

State Intervention in the Grain Trade of Malta (16th-20th Century)*

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Abstract

Until the early twentieth century, bread was graded and its quality sanctioned social distinctions in Maltese society. At a time when harvest failure often meant famine and death, setting the price of bread was one of the most difficult tasks from late medieval times to the early nineteenth century. During its stay in Malta, the Hospitaller Order of St John (1530-1798) depended heavily on imported duty-free grain from Sicily. Matters did not change much when Malta was a British Protectorate (1800-1814) but the island witnessed an overhaul in its system of grain provisioning as a British colony (1814-1964). In an attempt to improve the quality of bread for the mass of Maltese, the British colonial administration introduced a ‘free-trade’ policy.

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However, the new policy was based on the introduction of high tariffs on basic commodities like wheat, which in turn led to the fluctuation and steep increase of prices. Thus, rather than improving the quality of life, the new tariff laws forced many Maltese, peasants and urbanites alike, to spend most of their income on bread and they were left with little money to buy other commodities. Hardship reached a climax by World War I and harvest failures culminated in a popular rebellion in June 1919.

1. Daily Bread

The notion that bread is 'that stuff of life which is the symbol of survival'¹ is evinced in a number of Maltese idioms which refer to bread as a basic commodity without which it is believed that no one survives. Thus a well-off person is *ħobżu maħbuż* (lit. his bread is baked), one who has lost his job has *tilef ħobżu* (lit. he lost his bread), and when inquiring about someone's character the Maltese often ask, *x'ħobż jiekol dan?* (lit. what type of bread does he consume?). When someone is badly in need of something they say, *jeħtieġu bħall-ħobż li jiekol* (lit. he needs it like his daily bread). A profit-making job is referred to as *ħaġa li fiha biċċa ħobż ġmielha* (lit. something which provides a large quantity of bread). A profitless task is often *ma fihix ħobż* (lit. it procures no bread).² Here the term *ħobż* (bread) is to be interpreted as much in the symbolic sense as in the factual sense. The idioms do not specify if bread should consist of high quality durum wheat, lesser types of wheat, maslin [*mischiato*], or barley.³ However, they depict an inward-looking system, strictly indicating that in Malta bread was a common denominator, daily consumed and well liked at all social levels.

¹ Roy Porter, 'Preface', in Piero Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams*. p.10

² Karm Fenech, *Idjomi Maltin*, pp. 39-40.

³ Maslin consisted of a mixture of wheat and barley normally grown together and meant for human consumption. The percentage of wheat and barley varied but the mixture normally consisted of approximately 50 per cent wheat and 50 per cent barley. In times of great hardship, the mixture would normally contain more barley than wheat.



There are many references to the dominant role of bread in the Maltese diet. In his description of Malta published in 1536, the French chaplain of the Order of St John, Jean Quentin d'Autun, confirms that the islanders were above all bread-eaters. This appears to have been standard in Europe at least from the eleventh century onwards, when, according to Massimo Montanari, reference to bread starts to verge on the obsessive, while agricultural production became by metonymy the 'bread harvest'.⁴ In sixteenth-century Malta the interchangeable use of the terms grain and bread further stresses the fundamental role played by bread as an essential commodity. Quentin d'Autun points out that,

[T]he island is not very productive of grain. Malta is very fortunate for this one reason namely, that Sicily, very fertile in all kinds of grain, lies nearby and is for the inhabitants as good as a granary where otherwise they would die of hunger. And the people... conscious of their country's sterility, live a very frugal life.⁵

Over the years, the nutrition habits of the Maltese hardly changed. Baron Riedesel, who visited Malta in 1773, asserted that the Maltese still lived frugally on 'bread, peppers, onions and anchovies'.⁶ The outstanding role of bread among the working classes did not lessen its appreciation by members of the elite. Bread was in fact graded and its quality sanctioned social distinctions. Bread represented a status symbol that defined human condition and class according to its particular colour. This was shared with people in other parts of the Mediterranean. In Italy, as in Malta, bread was the 'dominant food' for most of the population and the quality of bread one ate served as a measure of well-being and economic status.⁷ In short, bread represented a socio-economic position.⁸

⁴ Massimo Montanari, *The Culture of Food*, p. 48.

⁵ Jean Quintin d'Autun, *The Earliest Description of Malta*, p. 35.

⁶ Roderick Cavaliero, *The Last of the Crusaders*, p. 89.

⁷ Carol Helstoksy, *Garlic & Oil. Food and Politics in Italy*, pp. 11, 15.

⁸ Piero Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams*, p. 120.



Despite heavy dependence on Sicilian grain, in 1811 Padre Carlo Giacinto pointed out that wheat was grown in Malta but the cultivation of barley was preferred.⁹ Padre Giacinto described the foods normally consumed by the Maltese peasants. He pointed out that the breakfast and lunch were of the most frugal type, consisting very often merely of barley bread with some onions or radishes, failing which they used a few salted olives, a little oil, a sardine or some other relish. Supper consisted of *minestra* (soup) with pasta and bread and they also drank some wine.¹⁰ Indeed Malta was a poor island but then life was not much different from that of neighbouring Mediterranean countries, where poverty was rife and much of the meagre income was spent on basic food commodities. In such circumstances, as the economic historian Carlo Cipolla points out, ‘the lower the disposable income, the higher the proportion spent on food.’¹¹

In turn this condition often generated a situation where a high proportion of the total expenditure was spent on staples, which in Europe and the Mediterranean was specifically spent on bread. This assessment is also reached by the French historian Fernand Braudel who makes a similar argument and concludes that the lower one’s income, the more bread and other starchy foods are consumed. Hence bread, which is presumably the ‘least expensive foodstuff in relation to its caloric content’, was the most popular food item and therefore the basis of Mediterranean life.¹² As a consequence no government could choose to ignore the need to procure a quantity of grain that could satisfy the needs of local consumption. Once the needs were not satisfied there were bound to be social, economic, and possibly

⁹ P. Carlo Giacinto, *Saggio di agricoltura - Per le isole di Malta e Gozo del P. Carlo Giacinto*, p. 60.

¹⁰ Giacinto, *Saggio di agricoltura*, p. 26. This was reported by John Davy in *Notes and Observations on the Ionian Islands and Malta*, pp. 416-7.

¹¹ Carlo Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy, 1000-1700*, p. 27.

¹² Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century. vol. 1. The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible*, p. 133.



political problems for a government that chose to minimize, or possibly ignore, their importance.

Visitors to Malta from the 1830s onwards agree that both breakfast and dinner were of the most frugal type. For the Maltese both meals continued to consist mainly of barley bread, cheese, olives, onions, garlic, dried fruit, salt-fish, oil, and similar foods. They also drank a moderate amount of wine and enjoyed cooked vegetables, or *minestra*, after a day's work.¹³ In many ways, the standard of living of the 1870s and 1880s remained quite similar to that of forty years earlier. The Maltese working class still ate very little meat and not much more in the way of vegetables, cheese, oil, pasta, or wine.¹⁴ There was a marked difference, however, in bread consumption. The 1836 Royal Commissioners had reported that a field labourer ate two pounds of bread a day. Francis Roswell, a British Commissioner investigating the matter forty years later, concluded that in 1877 a field labourer ate between four and five pounds of bread a day. Besides, by that time, bread was presumably made of good quality wheat although the prices were double those of the 1830s.¹⁵ This assertion should probably be taken with a pinch of salt, as good quality wheat bread remained a luxury throughout most of the nineteenth century. Most importantly, the availability or affordability of staple foods was not always guaranteed for the working urban and rural population. Bread played such a fundamental role in Maltese food that farm labourers were sometimes

...paid in money, at others in meschiato (that is a mixture of wheat and

¹³ See for example: Thomas MacGill, *A Handbook or Guide for Strangers Visiting Malta*, pp. 34-5; Charles A. Price, *Malta and the Maltese*, p. 9.

¹⁴ The pattern is once again not very different from the Italian one. According to Helstoksy the Italian peasant and worker shared a monotonous diet, and he asserts that 'In the nineteenth century, at least half of the family diet went to purchase the staple food of polenta, bread, or pasta, along with a *companatico*, usually, oil, onions, or other vegetables '... As a result, '...careful budgeting was important in cases where a penny or two made a significant difference in the quality of food one could eat...' Helstoksy, *Garlic & Oil*, pp. 11, 15-16.

¹⁵ Comments made by Price based on 'Report on the Finances and Taxation of Malta – F. Rowsell 1878', lv (2032) cf. Price, *Malta and the Maltese*, p. 131.



barley) [maslin]. *When they are paid according to the latter mode, they receive two tumoli [1 tumolo = 0.17 hl] each a-week; and this is the method which is generally preferred both by the labourers and farmers.*¹⁶

Traditionally bread reached the consumer in the form of grain – as wheat, maslin or barley. The grain was ground into flour and often kneaded into bread at home. Baking was often carried out at the domestic level in home ovens that often catered for the needs of neighbours who did not have the luxury of an oven in their own homesteads. The medievalist Godfrey Wettinger refers to the existence of a country-oven in Siggiewi in 1473.¹⁷ During the sixteenth century, from the early days of the rule of the Knights in Malta, ovens were found in the Harbour towns, namely Valletta, Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua. The octogenarian Betta Caloiro, who in 1601 was accused of witchcraft practices, declared that as a twelve-year-old girl (in circa 1533) she use to knead bread in the evening and leave the pastry in a wooden trough overnight. The bread was then taken to a neighbour to have it baked, as she did not have an oven.¹⁸ Likewise, Bartholomea de Milo baked bread in her oven at Cospicua in 1593.¹⁹ Nevertheless, we learn that bread was not always prepared at home and by the end of the sixteenth century, peddlers sold it on the streets. One such peddler was Hali Maurus, the slave of the knight

¹⁶ R, Montgomery Martin, *History of the British Possessions in the Mediterranean: Comprising Gibraltar, Malta, Gozo, and the Ionian Islands*, p. 211. In the passage between volume and weight units there is a certain room for variability depending on the type of grain under consideration. Malta depended on grain provisions from Sicily. The weights and measures are based on Sicilian ones as provided by Francesco Luigi Oddo, *Dizionario di antiche istituzioni siciliane*, pp. 112-113.

¹⁷ This country-oven was essentially a cylindrical clay oven at ground level used to bake bread. Godfrey Wettinger, 'Honour and Shame in Late Fifteenth Century Malta', *Melita Historica*, vol. 8 no. 1 (1980) p. 71.

¹⁸ Carmel Cassar, *Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition*, p. 21; cf. A[rchives of the] I[nquisition of] M[alta] Crim[inial Proceedings], vol. 19B case 46, fols. 494v-5: 25 June, 1601.

¹⁹ AIM Crim., vol. 17 case 105, fol. 202v: 5 November 1593.



Octavio de Castellano, who sold bread in the streets of Valletta. We have no details about the way Hali procured his wares.

The seventeenth-century Maltese historian, Gian Francesco Abela first records organized bread baking for the daily needs of a growing urban population in print in 1647.²⁰ Clearly, there was an urban demand for bakers' bread similar to that in major European cities and bread baking became concentrated on the village of Qormi, within a relatively short distance from the Harbour towns and particularly Valletta. Apart from the Qormi bakers, one comes across documents that shed light on licensed retail outlets found in the four Harbour towns themselves.²¹ Indeed as early as 1603 one baker, Leonardo Abate of Senglea explained that he had sold fresh bread to Gioanne Lopes, a new resident of Senglea.²² But this does not imply that whoever baked bread actually prepared it. By 1747 a list of bread bakers outside the Harbour area and the Mdina-Rabat area, or the countryside, indicates that Qormi had by far the largest number of bread ovens. There were ten ovens in Qormi but there were also five each at Żebbuġ and Birkirkara; four each at Żurrieq and Żabbar; three each at Żejtun, Luqa, Kirkop, Siġġiewi and Naxxar; two at Ghaxaq; and one each at Qrendi, Mqabba, Gharghur, Mosta, Lija, Balzan, Attard, and Safi.²³ Bakeries were thus scattered all over Malta and every parish appears to have had at least one bakery. It is most probable that the number of bakeries depended on the size and needs of each village. Furthermore a village like Qormi, which had by far the largest number of ovens, may have catered for the needs of the urban agglomerate surrounding Valletta. This explains why the larger villages like Żebbuġ and Birkirkara had the largest number of bakeries. The list does not take account of domestic ovens, which may have been relatively common in the countryside as

²⁰ Gian Francesco Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano con le sue Antichità, ed altre Notitie*, p. 92.

²¹ N[ational] A[rchives] M[alta], M[agna] C[urial] C[astellania], NA92/04, box 499.

²² AIM Crim., vol. 21A case 175, fol. 445: 2 June, 1603.

²³ N[ational] Library of M[alta] Libr[ary], ms.1220, pp. 272-5. Kindly brought to my attention by Mr Noel Buttigieg.



country-ovens. What is certain is that home-baking was still a common practice in the Maltese countryside until World War II.²⁴

2. The Early Modern Grain Trade

Grain as wheat, or until the mid-nineteenth century more commonly as maslin, was the main import from the urbanized harbour area to the countryside since most of the other food was home-produced. But it would be wrong to assume that Malta was in any way unique. Until the nineteenth century, when potatoes revolutionized the popular diet, cereals in varying forms like bread, porridge and gruel remained the basic commodities in the daily fare of the common people in Europe and the Mediterranean and provided the greatest share of their energy intake.

A popular Maltese idiom often used in everyday speech to this day claims: *Malta qatt ma rrifjutat qamh* (lit. Malta never refused any wheat [consignment]). The idiom implies that one should never refuse anything. But it confirms that wheat, often in the form of bread, always held first place in Maltese gastronomy. Godfrey Wettinger claims that, 'farming provided a livelihood for the peasants and formed the basis of an economy which included several hundreds of craftsmen, masons, carpenters... several notaries, and scores of priests secular and regular.'²⁵

The cultivation of wheat was given top priority but 'Malta did not produce enough wheat to feed its own people'.²⁶ Since politically Malta formed an integral part of the Kingdom of Sicily most of the wheat requirements were imported from the nearby much larger island. Malta depended so

²⁴ 'The 1939-45 war brought flour and bread rationing and the end of home-baking...' H. Bowen-Jones, F. 'The Farmer in Maltese Rural Society', in 'An Assessment of the Cultural Landscape', p. 348.

²⁵ Wettinger, 'Agriculture in Malta in the late Middle Ages', p. 3.

²⁶ Wettinger, 'Agriculture in Malta in the late Middle Ages', pp. 2-3.



heavily on grain imports from Sicily that this business came to provide an initiative to entrepreneurs, becoming the *raison d'être* of the Università (the Town Councils) of Malta and Gozo.²⁷ We learn that during the late Middle Ages, 'practically every year, large amounts of wheat and other cereals and pulses were imported from Sicily free of the Sicilian export duties'.²⁸ Nonetheless, Sicily itself suffered grain shortages and Sicilian towns, faced with a growing population and ever-increasing grain prices, were forced to gain control over grain supplies to feed themselves. The larger Sicilian towns managed to gain preferential access to grain supplies often through special arrangements. Sometimes they even closed their harbours or went so far as to interdict grain destined for export to smaller communities like Malta, which were faced with greater difficulties.²⁹

In Sicily, toll exemptions were only granted to towns belonging to the *regio demanio* (royal demesne), often in return for political support or loyalty. Since such allowances involved some loss of income for the crown, requests for exemptions were sometimes refused. Thus when Malta was still directly under royal Sicilian control, the Università received its required supplies of grain freely.³⁰ The situation changed in 1530 with the arrival of the Order of St. John, particularly as the Order of St. John continued to strengthen its position on the island, with the result that Malta ceased to be viewed as an integral part of the Kingdom of Sicily. As a result, the crown often found it difficult to maintain its earlier promises.

The officials of the Università, the jurats [Town Council representatives], were expected to secure adequate food supplies from the territory they controlled and to receive the assent of the Royal Patrimony, the institution

²⁷ Vassallo, 'Prices of Commodities in Malta: 1530-1630', p. 56.

²⁸ Anthony M. Wettinger, 'Agriculture in Malta in the late Middle Ages', p. 3.

²⁹ Henri Bresc, *Un monde méditerranéen. Economie et société en Sicile (1300-1450)*, pp. 744-7; Mark A. Aloisio, 'A Test Case for Regional Market Integration? The Grain Trade between Malta and Sicily in the Late Middle Ages', p. 301.

³⁰ NLM Libr. ms. 1220, pp. 191-3.



responsible for Sicily's financial administration, if obliged to buy grain from other municipalities. The jurats were entitled to buy the necessary grain supplies for their town from the municipal territory at the established price of the *meta*. The *meta* was a system intended to guarantee a 'fair' price to grain producers in their dealings with grain merchants.³¹ Thus, it was not the market price, but a rate that was fixed every year in each town to reflect the state of the harvest within its territory.³² Grain prices, like those of all other commodities, were fixed by *mete* from the Università all over Sicily and ratified by the viceroy. On the whole, prices did not differ much from one area of Sicily to another, since the local market depended on foreign agrarian credit. The system of *mete* had been progressively unified by the middle of the sixteenth century in line with the selling prices of the *carricatori*, as the centres from which grain was traded were called. *Mete* often increased and decreased in relation to transport costs.³³

Malta was administratively organized in line with the rest of Sicily. The advent of the Order of St John in 1530 meant the end of the internal administrative control by the Università of Mdina. The setting up of a new Università, for the urbanized zone virtually dominated by the Order and centred on the Grand Harbour, led to a substantial transfer of power from Mdina to the Harbour area.³⁴

Disputes over which Università should send envoys to Sicily led to further deterioration in the prestige of the older institution. For their part, the Grand Masters tightened their control on the institution, with the result that both Università could exert little independent control of the matter. At first, the Grand Master decided that each Università should send its representatives in

³¹ Orazio Cancila, 'Le mete del grano (1476-1824)', pp. 205-33.

³² The Royal Patrimony consisted of those territories directly administered by the king or viceroy. Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity*, p. 36.

³³ Maurice Aymard, 'Amministrazione feudale e trasformazioni strutturali', pp. 24-5.

³⁴ Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity*, p. 36.



alternate years,³⁵ but in 1583, the two Università were completely ignored. That year, two Knight Commanders were sent to Sicily to discuss the provisioning of grain with the viceroy without any previous consultations with the two Università.³⁶

Malta never managed to produce enough grain to feed its own inhabitants. In 1590, grain production reached a total of a mere 3,879 *salme* and nine *tumoli* (1 *salma* = 2.74 hl). Nearly 50 per cent - 1,975 *salme* and 10 *tumoli*, largely consisting of barley - derived from the countryside, around the villages of Birkirkara, Naxxar, Siġġiewi and Żebbuġ.³⁷ By the early 1620s the amount had risen to some 20,000 *salme* per year.³⁸ There are no indications whether the grain was barley or wheat but it may be safely assumed that the crop largely consisted of barley.

The situation did not improve much in the seventeenth century despite serious attempts to put more land under cultivation. The total yearly expenditure on grain during the rule of Grand Master De Paule (1623-1636) is reported to have reached 32,000 scudi per year, second only to the spending on the galley squadron.³⁹

With great difficulties, the importation of duty-free grain to the Maltese islands continued throughout the rule of the Order of St. John, with the exception of the early 1590s and early 1600s, when bad harvests, famine and plague in Sicily made exports from there impossible. This rule was sustained even in the years of meager harvests. Thus, although no grain was exported from Sicily after the harvest failures of 1606, 1607 and 1608, an exception for

³⁵ NLM Libr. ms. 148, fols. 39v, 55.

³⁶ Abela, *Della descrizione di Malta*, p. 123.

³⁷ Carmelo Trasselli, 'Una statistica maltese del xvi secolo', p. 479.

³⁸ B[iblioteca] [Apostolica] V[aticana] Barb[erini] Lat[ini] ms 5325, fol. 45.

³⁹ Elizabeth W. Schermerhorn, *Malta of the Knights*, p. 52.



duty-free quotas was made in the case of Malta.⁴⁰ It seems that this consistent provisioning was instigated by concern over the problem of food shortages on the island. A further increase in duty-free quotas, in 1622 and 1632, helped to alleviate the food shortage further.⁴¹ Meanwhile the Maltese had devised other means of procuring grain to feed themselves.

At a time when harvest failure meant famine and death, the poor were above all concerned with a cheap price for bread. Indeed the regulation of prices was one of the most difficult jobs of any late medieval or early modern government.⁴²

During the rule of Grand Master Pinto (1741-1772) it was not uncommon for the Università to sell grain at a loss. On one occasion losses amounted to 70 per cent but the Grand Master had managed to evade widespread discontent.⁴³ Great care was taken to regulate prices and keep them within reach of the common people, especially in times of harvest failures.

3. British Rule and the End of the Grain Trade Monopoly

The advent of the British in 1800 led to some drastic changes in the importation of grain to Malta. A Commission of Inquiry was sent from Britain. Among the new sources of revenue recommended by the Commission was a one per cent duty on all imports, as well as taxes on foreign residents and wine shops. The Commission then went on to discuss the need of a *Consiglio Popolare* or Università, the functions of which had been greatly curtailed by the Order of St John. It further suggested that Malta's

⁴⁰ Timothy Davies, 'Village-Building in Sicily: an Aristocratic Remedy for the Crisis of the 1590s', p. 200.

⁴¹ NLM Libr. ms.1220, p.6; NLM A[rchives of the] O[rder of] M[alta] vol. 6421, fols. 89-91.

⁴² E.P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', pp. 76-136; Vassallo, 'Prices of Commodities in Malta', pp. 71-2.

⁴³ Paul Bartolo, 'Il-hobz tal-Maltin... u l-kummerç hieles li riedu l-Inglizi (1812-1838)', p. 78.



administration, then divided into civil and military authorities, should in future be united under one administrator, who would serve as governor and commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces. The governor could then be advised, if he so wished, by a council composed of Maltese residents. The Commissioners Report was influenced by the changing political circumstances in the period in question. Malta had by then become an important base for the Royal Navy and the British could not afford to see the utility of the base diminished by local political activity. The report of the Commissioners was under scrutiny in London and induced the Colonial Office to create a new position of Civil Commissioner and Commander-in-Chief for Malta.⁴⁴ To make matters worse the King of the Two Sicilies had prohibited the exportation of grain to Malta at a time when Sicily enjoyed an abundant harvest. Therefore, while in Malta wheat was being sold at 60 shillings a quarter, in nearby Sicily it cost only 28 shillings. In 1856 William Senior Nassau blamed King Ferdinand II, who preferred to ruin the abundant harvest rather than sell wheat to Malta. This was very likely the result of the Neapolitan king's displeasure at losing his sovereignty over the Maltese Islands.⁴⁵

The man chosen for this new position was Sir Thomas Maitland (1813-1824). Maitland had already built a reputation as the successful administrator of Ceylon. Maitland then set about transforming and re-organizing the administrative set-up. His ruthless methods earned him many critics. Not only was the *Consiglio Popolare*, meant to serve as a council never established, but even the old Università – which continued to run the grain trade, was abolished and so was the committee of *giurati* (jurats). Maltese were replaced by Englishmen in almost every decision-making government position. Maitland promised that he would not interfere in the grain trade but since the loss of the monopoly disrupted his financial administration Maitland imposed a fixed duty on imported grain as a source of

⁴⁴ Godfrey Pirota, *The Maltese Public Service 1800-1940: The Administrative Politics of a Micro-State*, pp. 80-6.

⁴⁵ William Senior Nassau, *Conversations and Journals in Egypt and Malta*, vol.2, p. 293.



revenue. The grain duty was perhaps his most unpopular measure as grain, which was largely imported, was the staple food of the people and this duty hit hardest those least able to afford it.⁴⁶ Under Maitland the public service was completely re-organized, an Audit department was set up, and the several charitable establishments were placed under a central authority. The Maitland reforms may have paved the way for a more centralized departmental organization in line with the colonial administration adopted elsewhere within the British Empire. But it also led to the creation of highly-paid jobs filled by British officers who were paid from revenue collected through the controversial grain tax.⁴⁷ As Godfrey Pirotta points out, the size of the public service and the Maltese welfare system were intricately connected after 1822. Indeed prior to 1822 government revenue in Malta was derived from property rents, mercantile duties and the grain monopoly. With the suppression of the monopoly on grain the government decided to impose a duty on imported grain which amounted to about a third of all government annual revenue every year. It was a tax on the staple food of the people, who could ill afford the price of bread, and led to a sharp increase in poverty. A reduction in the number of government positions was seen as indispensable to relieve the burdens imposed by the tax.⁴⁸

Soon after Malta became a British colony in 1815 proposals to do away with the state monopoly and introduce free trade were under way. Nevertheless, the British authorities favored the exercise of control over the importation process so that grain would continue to reach the islands at moderate prices. Some advocates of free trade honestly believed that competition would even reduce the price of grain, to the benefit of the consumers. Little did they realize that the geographical limitations of Malta, and the heavy dependence of the great majority of the population on grain, augmented the chances of a drastic reduction in the quality of life. In Malta

⁴⁶ Pirotta, *The Maltese Public Service 1800-1940*, pp. 97-8.

⁴⁷ Pirotta, *The Maltese Public Service 1800-1940*, p. 425.

⁴⁸ Pirotta, *The Maltese Public Service 1800-1940*, pp.118-9.



there was no such thing as free trade, but rather an oligopoly in the hands of a few who dictated prices.

The monopoly was lifted in 1822 and this led to some changes to the types and quality of imported grain. Between 1828 and 1835, under Governor Major General Sir Frederick Cavendish Ponsonby (1827-1836), 82 per cent of grain consumed in Malta was being imported. The bulk of grain was now being brought from Southern Ukraine and the Black Sea coast. But cheaper and poor quality wheat was also imported from Egypt. Indeed in the decade between 1822 and 1832 Egyptian grain amounted to some 30 per cent of the total imported grain. It was the cheapest but also the worst in quality available in the Mediterranean. Thus, as Paul Bartolo points out, in 1820 the governor of Malta, Sir Thomas Maitland (1813-1824), wanted to sell Egyptian wheat to the poor. He described it as, ‘...a cheap and wholesome food... to the poorer classes... who have hitherto been accustomed to eat barley and other inferior kinds of grain...’⁴⁹ The minimal government control on the commerce in grain came to an end in 1837, with the blessing of the new governor, Lieutenant General Sir Henry F. Bouverie (1837-1843).

The Grain Department was abolished by the British administration of Malta in 1837 and as Godfrey Pirotta succinctly remarks,

*...the government of Malta was finally divested of its responsibility, of over five centuries, of ensuring, directly or indirectly, that the population of Malta was adequately and cheaply fed.*⁵⁰

Based on the recommendations of the Austin Commission,⁵¹ the tariff law reform abolished almost all other duties on imports in Malta, except those

⁴⁹ Bartolo, ‘Il-hobż tal-Maltin’, p. 80.

⁵⁰ Pirotta, *The Maltese Public Service 1800-1940*, p. 157.

⁵¹ John Austin (1790-1859) was a legal theorist and reformer. In 1838 Austin served on a commission investigating complaints about the management of Malta as a British colony. His efforts led to an overhaul of the tariff reform in the Maltese government.



on beer, cattle or more precisely beasts of burden (namely horses, mules and bullocks), charcoal, grains, oil, potatoes, pulses and seeds, spirits, vinegar and wines.⁵² However the most important food items for the masses of Maltese were wheat and other grains, which the government stopped subsidizing. The government of Malta was finally divested of its responsibility of ensuring that the island was adequately supplied with a cheap supply of grain. The grain trade, or more precisely now, the wheat trade, fell into the hands of businessmen. But the new system was equally defective.

In the 1870s, at a time when official efforts at Anglicizing the Maltese were introduced, the Colonial Office appointed no less than three commissioners within just two years – 1877-1878. These were meant to investigate practically every aspect of Maltese life. Patrick Keenan investigated the educational system; Sir Penrose Julyan looked into the civil establishments, their administration, organization, and costs; and Francis Rowsell looked into the finances and taxation. Rowsell found out that one major source of government expenditure in Malta was its large civil establishment and suggested the reduction of public expenditure through the abolition of the Land Revenue Department, the Treasury and the Printing Office. Rowsell suggested that ideally the grain tax, the island's main source of revenue, be abolished or at least substantially reduced. The government should instead readjust taxes so that everyone would pay 'his fair proportion of the expenses of government'. The revenue could be recovered by new taxes from other sources like alcoholic drinks, licences, education fees, tonnage dues and store rent on bonded goods.⁵³ Rowsell's proposals would have improved the quality of life of the poor but the tax reform never went ahead.

⁵² John MacGregor, *Commercial Statistics. A digest of the productive resources, commercial legislation, customs tariffs, navigation, port, and quarantine laws, and charges, shipping, imports and exports, and the monies, and measures of all nations*, pp. 1267-8.

⁵³ 'Report on the Finances and Taxation of Malta – F. Rowsell 1878', p.19 cf, Henry Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience*, p. 8.



Paul Bartolo has equated the liberalization of the grain trade with the falling standards of living of the Maltese poor, which, he claims, reached abysmal levels. Bartolo associates the increase in the price of grain with the increasing commercial speculation of the British merchants who began to manage the grain trade and who expected to make the largest possible profit.⁵⁴ In an analysis of the economic development in Malta of 1842, only a few years after the introduction of the liberalization process is carried out made by Charles Price who points out that:

*...certain merchant families... and newcomers, shared with several British firms established in Valletta the cotton trade, the profitable cereal trade with Egypt and the Black Sea, the local trade with Sicily, and the growing entrepôt trade with Africa and the East. By the end of the forties [1840s] some one hundred and fifty natives felt themselves sufficiently important to be included as 'merchant dealers' in local almanacks and guides.*⁵⁵

4. Grain Production and Imports

During the first half of the nineteenth century, industrial activity was so low that the main form of employment remained agricultural, while external commerce fared badly except in wartime. A characteristic feature of British economic thought was the emphasis on private enterprise. According to Arthur G. Clare, the British imposition of a *laissez-faire* policy meant:

...that the Maltese individual had to seek out his own economic salvation; second, that the Maltese... should not expect heavy financial commitments from British sources except by way of defence spending; third that the island had to survive on its own taxes. While this state of affairs might have had some measure of success in a country endowed

⁵⁴ Bartolo, 'Il-hobż tal-Maltin', pp. 86, 90-2.

⁵⁵ Charles A Price, *Malta and the Maltese*, p. 15.



*with rich resources in terms of both men and materials, in Malta's case it retarded economic growth.*⁵⁶

In 1842 an English visitor, John Davy, noticed that in Malta grain (the grain consumed was either made of wheat or maslin) and cotton were the crops most widely cultivated.

Wheat figures are given as 8,205 acres under cultivation in Malta, yielding 72,399 bushels and 542 acres in Gozo, yielding 6,559 bushels. In comparison only 4,307 acres were cultivated with maslin in Malta and 2,890 acres in Gozo. These yielded 52,581 bushels in Malta and 42,607 bushels of maslin in Gozo. Finally 5,749 acres of barley in Malta yielded 57,245 bushels and the 62 acres of Gozo produced 708 bushels of barley. The Gozitan farmers appear to have preferred the cultivation of forage (2,216 acres which yielded 32,876 in soma [loads of ten bundles each] not bushels) to that of barley.⁵⁷

The table below, based on data published by John Davy in 1842, shows official Government returns of the quantity of grain produced in Malta, the quantity of imported grain consumed and the price of bread per pound between 1828 and 1834. A distinction is made between wheat and maslin grown in Malta but the amounts of imported grain are strictly for wheat. It is evident that bread prices varied widely, from 6½ pence a pound in 1828 to 5½ in 1829 and 1832; to 2½ a pound in 1830 and 1833; to 3½ pence a pound in 1832 and 1834. But the more commonly used maslin bread, which Davy calls *'the common brown bread that is used by the labouring classes, seldom I believe, exceeds a penny a pound. Notwithstanding that it is heavily taxed'*. In a note he adds that the maslin, locally known as *mischiato* (mixed grains), consisted of one-third wheat and two-thirds barley, evidence that the period in

⁵⁶ Arthur G. Clare, 'Features of an Island Economy', p. 128.

⁵⁷ In Malta 5,518 acres of land with forage cultivation yielded 100,474 soma. At the time cotton cultivation was still more popular than the cultivation of wheat. An impressive 8,414 acres in Malta and 3,139 acres in Gozo were still cultivated with cotton. Davy, *Notes and Observations on the Ionian Islands and Malta*, p. 409.



question was one of great hardship as maslin normally consisted of 50 per cent wheat and 50 per cent barley. Davy also comments that '*a large proportion of the revenue of Malta has hitherto been derived from a tax on bread made of foreign wheat*'.⁵⁸

Table I

Grain Cultivation in Malta, Imported Wheat and the Price of Bread 1828–1834

Year	Grain grown in Malta		Foreign Wheat <i>Salma</i>	Bread per pound In Pence
	Wheat <i>Salma</i>	Maslin <i>Salma</i>		
1828	19,069	23,948	49,854	1 6/12ths
1829	15,843	25,040	54,960	1 5/12ths
1830	17,757	21,195	49,904	1 2/12ths
1831	5,682	15,538	65,459	1 5/12ths
1832	9,986	29,914	53,612	1 3/12ths
1833	9,983	12,787	59,588	1 2/12ths
1834	15,711	26,539	55,150	1 3/12ths

From: John Davy, *Notes and Observations on the Ionian Islands and Malta*, p. 409

The returns made to the Government of Malta for 1833 contain details on the acres of land under cultivation under specific headings. The grain under cultivation in both Malta and Gozo was of three types, namely: wheat, maslin and barley. Wheat was still largely consumed by the higher classes, while maslin was commonly eaten by the masses, and barley was cut green and largely used as fodder for cattle.⁵⁹ Incidentally, in a small island in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, like Malta, barley was easier to cultivate, as it is more tolerant of soil salinity than wheat. This might explain why barley cultivation was preferred to any other. In the end, the farmers' preference for barley meant that less land was allotted for wheat, or at least maslin

⁵⁸ Davy, *Notes and Observations*, p. 409.

⁵⁹ Davy, *Notes and Observations*, p. 397.



cultivation, and this did not help to reduce the increasing demand for imported wheat.

Davy compares the wages of the Maltese with those of the Ionian Islands, similarly under British rule at the time of writing, and concludes that the farmers' profits were very small, that the labourers received miserable wages from the land and the population was very poor.⁶⁰ Wages were even lower than those of thirty years before. Thus while in 1811 Padre Carlo Giacinto claimed that the farm labourer received eighteen pence a day, by 1842 he was only receiving a wage of six-and-a-half pence per day.⁶¹ Evidently the standard of living was abysmal and peasant families could ill afford to buy enough bread to survive. No wonder that some decades later W. Senior Nassau was able to assert that *...Maltese incomes are so small that the attempt to keep up the appearances which the English think only decent, becomes a ruinous expense...*⁶²

Price volatility remained a standard feature in the nineteenth century and appears to have resulted, at least in part, from international instability. Indeed, during the second part of the nineteenth century, cereals were at a premium on the international market and this situation inevitably effected Malta. Prices fluctuated, but often rose to such high levels that the mass of the population in Malta was left with little money to buy other commodities. According to Godfrey Pirotta

*At least three-fifths of the public revenue was derived from import duties of which the duties on grain formed the bulk. Between 1868 and 1871, as a result of the diminution of demand for imported cereals, this revenue fell by an average of £10,000 a year.*⁶³

⁶⁰ Davy, *Notes and Observations*, p. 421.

⁶¹ Davy, *Notes and Observations*, p. 416.

⁶² Senior Nassau, *Conversations and Journals*, p. 261.

⁶³ Pirotta, *The Maltese Public Service 1800-1964*, p. 243.



This strongly suggests that the very great increase in the demand for the potato was the direct result of the general impoverishment and further lowering of the standard of living of the Maltese masses in the mid-nineteenth century. Wine, cheese and oil took up most of what was left,⁶⁴ while meat consumption was pegged at a lower level and was only to rise after World War I.

In 1902 Sir Temi Zammit (1864-1935), claimed that ‘nothing is eaten in such large quantities more than bread... which [he claims] is the basic need of humans who cannot live without it’.⁶⁵ This issue was later confirmed by Adriano Dingli, a Maltese lawyer who in 1906 wrote a pamphlet arguing against the duty on imported cereal produce. Dingli asserts that the duty

*...may be established for either or both of two reasons; to protect the national production of wheat and to secure a large source of income to the State.*⁶⁶

He argues that in the case of Malta which ‘...could never subsist on cereals produced at home alone... the quantity of imported wheat greatly exceeds what is produced at home, in spite of the duty.’⁶⁷ It follows that the duty on cereals had become a ‘burden [that] is borne by the consumers’ with the result that ‘the revenue is increased in proportion to the more or less protective value of the duty...’⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Maurice Aymard & Henri Bresc, ‘Nourritures et consommation en Sicile entre xiv et xviii siècle’, pp. 597-8.

⁶⁵ ‘Ma hemmx haġa li titiċkel actar mil hobż... hua l’ewwel bżonn tal bniedem u mingħajru ma nafx x’onna naghmlu...’. Temi Zammit, ‘Chelmtin fuk il hobż’; cf. Kenneth Gambin and Noel Buttigieg, *Storja tal-Kultura tà l-Ikel f’Malta*, p. 197. The rotolo is an old Sicilian weight measure equivalent to approximately 793.5 grams. See: Oddo, *Dizionario di antiche istituzioni siciliane*, p. 113.

⁶⁶ Adriano Dingli, *The Duty on Imported Cereal Produce and the Bread Making Industry in Malta*, p. 8.

⁶⁷ Dingli, *The Duty on Imported Cereal Produce*, p. 19.

⁶⁸ Dingli, *The Duty on Imported Cereal Produce*, p. 11.



As with Dingli sums up that as in most countries bread was the staple food of the poor, who ended up paying much more heavily than the rich.

*...that article [bread] does not assume by any means the same important function on the tables of the well-to-do. A labourer will consume, under normal conditions, about one-rotolo or even more a day; while the average well-to-do man consumes about a fourth or at most half a rotolo. And these figures conclusively prove the unequal distribution and the heavy call on the resources of the poorer classes.*⁶⁹

In essence, a rise in the price of grain has the effect of striking the poorer classes more than the richer ones since the latter had a more varied diet.⁷⁰

Until the early part of the twentieth century therefore, bread remained the staple food of the mass of the population, who literally continued to survive on bread. When at the end of World War I the price of bread trebled, despite the addition of barley flour, potatoes, rice, or corn, many suffered hunger or developed gastric maladies.⁷¹ As bread was the staple food of the masses, the Lieutenant-Governor, William C.F. Robertson, argued in 1919 that a rise in price could lead to a riot.⁷² The price of bread had in fact trebled from 2½ pence to 7½ pence per rotolo owing to the complete interruption of the Russian grain trade after the outbreak of war in 1914 and the Russian revolutions that followed in 1917. The increase in the price of bread had led to a strike at the Malta dockyard in 1917. Undoubtedly, social conditions were poor at the time and the general atmosphere had deteriorated. However great efforts by the colonial government to search for alternative sources of wheat supplies meant that the price of bread was somehow kept in check. This was mainly possible thanks to the arrival of wheat shipments from Australia that

⁶⁹ Dingli, *The Duty on Imported Cereal Produce*, pp. 22-3.

⁷⁰ Dingli, *The Duty on Imported Cereal Produce*, pp. 13-5.

⁷¹ Carmel Cassar, 'Everyday life in Malta in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', pp. 100-1.

⁷² Paul Bartolo, *X'kien ġara sew fis-Sette Giugno*, pp. 40-1.



eventually reduced prices first to 7 pence, then to 6½, and by April 1919 it had gone down to 5½ pence without the need to recur to subsidies. Eventually the new governor, Field Marshal Viscount Lord Plumer (1919-1924), approved a further reduction in the price of bread so that it went down to 4½ pence per rotolo.⁷³

It is evident that bread shortages were still a paramount political issue in the early twentieth century. As everywhere else in Europe, the Maltese could turn to potatoes, and it seems that by the early twentieth century they were cultivating potatoes in relatively large quantities. In 1915, John Borg, the Superintendent of Public Gardens and Plantations, claimed that potatoes ‘constitute at present a very important item of cultivation, and in favourable circumstances there is no crop equally profitable’.⁷⁴ By 1919, potatoes had become a very popular staple at a time of dire grain shortages and the government had provided incentives to Maltese cultivators to produce more potatoes than usual during World War I. This was part of the war effort as most of these potatoes were meant to be exported to the Allied Armed Forces. The problem was that the quantity of potatoes meant for export was so great that there was not enough left for local consumption and therefore not enough was left to feed the Maltese!⁷⁵ There seems to have been a tendency for the rural poor to consume larger quantities of potatoes than their urban counterparts. Thus even after World War II the villagers continued to make great use of the potato while the urban lower classes preferred to eat various forms of pasta instead.⁷⁶ By that time, both pasta and potatoes served as substitutes for bread.

The British policy of free trade had the effect of improving the quality of bread for the mass of Maltese who daily consumed a large proportion of the wheat imported to Malta. However the crisis generated by World War I,

⁷³ Bartolo, *X’kien ġara sew fis-Sette Giugno*, p. 42.

⁷⁴ John Borg, ‘Agriculture and Horticulture in Malta’, p. 229.

⁷⁵ Bartolo, *X’kien ġara sew fis-Sette Giugno*, pp. 42-3.

⁷⁶ B.W. Beeley, ‘F. The Farmer in Rural Society’, p. 347.



coupled with a shift in the sources of imported wheat from the not too distant Ukraine to the far-flung British Dominions, and a malfunctioning administration brought about much misery, which led to the riots of 1919.

5. Conclusion

The importation of duty-free grain from Sicily was a major feature of the rule of the Order of St John in Malta and by the mid-sixteenth century it had become the *raison d'être* of the municipal authorities, or the Università of Mdina, and later Valletta. The grain trade remained a state monopoly until its liberalization in 1822. This may seem like a step forward towards the introduction of free trade. It may be argued that the abolition of the state monopoly, and the inability to grow enough local grain to support the needs of the Maltese, led to an ever-increasing demand for foreign grain. Some may argue that Malta was privileged in that it managed to become liberalized earlier than Britain, where the Corn Laws that were introduced in 1815 to protect the local market were only repealed in 1846. In Malta, the high tariffs on the price of grain soon became a most effective way for the local administration to raise revenue.⁷⁷ In the end, the available data seems to suggest that the way the British managed the grain trade led to unnecessary suffering for the mass of the Maltese population. In short, the liberalization of the grain trade, mainly due to political reasons, may largely be blamed for a steady decline in the standard of living of the Maltese.⁷⁸ But it would be misleading to see the liberalization of the grain market as the sole cause of declining living standards in Malta. Other factors, like problems in the global supply of grain, and wars, seem likewise to have contributed to the problem of

⁷⁷ Malta levied a duty that ranged between 20 and 30 per cent on wheat, which successive colonial administrations failed to reform as they were heavily dependent on this form of revenue. Paul Sharp, 'Malta and the Nineteenth Century Grain Trade: British free trade in a microcosm of Empire?', p. 33.

⁷⁸ From a *de jure* extension of the Kingdom of Sicily under the Knights of St John (1530-1798), Malta became a British protectorate (1800-1814) and later a fortress colony (1814-1964).



food shortages. Deterioration in economic standards was witnessed during World War I (1914-1918), when the Ottoman Empire sided with the Axis, and thus against Britain, France and the Russian Empire, with the result that the Black Sea was closed to trade and Malta stopped receiving grain from the Ukraine. Matters became worse in the years following the Russian Revolution (1917), and the Russian Civil War (1917-1921) that followed. During those difficult times, the British authorities had perforce to seek grain from elsewhere and the abundant supply of grain from Canada and Australia, as parts of the British Empire, were the obvious choice. What the British authorities failed to evaluate were the excessive freight expenses of the crossing, which naturally increased the costs. Changes in the global trade production, the slowing down of trade routes, food shortages, and sky-rocketing prices all contributed to the general suffering of the Maltese, as they did to other populations elsewhere.

Ever since the British set foot on Malta they were caught between two conflicting needs regarding basic food supplies. On the one hand, they had to ensure a sufficient and affordable supply of grain for local consumption. At the same time, they tried to ensure that Malta paid for the costs of food supplies and this implied that grain, in particular, besides other commodities, had to be taxed. However, the stiff taxation on a vital imported commodity seems to have made imported grain less accessible to the masses. By the mid-nineteenth century, the dilemma was so acute that the rural population preferred to resort to the extensive cultivation of potatoes rather than buy unaffordable grain with which to make their bread. Substantial quantities of potatoes began being exported abroad, thus providing financial benefits not only for the British authorities but also for merchants and the local farmers.

However, the main fault of the British colonial administration may probably be sought in the way Malta was administered. Throughout the long period of British rule, Malta was mainly valued for its strategic value. Perhaps the British outlook is best expressed in Joseph Chamberlain's speech to the House of Commons in 1902 when he stated:



*...We hold Malta solely and entirely as a fortress essential to our position in the Mediterranean. Not as an ordinary colony but as a fortress... In a fortress anything like open agitation against the government is a thing that cannot be tolerated on the face of it....*⁷⁹

Under British rule, Malta, essentially reduced to a client state, was economically and politically dependent upon the “mother country”. This may explain why the Maltese colonial government became heavily dependent on the grain tax. The economy, totally geared to accommodate the British services, had no alternative methods of taxation and matters only changed in 1948 with the introduction of income tax.⁸⁰ The implementation of the grain trade system was thus very different from the liberal free-trade philosophy adopted in Britain. Nonetheless, the evidence confirms that those largely affected were the poor majority of inhabitants, as these depended mainly on grain for their sustenance. On their part, the Maltese did not consider the duty on grain as the best method of taxation as the attack on the grain importers during the *Sette Giugno* riots clearly suggests.

However, by claiming that the liberalization of the grain market led to a lowering of the living standards of the Maltese, one would be ignoring equally important factors, like grain shortages, long distance travel, and war that had a lasting impact on the Maltese throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whatever the case, one may argue that despite the lack of immediate public outrage at the abolition of the ancient grain provisioning system in 1837, the issue remained a major incessant preoccupation for the local British administration until World War II.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Frenco, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony*, p. 100

⁸⁰ Pirotta, *The Maltese Public Service 1800-1940*, p. 158.

⁸¹ Pirotta, *The Maltese Public Service 1800-1940*, p. 157.

**Coinage under the Order of St John: 1530-1798**

6 *dinari* = 1 *grano*

10 *grani* = 1 *carlino*

20 *grani* = 1 *tari* (or 2 *carlini*)

12 *tari* = 1 *scudo*

30 *tari* = 1 *uncia* (or 2½ *scudi*)

Coinage under British rule: 1800-1964

3 *grani* = 1 farthing

4 farthings = 1 penny

12 pence = 1 shilling

5 shillings = 1 crown

20 shillings = 1 pound sterling (sovereign)

21 shillings = 1 guinea



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