, 'Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 48 (1997), 147.
- 8 From 'A Form to be used in common prayer ... to excite all godly people to pray unto God for the delivery of those Christians that are now invaded by the Turk', reprinted in W. Keatinge Clay (ed.), *Liturgical Services of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth: Liturgies and Occasional Forms of Prayer Set Forth in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (Cambridge, 1847), 519–23, esp. 519. This is quoted by Vitkus, 148.
- 9 "if the Infidels ... should prevail wholly against [the kingdom of Hungary] (which God forbid) all the rest of Christendom should lie as it were naked and open to the incursions and invasions of the said savage and most cruel enemies the Turks, to the most dreadful danger of whole Christendom..." This is again quoted from 'A Form to be used in common prayer...' Keatinge Clay, 527–35, esp. 527 and discussed by Vitkus, 148.
- 10 ASV SS Malta vol.25, f.14A-v (26.i.1669).
- 11 Quintin D'Autun, *Insulae Melitae Descriptio* (Lyons, 1536), transl. and notes by H.C.R. Vella, *The Earliest Description of Malta* (Malta, 1980), esp. 43–5.
- 12 L. Vitali, *Licata città demaniale* (Licata, 1909).
- 13 ASV SS Malta, vol.25, f.31-v (9.ii.1669).
- 14 ASV SS Malta vol.25, f.54 (30.iii.1669).
- 15 ASV SS Malta vol.24, f.137 (16.x.1668).
- 16 ASV SS Malta vol.24, f.134 (8.x.1668). St Francis Borgia, SJ (1510-1572) was the third superior general of the Society of Jesus. He was canonized two years after the event in 1670.
- 17 ASV SS Malta vol.24, f.177 (10.xi.1668).
- 18 ASV SS Malta vol.25, f.129 (29.vi.1669).
- 19 ASV SS Malta vol.48 f.158 (29.vi.1697).
- 20 Bonner Mitchell presents various Italian examples of these mixed instances of religious and civic forms in Renaissance pageantry. B. Mitchell, *The Majesty of the State: Triumphal Progresses of Foreign Sovereigns in Renaissance Italy (1494–1600)* (Florence, 1986), 2–3.
- 21 In the case of Naples, Gabriel Guarino argues that the cavalcade could be seen as a 'conciliatory device' between social groups but was in itself also a 'mirror image of society, a neat visual expression of the very clearly defined social stratification of Neapolitan society, perfectly intelligible for the entire population participating in the rite. G. Guarino, *Representing the King's splendour. Communication and reception of symbolic forms of power in viceregal Naples* (Manchester, 2010), 44.
- 22 ASV SS Malta vol.48, f.158-159 (29.vi.1697).
- 23 P. Prodi, *Il sovrano pontefice. Un corpo e due anime: la monarchia papale nella prima età moderna* (Bologna, 1982), esp. 83–126.
- 24 W. Bray (ed.), *Diary and Correspondence of John Evelyn*, i (London, 1850), 130–1.
- 25 ASV SS Malta vol.42, f.32 (15.viii.1691).
- 26 S. Bertelli & G. Calvi, 'Rituale, cerimoniale, etichetta nelle corti italiane', in S. Bertelli & G. Crifò (eds), *Rituale, cerimoniale, etichetta* (Milan, 1986), 11–27, esp. 26.
- 27 C. Cassar (2000), 233–5.
- 28 M. Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris, 1952).
- 29 In his study on early modern Naples, Gabriel Guarino has recently shown that in the royal courts of Madrid, Paris, London, and Vienna, the splendid performance received a prominent place in the system of festivities, cf. Guarino, 78.
- 30 See for example, I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, i (New York, 1974), 353.