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Popular Perceptions and Values in Hospitaller Malta

In his description of Malta, Jean Quintin d'Autun observed that 'the people have a Sicilian character, with a mixture of African ... The people are very devoted to their religion ... [which] is wonderfully practised in the whole island.' Apart from Mdina 'and some houses in the suburb', the Maltese lived in makeshift houses roofed with tiles or reeds, 'which one would take ... for African huts'. Above all, the Maltese depended on Sicily for their grain supplies and used thistles and cow dung for fuel, as timber had to be imported: 'the people, conscious of their country's sterility, live a very frugal life'.¹

In the late eighteenth century, Malta was described as a country of growing material prosperity. The Order's rule had brought law and order, security as well as prosperity to the Maltese. The population, which in the early sixteenth century had barely reached 17,000 souls, nearly topped the 100,000 mark in 1798. Splendid buildings and a relatively high

¹ J. Quintin d'Autun, *Insulae Mellitae Descriptio*, in *The Earliest Description of Malta (Lyons 1536) by Jean Quintin d'Autun*, trans. and ed. H.C.H. Vella (Malta, 1980), 35-43.

standard of living, 'higher than anywhere else in the Mediterranean, had changed life in this outpost of Europe dramatically'.² The income derived from the *corso*, the profits of trade, and the steady flow of the Order's revenues (in the form of *responsiones*) were among the most important driving forces behind such change.³ A gradual but consistent change in the Maltese people's character was felt immediately after the arrival of the Order of St John. N. de Nicolai, on a visit to Malta in 1551, had already observed the cosmopolitan atmosphere obtaining in the Birgu area.⁴ As early as 1611, the English traveller George Sandys observed the great differences between the character of the townsmen and that of the peasants. 'Those of the country,' he wrote, 'are indeed a miserable people; but the citizens are altogether Franchified.'⁵ However, general improvement in the standard of living continued such that in 1653 Inquisitor Borromeo reported that in 1530 Mdina had been the only town on the island and that the rest of the people were rustic villagers; but, by the time he was writing, the village population had grown and their habits had improved considerably.⁶

Nevertheless, in the latter part of the eighteenth century there still prevailed the general impression that the peasants lived frugally on 'bread, peppers, onions, and anchovies'.⁷ Thus, although a general improvement was in fact registered

² Cavallero, *The Last of the Crusaders* (Malta, 1960), 101.

³ D. Cutajar and C. Cassar, 'Budgeting in 17th-Century Malta', *Mid-Med Bank Annual Report and Accounts* (Malta, 1983), 144.

⁴ Nicolo de Nicolai, *Le navigazioni et viaggi nella Turchia*, trans. Francesco Fiori de Lilla (Antwerp, 1576), 35.

⁵ G. Sandys, *A Relation of a Journey begun Anno Domini 1610*, 4th edn. (London, 1637), 234.

⁶ 'Relazione di Malta e suo Inquisitoriato: dell'Inquisitore Federico Borromeo', *Malta Letteraria*, II (1927), 50.

⁷ Baron Riedesel (1773), after Cavallero, 89.

in Malta, 'in part due to the presence of a multitude of strangers who visited the island',⁸ the peasants continued to retain most of their habits right up to the end of the Order's rule. V. Denon was able to remark that, while 'countrywomen are said to be faithful to their husbands ... the women of the city know no more how to resist the gold of the Bailiffs than the amorous sighs of the young Knights.'⁹

The general picture that can be drawn from these accounts is that, throughout the rule of the Hospitallers, the way of life in the Maltese countryside had changed but little, while around the Grand Harbour the Order had developed an urban environment on which it came to concentrate most of its attention and activity. The division between the urban centres around the harbour and the *campagna*, as the rest of rural Malta was known, remained total during the rule of the Order. This social and cultural barrier broke down only very slowly during the British period.¹⁰

1 POPULATION, WORK, AND MIGRATION

The arrival of the Hospitaller Order of St John in Malta brought about a radical change in the administrative, political, economic, cultural, and social systems of the island. The first move of the Order was to transfer the seat of Government from the old medieval town of Mdina to Fort St Angelo and its suburb Birgu (later Vittoriosa), overlooking the Grand Harbour. This proved to be an inevitable move since the Order depended heavily on its navy for both economic and military reasons, at a time when the only possible mode of communication of an island with the outside

⁸ L. de Boisgellin, *Ancient and Modern Malta*; 1 (London, 1804), 77.

⁹ V. Denon, *Voyage en Sicile et à Malte* (Paris, 1788); Cavallero, 77.

¹⁰ D. Cutajar and C. Cassar, 'Malta and the Sixteenth-Century Struggle for the Mediterranean', *Mid-Med Bank Annual Report and Accounts* (Malta, 1985), 29.

world was through its maritime links. In such circumstances, many Maltese, in search of a better future, were attracted to the Birgu area, causing an exodus from the countryside to the new seat of Government. The need to create new living space in the harbour area led to the establishment of two newly fortified towns during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – Senglea and Bormla (later Cospicua) – which, together with Birgu, became known as The Three Cities. This hub of economic activity became the natural centre of all kinds of trades, crafts, and arts, further enhanced with the building in 1566 of Valletta – a new seat of Government and the island's new capital city. The new boost of activities must be seen within the context of demographic growth, witnessed throughout the period of the Order's rule.

A look at such trends in Malta during the period from 1530 to 1798 reveals a slow but steady increase in population. During the sixteenth century the growth was slight in spite of the installation of the Order, with its various client communities. Population growth was actually reversed in the 1550s, 1560s, and early 1570s due to persistent fears of a Muslim attack, war, corsairing activity, and various evacuations from the country in the form of a massive wave of emigrants owing to the ever-present fear of a Turkish invasion. To these one should add the ravages of the plague of 1592.¹¹

The prosperity of the Maltese islands increased throughout the seventeenth century as evidenced by the continued expansion of the population which followed a more even course after 1614, although it was subjected to another severe check caused by the outbreak of plague in 1676.¹²

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43-7.

¹² D. Cutajar and C. Cassar, 'Malta's Role in Mediterranean Affairs: 1530-1699', in *Malta: Studies of its Heritage and History*, ed. Mid-Med Bank (Malta, 1986), 126.

| TABLE I | | | | |
|------------------------------|--------|----------|-------|-----------------|
| Population Growth: 1530-1798 | | | | |
| Year | Malta | Gozo | Order | Maltese Islands |
| 1530 | — | — | — | 25,000 |
| 1590 | 27,000 | 1,864 | 3,428 | 32,290 |
| 1614 | 38,429 | 2,655 | — | 41,084 |
| 1632 | 49,866 | 1,884 | 3,848 | 51,750 |
| 1658 | 46,150 | 3,923 | — | 50,073 |
| 1676 | — | 4,438(7) | — | 60,000 |
| 1680 | 43,800 | 5,700 | — | 49,500 |
| 1738/40 | 58,435 | 7,929 | — | 56,364 |
| 1798 | 90,000 | 24,000 | — | 114,000 |

Sources: Cutajar and Cassar (1965), 47; Cutajar and Cassar (1986): 127-8; H. Bowen-Jones *et al.* (Makfa 1961), 133.

Meanwhile, a multitude of men, hailing from all parts of Christendom, were increasingly attracted by better prospects of work on the island and entered the Order's service either in the Armed Forces or the Civil Service.

Human mobility became a very significant demographic feature. A passengers-list for the year running from September 1688 to August 1689 gives the total number of arrivals for that year as 940 (excluding Hospitallers) – a fact which lends weight to the proposition that Malta was by then comparable to one of the more cosmopolitan centres of the Mediterranean.¹³ Most of these passengers travelled by means of small boats which made frequent trips to the southern coasts of Sicily. Such a surge of activities enabled the Order to maintain its vast building programme and man its fleet. The passengers-list provides excellent insight into how this was in fact accomplished. Many passengers declared their

¹³ MCC, reg. Rev. Mancip. 1588-1617.

intention to serve on the galleys, while others aspired to open shops or engage in a profession.¹⁴

The Turkish siege of Malta of 1565 brought about a radical transformation to life in Malta and for most people it marked the end of an old era and the beginning of widening horizons. This break in continuity manifested itself at every level – demography, topography, agriculture, and social relations. Human death toll, evacuation, and increased migration to the towns around the harbour extensively depopulated the countryside. The wide-scale destruction of houses, fields, and livestock changed the villages physically. New structures in different style were built on new sites, while different village centres began to emerge.¹⁵ There were numerous direct effects on the economy. Cotton production was intensified as a cash crop. Increased dependence on the State for subsidized grain and other foodstuffs, and on foreign remittances made village life less autarchic.¹⁶

Slavery clearly influenced the labour market for both domestic and public enterprise. Slaves were obtained almost exclusively from corsairing activities. In 1590 slaves numbered around 3,000. Some were pressed into service on the galleys, but at least half were incorporated into the local economy.¹⁷ They were purchased by most sectors of the population, including priests. This obviated the slaves' need to live with kin and for domestic labour. Male slaves appear to have been in the majority and they fetched higher prices than female slaves.¹⁸

¹⁴ Cutajar and Cassar, 'Malta's Role', 110.

¹⁵ L. Mahoney, *A History of Maltese Architecture*, (Malta, 1988), ch. 8.

¹⁶ J. Debono, 'The Cotton Trade of Malta 1750-1800', *Archivum: Journal of Maltese Historical Research*, 1 (1981), 94-5.

¹⁷ C. Trasselli, 'Una statistica maltese del secolo XVI', *Economia e Storia* (1966), 474-80. NLM, *Univ.* 1, ff. 187-88.

¹⁸ G. Wettlinger, 'Some Aspects of Slavery in Malta, 1530-1800'. Ph.D.

A large number of Maltese males were engaged in the Order's navy, State- or privately-owned merchant shipping, as well as piracy, which was fast becoming a very profitable enterprise. The essence of local men and the heavy influx of foreigners may suggest why Maltese females from the Harbour area tended to marry foreigners at a time when nearly a third of the whole population of Malta was based on the Harbour towns.

Such drastic and continual changes led to the rise of a new class of subjects (the *familiars*) which the Order tended increasingly to rely on for the running of the bureaucratic machine. This new class was made up of a mixture of descendants of the original Rhodiots, who had settled down in Malta with the Order's arrival, and Maltese country-dwellers who were lured to the Harbour area in search of better work opportunities; others hailed from various parts of Europe, especially Greece, Italy, and southern France. These were either attracted to serve the Order in the hope of career advancement, better pay, or else in order to escape from religious persecution at home. This class was entrusted with highly responsible jobs from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards. Perhaps one of the best examples is that of Girolamo Cassar, chief engineer on the Valletta building programme. Some were even allowed to join the Order itself (Cassar was made a *donat*) or were granted titles of nobility.

Geographically situated at the periphery of southwestern Europe, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Malta possessed a highly commercialized and monetarized urban sector, centred on its new capital Valletta and the two harbours, Marsamxett and the Grand Harbour. Its economy depended heavily upon trade, piracy, slavery, and the income from Hospitaller estates in Europe which filtered down through the Common Treasury in Valletta to finance large-scale building programmes and the manning of a small but well-organized

and efficient navy,¹⁸ helping it to become one of the lesser Mediterranean powers, carrying great reputation and prestige among all other States in Europe and the rest of the Mediterranean.

2 DOMINATION OF LIFE BY RELIGION AND DEATH

Christianity was well-rooted in Malta by the time the Order of St John arrived. There was usually an absentee Bishop, apart from some religious orders and institutions together with a Tribunal of the Inquisition usually presided over by the Vicar-General responsible for the island's spiritual needs. The attachment of the Maltese community to the Church was so great that it often enabled the diocese to act as a separate, if not as an independent, entity in Malta throughout the Order's rule. Such a situation was attained practically in all pre-industrial societies where religion has always been looked upon as a symbolic code of communication and a focus for social organization. In fact, organized religions have generally always had to come to terms with the existent economic and cultural divisions.²⁰ In Malta, the unity of the various strata of the population was possible through the profound ties of all the inhabitants, except the Muslim slaves, to the Roman Catholic Church. Malta was close to a theocracy as the three separate jurisdictions on the island – the Grand Master's, the Bishop's, and the Inquisitor's – all considered the Pope as their ultimate earthly head. The net result was that religion seeped deeply into all sectors of society with the priesthood serving as the focus of social organization. They combined teaching as well as other advisory duties with their spiritual role. Among the peasantry, they acted as a main link between the village and the outside world. At the village level the

¹⁹ Cutajar and Cassar, 'Malta's Role', 105-40. J.F. Grima, 'The Order of St John's Galley Squadron at Sea', *Storja* 78 (1978), 9-41.

²⁰ A.D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1986), 26-9.

priesthood constituted the only literate stratum of the community to which the inhabitants had easy access. Priests served as a link between the Government of the Order of St John and the mass of the population.

The *relazione* of Don Filippo Borg, parish priest of Birkirkara, is evidence of how village representation fell above all to the lot of the parish priest. During the Order's rule, this role came to be challenged by the Knight nominated as Captain of the Militia, who tended to become a new source of patronage attracting all those who sought favours from the Hospitaller Government. Such a situation created rivalries within the village community which tended to split into factions. Nevertheless, Borg spoke in defence of the population at large.²¹

At times parish priests stood up against the abuse of the Curia itself. It was usual for bishops to be surrounded by a group of hangers-on, consisting of prelates, the staff at the Curia, and other patentees. On occasions some of these tended to accompany the Bishop on pastoral visits, enjoying a free and very comfortable holiday at the expense of the parishes. These had to provide free board and lodging to the Bishop and his party. In fact, such visits often became a serious financial burden on the parishioners' resources. The pastoral visit of Bishop Rull between 1758 and 1760 had one such effect. When a few years later the Bishop intended to embark on a similar project, the parish priests appealed directly to Rome to forestall the project.²²

The Rising of the Priests in 1775 and the hoisting of the Maltese banner on St James Cavalier and Fort St Elmo could be interpreted as evidence that the local Church and priesthood led the people against the ever-growing absolute rule of the Grand Masters. In this case, as one historian

²¹ G. Wettinger, 'Early Maltese Popular Attitudes to the Government of the Order of St. John', *MH*, vi, 3 (1974), 255-78.

²² C. Testa, *The Life and Times of Grand Master Pinto: 1741-1773* (Malta, 1989), 228.

rightly points out, the populace or, at any rate, the clerics and their families sided with the Bishop.²³

Eighteenth-century Malta is often depicted as a society which was fully immersed in the cultural conditions of the time. Thus, while the mass of the population retained much of their religious enthusiasm, the administrative and cultural élites were gradually becoming sceptic of Christian values. There is no doubt that the effects of the Enlightenment had begun to be felt in the early eighteenth century when writers like Voltaire, Montesquieu, and others were being arduously read and digested.

Knowledge of what the bulk of the people understood by Christianity might be gained by browsing through the episcopal and especially the Inquisition court cases of the time. Previous to the arrival of the Apostolic Delegate, Mgr. Pietro Duzina, and the implementation of the rules enacted by the Council of Trent, behaviour in church was informal and at times even irreverent. People sat on the altar steps, squatted on the floor, nipped out at intervals to wine shops, talked, laughed, and spat on the floor.²⁴ Pietro Pachi of Siggiewi, for example, ceased to attend Mass since he was not allowed to continue sitting in the choir or on the altar steps any longer.²⁵ Irreverent behaviour in church was no longer tolerated. When the Apostolic Visitor learnt that riotous merry-making took place in the precincts of the church of St Agatha in Rabat (Malta) on the eve of the saint's feast, he ordered that, from then on, the gates of the church be kept closed one hour after sunset to avoid this and similar abuse.²⁶

The Counter-Reformation Church was above all keen in reforming the social behaviour of its members. This explains

²³ H. Frendo, *Malta's Quest for Independence* (Malta, 1989), 36.

²⁴ J. Delumeau, *Catholicism Between Luther and Voltaire: A New View of the Counter-Reformation*, trans. J. Moiser (London, 1977), 197.

²⁵ AIM, *Proc. Crim.* 3A, ff. 94-107, case 6, November 1576.

²⁶ NLM, *Lib.* 643, 36.

the particular importance attached to the celebration of the Mass and popular behaviour at Church festivities. The development of votive Masses allowed congregations to pray for their survival in the time of plague, for rain, to avert storms, and a hundred other reasons. 'The Mass thus provided ways of regulating the unpredictable of nature.'²⁷ Finally, there were Masses celebrated for the dead, strongly criticized by the Protestant reformers and their sympathizers who could see no point in praying for the deceased.²⁸ The records of the *Reverenda Fabrica di San Pietro* (1628-1798), which are kept at the Cathedral Archives in Mdina, are eloquent proof that the Maltese population continued to believe in the efficacy of Masses for the dead.

Popular religion in early modern times contained a streak of anti-clericalism clearly expressed in the cases which were heard by the Inquisition regarding the low moral standards of both secular and regular clergy.²⁹ The steady improvement of clerical celibacy probably helped to improve the laity's image of the clergy. On the whole, these were normally respected by the people. When, in 1661, Bishop Molina reported on the spiritual situation of the Maltese islands to the Holy See, he pointed out that the majority of the priests were completely dedicated to the good of their flock.³⁰ Nevertheless, members

²⁷ J. Bossy, 'The Mass as a Social Institution', *Past and Present*, 100 (1983), 38-40.

²⁸ Further details in C. Cassar, 'The Reformation and Sixteenth-Century Malta', *MH*, x, 1 (1988), 51-68.

²⁹ See for example C. Cassar, 'The First Decades of the Inquisition: 1546-1581', *Hyphen* [Malta], iv, 6 (1985), 207-38; id., 'An Index of the Inquisition: 1546-1575', *Hyphen* [Malta], vi, 4 (1990), 157-78; J. Cassar Pullicino, 'Social Aspects of an Apostolic Visit', *MH*, II, 1 (1956), 19-41; A. Bonnici, *Il-Maltn u L-Inkjetzzjoni f'Nofs is-Seklu Sbatax* (Malta, 1977); F. Ciappara, *Mill-qgħan ta' l-Istorja: Il-Kapillani fis-Seklu Tmintax* (Malta, 1984).

³⁰ A. Bonnici, 'Aspetti della vita cristiana nell'isola di Malta verso la metà del seicento', *Maltese Folklore Review*, I, 4 (1974), 305-35.

of the clergy continued to be accused of 'unethical behaviour'. One of the most common accusations brought against the priesthood concerned the violation of the vow of chastity. Inquisition trials on the subject abound, such as the accusations of Anne Cassar of Luqa and Maria Farrugia of Żebbuġ.³¹ Both women reported their confessors of taking certain liberties with them. Sometimes such charges were unjust or based on insufficient evidence. A case in point was the charge put forward by Grazio Sciberras of Birkirkara who suspected his wife of having illicit relations with the parish priest. The wife, however, strongly denied such accusations.³² During the early modern period, religion remained the major driving force of Maltese society, even though religious ignorance or indifference was still widespread. Some may have rejected the over-dogmatizing attitude of the clergy, yet Christianity remained a popular force. Indeed, religion had very little to do with belief in the theorization of norms and the so-called 'guilt culture'. Popular religion had much more to do with semi-magical practices, such as healing, divination, the evil eye, and love charms.³³ Efforts on the part of the Catholic Church to eliminate these practices did not subside and some forms of magic, like healing and trust in charms against the evil eye, persisted into the twentieth century.³⁴

The hold exerted by religion was perhaps related to the insecurity of life. As a salvation religion dealing with life after death, Christianity offered an escape from damnation in the all too likely event of a sudden or early death. This obsessive anxiety focusing on death reflects how people looked at it. Death was a phenomenon which pervaded early modern society. It was a major talking point in both theological

³¹ AIM, *Proc. Crim.* 97B, f. 616; *ibid.*, 96C, f. 1325.

³² *ibid.*, 99B, f. 391, 13 September 1707.

³³ C. Cassar, 'Healing and Witchcraft Beliefs in Seventeenth-Century Malta', (Unpublished M.Phil. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1989), 9.

³⁴ J. Cassar Pullicino, *An Introduction to Maltese Folklore* (Malta, 1947), 35.

and political thinking among all sectors of society. It pervaded the life of both rich and poor alike. Death came prematurely. Infant mortality was high, as evidenced in the burial registers of the Maltese parishes; and sometimes birth and death were effectively simultaneous.

Nature conspired with death. Plague, in particular, was a frequent assailant throughout the Mediterranean and the rest of Eurasia. In the catalogue of plague outbreaks compiled by J.N. Biraben, one notes that between 1600 and 1650 there were only thirteen years free of plague in the Mediterranean region and only seven years for the second part of the century.³⁵ Quarantine measures, taken to check plague from spreading, must have certainly helped to give some psychological confidence to the population at large, but a considerable number of people continued to resort to magic in order to cure disease. At a time when medical knowledge was limited, many had no faith in doctors and, as Domenica Muscat declared in 1598, people preferred to resort to healers instead.³⁶ The eventual victories over plague as well as over famine led to a gradual change in popular mentality, especially from the late eighteenth century onwards.

Death's omnipresence affected the attitudes of people at large. Its imminent presence affected the psychology along which they organized their lives and activities. The sixteenth century in particular was an age of heroic enterprises, especially remembered for the siege of 1565 and the active part Malta played in sea battles like Prevesa (1538) and Lepanto (1571). Yet, for all their importance, these campaigns were often rushed in planning and preparation. Owing perhaps to the lack of proper means of communications, much of the human effort of the early modern period suggests a

³⁵ See J.N. Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens* (Paris, 1975); D. Cutajar, 'The Malta Quarantine: Shipping and Trade 1654-1694', *Mid-Med Bank Annual Report and Accounts* (1987).

³⁶ AIM, *Proc. Crim.* 18, case 209, ff. 177-180.

frantic attempt to rush things through³⁷ before death stepped in to cancel all effects of human endeavour. Christianity, at least on the popular level, offered the only real resistance to the triumph of death. For this reason peasant and urbanite tended to nourish strong religious feelings although sometimes the Maltese tended to transgress against official religion.³⁸

The cult of saints was particularly strong among the masses of the population, especially due to the fact that the Counter-Reformation firmly restated the usefulness of invoking saints.³⁹ Devotion to the Virgin Mary increased in intensity, while some new saints of the Counter-Reformation emerged as well-documented popular hero figures. Vincent de Paul exemplified compassion for the poor, orphans, and prisoners; Carlo Borromeo stood for personal ascetism and service to the poor, especially in plague epidemics.⁴⁰ Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier, and Philip Neri were also assimilated in Maltese cults.

In the early seventeenth century, the cult of St Paul was further boosted, thanks partly to the presence on the island of the Spaniard Juan Benegas, who revived the veneration for St Paul's Crypt,⁴¹ and partly to the foundation of the Jesuit

³⁷ F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. S. Reynolds (London 1972-73), II, pt.3, provides excellent insight into this attitude for the sixteenth century. See also Curajar and Cassar, 'Malta and the Sixteenth century'.

³⁸ The Archives of the Inquisition in Malta abound with cases in which ample references are made to the enforcement of the Tridentine decrees.

³⁹ P. Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987), ch. 5.

⁴⁰ G.L. Mosse, 'Changes in Religious Thought', in *The New Cambridge Modern History, iv: The Decline of Spain and the Thirty Years War*, ed. J.P. Cooper (Cambridge, 1970), 171, 182.

⁴¹ J. Azzopardi (ed.), *St Paul's Grotto, Church and Museum at Rabat, Malta* (Malta, 1950), pt. 1.

College in Valletta in 1592. The Jesuits promoted studies on the Pauline cult where the Apostle's role as protector of the Maltese was particularly stressed.⁴² Other saints, particularly Publius and Agatha, were venerated as co-patrons of the Maltese diocese. By the early eighteenth century, the patrons of various parish churches were venerated at the parocinial level, thus becoming symbols of their respective parishes. Meanwhile, the veneration towards the patron saint of the island, St Paul, grew so strong that by 1700 the Council of the Maltese Commune issued edicts with such invocations as 'In the name of God, and the Glorious Apostle St Paul, our Protector'.⁴³

No saint was nearer to God, however, than the Virgin Mary, acclaimed by the medieval Church as 'Mother of God'. With this concept the Church developed the Hail Mary (*Ave Maria*) into a prayer to be especially recited during times of great crisis. So popular was the *Ave Maria* that its periodical recitation became a recognized way of measuring time.⁴⁴ Thus the Church involved itself in everything, both in the Middle Ages and even more so after the Council of Trent.⁴⁵ The Jesuit College ensured the domination of religion over education. The Order's Government itself paid for scholarships that enabled promising young students to perfect their studies abroad. However, those students who intended to study the Holy Scriptures in their original languages were referred to

⁴² V. Borg, 'Gerolamo Manduca: His Life and Works', *MH*, vii, 3 (1978), 237-57; F. Clappara, 'Mikiel Anton Vassalli: A Preliminary Survey', *MH*, x, 2 (1989), 145-56.

⁴³ NLM, *Univ.* 23f. 13v. 29 September 1701.

⁴⁴ E.P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present*, 38 (1967), 58.

⁴⁵ L. Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century - The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. B. Gottlieb (Cambridge Mass., 1982), 349.

others. This might perhaps explain how Mikiel Anton Vassalli managed to study oriental languages in Rome.⁴⁶

Every activity, including time, was seemingly saturated with religion. The divisions of night and day remained largely ecclesiastical. It was the church bells which proclaimed a succession of prayers and services from morning to evening at recognized hours. It was customary to refer to the hours of the day in relation to the striking of church bells. Thomaso Xiberras pointed out that he had entered a tavern at the time when the church bells struck the *Pater Noster*,⁴⁷ while Rosa Cumbo referred to a particular point in time in this way: 'Yesterday evening, after supper, around the striking of the first *Ave Maria*'.⁴⁸

Even the calendar spoke the Christian language everybody understood. Feast days were linked to various collective activities. Andrea Zammit of Żurrieq specified the time he was talking of as Easter time, the time the cotton crop matures.⁴⁹ Vincenzo Mifsud referred to the olive harvest as the period after the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary.⁵⁰

In other circumstances the people tended to associate a particular point in time to a memorable event. Thus, in the late sixteenth century, they were especially concerned with the siege of 1565. In 1574 Simon Provoat admitted to have kept a concubine since the time of the siege,⁵¹ while Isabetta Caruana claimed that she had been teaching catechism to girls at the *Monasterio delle Vergini* since the time of the siege.⁵²

⁴⁶ Cutajar and Cassar, 'Budgeting', 30.

⁴⁷ MCC, Misc. 23, 25 October 1708.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 31 October 1708.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, AO 611, f. 133, 23 November 1699.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Off. Prim. Appellationsi, 1706/7, f. 31.

⁵¹ AIM, Proc. Crim. 167, case 1, f. 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 147A, case 4, f. 50, 4 May 1599.

Religion surrounded food with rules, rituals, and prohibitions. Food itself was eaten partly on the Church's orders. People ate fat or lean according to whether the Church said so or not. In 1582 Inquisitor Federico Cefalotto defined what the Church meant by fasting. 'It is illicit to eat prohibited foods, that is meat and dairy products in Lent, *quatuor temporum vigiliis*, and other days on which the Holy Church prohibits us.'⁵³ Eating meat on prohibited days was a serious offence throughout the period of the Hospitallers in Malta. Anyone who transgressed was immediately reported to the Tribunal of the Inquisition. Don Mariano Briffa was reported for having eaten meat on Fridays and Saturdays in 1599.⁵⁴ The selling of meat on a Friday was considered a serious offence. In fact, Giuseppe Gaveau, a French merchant was accused of having sold meat and chickens on that prohibited day.⁵⁵ The Inquisition kept very strict rules over this issue, even in the eighteenth century. Its campaign over prohibited foods was so effective that Gozitans, who lived so far away from the watchful eye of the Inquisitor, felt obliged to report those who infringed upon the law of fasting. Antonia Vella of Rabat (Gozo) came all the way to Birgu in 1703 purposely to report a neighbour for having had roasted mutton on a Saturday.⁵⁶ Such modes of behaviour continued to prevail among the lower classes in Malta until at least the late nineteenth century.

3 STANDARD OF LIVING

Food and the urgent need to relieve hunger moved the population of early modern Europe, including Malta, even

⁵³ Ibid., 6C, case 84, f. 1266.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 147B, case 10, f. 197v.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 3A, case 13, ff. 261-316, August 1576.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 97B, f. 609.

more than politics, religion, or sexual urges.⁵⁷ Eating dominated both private and public life, since having enough to eat had an enormous significance. Early modern society was marked by a culture in which all dreamed of eating meat, essentially because diet primarily consisted of vegetable foods.⁵⁸ Meat meant nourishment, taste, and status. None the less, it was a taboo to eat it on certain days. Those who could afford it must have been in the eye of their neighbours who were only too happy to report them to the Inquisition for the least transgression. From a window overlooking his courtyard, Imperia Tonne of Mqabba spied upon Don Mariano Briffa eating meat on Fridays and Saturdays on several occasions. Thanks to her, we gain a clear picture of how meat was prepared and eaten as well as which kind of meat was normally preferred by the people. On all occasions Don Mariano was reported to have eaten pork. Once, she said, she saw him eating many mouthfuls of crude meat while it was being cooked, presumably grilled, and drinking wine over it. On another occasion, he ate sausages and salamis prepared in Malta. On a couple of other occasions he had even asked Imperia, his neighbour, to cook the meat for him. Once, this consisted of pork sausages; and on another occasion, it was a piece of pork known as *di lunga*.⁵⁹

It has been pointed out that meat, eggs, and poultry could not be sold during the forty days of Lent, Fridays, and other days in which it was prohibited. Invalids had to produce two certificates, one from their doctor and one from a priest, in order to be exempted. Anyone who pretended to be sick risked getting into trouble and be reported to the Inquisition. Alberto Bezzina of Żebbuġ had chicken prescribed for his

⁵⁷ P. Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams* (Oxford, 1989), *passim*.

⁵⁸ F. Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, I: The Structures of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Reynolds (London-New York, 1981), 104.

⁵⁹ AIM, *Proc. Crim.* 147B, case 10, f. 197v, 31 May 1599.

meal as a result of feigned sickness but he was promptly denounced by his wife.⁶⁰

The number of days on which meat and dairy foods were prohibited led to a huge demand for fish, salted or smoked. However, fish in Malta was not always plentiful. Fishermen were few, although they were scattered all over the island.⁶¹ Moreover, the scope of fishing was restricted during the winter, due to weather conditions and rough seas. For these reasons it was common to import fish from abroad, at times even from the North Sea. Arnaldo Bastiano, a sailor from Hamburg, declared before the Inquisition Tribunal in 1600 that he had come 'to Malta aboard a *bertone* laden with a cargo of salted fish'.⁶²

Diet remained pretty much the same over the centuries, particularly for the lower classes. They ate little meat, cheap fish, and poor-quality cheese. Bread was the staple commodity and remained so at least until the early twentieth century.⁶³ Society was heavily dependent on agricultural produce. Yet it was rare for a harvest to escape in turn all the dangers that threatened it. Fields were relatively small and there was always the fear of famine. A few changes in temperature and a shortage of rainfall were enough to endanger human existence. Indeed, no major wars were fought during harvest time, while the only detail of everyday life that regularly found its way in diplomatic correspondence concerned harvest throughout the Mediterranean.⁶⁴ Malta was no exception to the rule. Population increase and the continuous

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 97B, f. 609, 17 June 1703.

⁶¹ B. Blouet, *The Story of Malta* (London, 1967), 134.

⁶² AIM, *Proc. Crim.* 17, case 93, ff. 95-104, 9 March 1600.

⁶³ C. Cassar, 'Everyday Life in Malta in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in *The British Colonial Experience 1800-1964: The Impact on Maltese Society*, ed. V. Mallia-Milanes (Malta, 1988), 101.

⁶⁴ Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 244.

droughts made it 'a land of hunger'. The island depended so heavily on the importation of wheat from Sicily that this business activity provided a strong initiative to entrepreneurs and became the *raison d'être* of the *Università* of Malta and Gozo.⁶⁵ This in part explains why land continued to be the most coveted of possessions. It was the safest capital, and agriculture the greatest source of revenue.⁶⁶

The grading of bread and its quality sanctioned social distinctions. Bread represented a status symbol that defined human condition and class according to its particular colour. As 'the stuff of life', bread represented a socio-economic position.⁶⁷ At a time when harvest failure meant famine and death, the ideal of the just price was embedded in popular culture. 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 early modern Government.⁶⁸ The *Università* of Malta had a hard time to keep prices as low as possible. At times, the only solution to do so was to make loaves smaller in size. The prices of other essential commodities, such as wine, oil, and cheese were also kept generally stable. Though equally vital, they were consumed in much smaller quantities than grain.⁶⁹

Vegetables were a side dish and for most people meat or fresh fish was an occasional luxury. As pointed out by Marc Bloch, traditional society tended to rely on one or two staples

⁶⁵ A.M. Vassallo, 'Prices of Commodities in Malta: 1530-1630' (Unpublished BA Hons. dissertation, University of Malta, 1976), 56.

⁶⁶ Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 42.

⁶⁷ Camporesi, 120.

⁶⁸ E.P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136.

⁶⁹ M. Aymard and H. Bresc, 'Nourritures et consommation en Sicile', *Annales E.S.C.* (1973), 597. See Vassallo, 211-14.

for the bulk of its food.⁷⁰ In early modern Malta, the mass of the population consumed large quantities of bread and wine, supplemented by oil, cheese, vegetables, and very little fish or meat.

Malnutrition led to premature death, particularly among those children who were weak and poorly developed. Small pox and other diseases carried off up to half the child population before they reached puberty. The number of victims from epidemics and endemic illnesses was always high, especially among children. The net result of malnutrition was therefore depopulation.

Just as malnutrition had unfortunate effects upon the demographic development of the lower classes, the manner in which the upper classes lived also resulted in their decadence. Their food was very heavy, consisting chiefly of meat and wine. The Knights and their retinues appear to have preserved their lifestyle unchanged in Malta: they dressed according to the fashions in Europe, while they ate and drank as one was normally expected to eat and drink in a cold climate. A diet such as this amounted to a veritable suicide on the part of the dominant classes. Too much meat and too much drink proved as lethal as the undernourishment of the poor.

Workers had to spend a large part of their income to buy staple commodities, particularly bread, and very little remained to spend on articles other than food. A problem which early modern workers had to face in this struggle for survival concerned clothing and housing. How could they pay for clothing and afford rent for their lodging? Workers were probably very poorly clothed. The poor were utterly ignorant of fashion. Their costumes remained unchanged from one generation to another. Crude homespun seems to have been the everyday working garb, made from the least expensive of local resources: wool or cotton.

⁷⁰ M. Bloch, *Les caracteres originaux de l'histoire rurale Francaise*, 1 (Paris, 1976), 21-2.

Travellers' accounts tend to show that throughout the rule of the Hospitallers, Maltese women went out veiled. Jean Quintin, secretary to Grand Master L'Isle Adam, in his *Inoulae Melitae Descriptio* (1536), claims that 'they go out covered in a veil, as if to see a woman is here the same as to violate her'.⁷¹ At the end of the eighteenth century, Jean Houel could still point out that Maltese women wore a *faldetta*. He pointed out that while women of distinguished rank carried a mantle of black silk, those of inferior rank possessed *faldettas* which they could also hold in their hands.⁷² There was a general repugnance among foreign visitors to Malta for the *faldetta*. Sier Du Mont, who visited Malta in 1690, felt that the *faldetta* made women look like ghosts.⁷³

Count Ciantar and Canon Agius de Soldanis provided invaluable details of local dress and fashion as seen through Maltese eyes.⁷⁴ Count Ciantar was of the opinion that the cloak with a hood attached to it, commonly used by Maltese males, had been introduced by the Arabs. De Soldanis argued that by the eighteenth century this had developed into the form known as *kapott* in the cities and as *mantar* among peasants and the urban lower classes. Otherwise, the Maltese clothed themselves in a similar fashion as the Sicillans. However, the presence of Turkish and Muslim slaves in Malta may have introduced other items of dress which were slowly adopted by the Maltese.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the 'citizens' were already 'altogether Frenchified' by the early seventeenth

⁷¹ Quintin, 41.

⁷² J. Houel, *Voyage pittoresque des îles de Sicile, de Malte et de Lipari*, iv (Paris, 1785), 96.

⁷³ S. Du Mont, *A New Voyage to the Levant*, 3rd edn. (London, 1702), 137.

⁷⁴ G.A. Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata*, i (Malta, 1772), 771-81, 801-3; NLM, *Lib.* 142 (G.F. Agius de Soldanis), v, 218-9.

⁷⁵ J. Cassar-Pullicino, *Studies in Maltese Folklore* (Malta, 1976), 138.

century.⁷⁶ French costume remained dominant in Malta among the upper classes until the early nineteenth century.⁷⁷ Shoes were hardly ever used. Richard Colt Hoare, on a visit to Malta in 1790, observed that people walked barefooted, particularly in the countryside. They wore shoes and stockings only when they went to the city, 'but these were carefully taken off when leaving it, so that a pair of shoes frequently descends from one generation to another.'⁷⁸

Throughout the Order's rule, the separation between town and country folk was highly emphasized. One could in fact recognize a person's social standing from the way he dressed. A respectable gentleman at the close of the sixteenth century had to keep a formal home, have a servant at home, and own a horse. Besides, both the gentleman and his wife had to go out well dressed like all the other people of their rank.⁷⁹ Such standards seem to have remained pretty much the same until the end of the eighteenth century.

How did the majority of the Maltese live in the early modern period? Jean Quintin referred to the Maltese peasants as inhabitants of caves or African huts.⁸⁰ This suggests that the population at large was not particularly fussy about housing standards or general health conditions. They continued to satisfy themselves with the most impoverished dwelling-places. In villages it was possible to

⁷⁶ Sandys, 234.

⁷⁷ G.P. Badger, *Description of Malta and Gozo* (Malta, 1838), 119-26; M. Miegé, *Histoire de Malte*, I (Paris, 1840), 168; F.M. Lacroix, 'Malta et le Goze', in *L'Univers, ou Histoire et Description de tous les Peuples*, ed. M.D'Avezac (Paris, 1848), 38.

⁷⁸ A.C. Hoare, *A Classical Tour through Italy and Sicily* (London, 1819), 505. Indeed, up to the late 1930s, it was still customary for country people to walk barefooted. See Cassar, 'Everyday Life in Malta', 104.

⁷⁹ AIM, *Proc. Crim.* 147, case 7, ff. 142-143, 12 December 1598. Evidence on Signor Mattheolo Falsone by Domenico Aczopardo.

⁸⁰ Quintin, 31.

have some space for a family household. Land was relatively cheap and it was normal for a house to include a large number of rooms on the groundfloor although these tended to be of modest size.⁸¹ The agricultural labourer's family, however, lacked possessions and more often than not they lived in a state of almost complete destitution. Their furniture consisted of next to nothing, at least until the early eighteenth century, when rudimentary luxury began to spread. Chairs, woollen mattresses, feather beds, and some peasant furniture such as a chest of drawers or two in which to put their clothing, a table, a few stools, and a spinning-wheel for cotton were found in the houses of both rich and poor.⁸² All subjects were expected to own holy pictures or a crucifix as prescribed by the Counter-Reformation Church. When Lorenza Moscamarina and Paula d'Asardo claimed that they had no such pictures at their abode, they were promptly reported to the Inquisition.⁸³ Holy pictures were so important that at times they constituted part of a girl's dowry.⁸⁴ All in all, inventories, which are reliable documents, testify almost invariably to the general destitution of people in the countryside.

In the towns, the situation was just as depressing. Urban overcrowding created a number of slum housing areas within the capital. Slums sprouted all around the tip of lower Valletta to house sectors of the lowest orders of society. Overcrowding characterized lower-class housing.⁸⁵ It was common for poor artisans to live in one-room cellars whose only source of light and air was provided by the street door. The *mezzanini*, constructed above them, were likewise small

⁸¹ Mahoney, 82.

⁸² J. Micallef, *Hal-Luqa, Niesha u Graffietha* (Malta, 1975), 140.

⁸³ AIM, *Proc. Crim.* 6C, case 40, ff. 964-971, 6 September 1581.

⁸⁴ J. Micallef, *L-Istorja ta' Hal-Safi* (Malta, 1980), 32-3.

⁸⁵ Blouet, 108.

and ill-ventilated.⁸⁶ Except for the houses of the very rich, tenements were economically planned. Buildings were densely populated as owners sought to turn to profit every square inch of land available. In the eighteenth century it was still usual for the middle classes to mingle with the common folk. The well-to-do sometimes lived in large houses. At times they still occupied the higher floors of ordinary buildings, while workers were housed wherever space was available. In her marriage contract, Victoria Debono, from Valletta, had, as part of her dowry, a room access to which was made from a common courtyard above Porta Reale.⁸⁷ The ground floor in towns usually contained a workshop with access from the street, sometimes with wares displayed onto the street itself.

The Order's presence in Malta brought about an all-round improvement in the existing medical services. Until the latter part of the sixteenth century, there were only three small hospitals on the Maltese islands. The one built by the Order at Birgu in the early 1530s was well equipped by sixteenth-century standards. The other two were the *Santo Spirito* hospital outside the old town of Mdina and the St Julian hospital inside the citadel in Gozo. Both hospitals were provided with insufficient accommodation and facilities. The St Julian hospital had even been turned into a prison by the time Mgr. Duzina carried out his Apostolic Visit in 1575.⁸⁸ Improvement in the medical service took place later on in the century with the building of the Holy Infirmary in Valletta. Its lavish care and advanced services became quite renowned. A parallel service was the maintenance of the Convent of St Ursula, which functioned as an orphanage and rendered an excellent service to the community. In such institutions rudimentary relief services to the poor and the aged were also provided. Undoubtedly, the sanitary conditions of the Maltese

⁸⁶ P. Cassar, *Medical History of Malta* (London, 1964), 328-9.

⁸⁷ NAV, 16/521, Not. Tommaso Agius, 14 January, 1652.

⁸⁸ Cassar-Pullicino, 'Social Aspects', 29.

islands were much below present-day standards. In Valletta and the Harbour towns in particular, an adequate supply of water was a major concern. By law every house had to have its own well or cistern.

The aqueduct, constructed by Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt in the early years of the seventeenth century, brought water from a natural spring in the countryside. None the less, water was still considered a precious luxury. In fact, the Grand Masters continued to issue proclamations (*bandi*) to prohibit flagrant abuse by many people, who used to wash their wares and water their animals at public fountains. Such activity was only restricted to a very small number of fountains. The rest were reserved solely for drinking purposes. For this reason anyone who damaged or made any other use of fountains was severely punished.⁸⁹ It appears that the people did their best to keep themselves clean. However, such restrictions on the use of water indicate that people in general had to do with fairly low standards of hygiene. In such conditions, it is no wonder that diseases spread, claiming numerous victims, in spite of rigorous quarantine control.⁹⁰ This had other repercussions on Maltese society, such as the death of a large number of infants each year.

Regardless of whether they hailed from the Harbour towns or the countryside, the basic geographical perception of the early modern Maltese was that of the locality in which they lived. Nevertheless, everyone was conscious of Malta as a political unit. But there was a distinction between the countryside and the Harbour area, dominated first by Birgu and afterwards by Valletta. This distinction was accepted by everyone although contact between different localities and the Harbour towns was never lacking. Villagers had frequent contacts of a commercial, social, and cultural kind with the

⁸⁹ NLM, *Lib.* 1200, 372-75.

⁹⁰ Cutajar, 'The Malta Quarantine', *passim*; J. Micallef, *The Plague of 1676: 11,300 deaths* (Malta, 1984), *passim*.

Harbour area, a fact which is confirmed both by the frequency of marriage ties and by the migration of peasants to the towns in search of work.

The communication system did not help to improve the disparity between the Harbour area and the countryside, as the condition of roads was deplorable. These usually consisted of numerous, uneven, and dusty paths and lanes that turned into mud with the first rain, making them impossible to use in winter. In the sixteenth century, the bad state of the roads and the primitive means of transport made it difficult for the Rabat parish priest to travel to Dingli to administer extreme unction to the dying. On inquiring about the matter, Mgr Pietro Duzina, during his Apostolic Visit of 1574-75, was told that people from Dingli sometimes died without any spiritual assistance.⁹¹ The only means of internal transport consisted of travelling by mule, donkey, or cart. The richer members of society apparently travelled by means of privately owned horses and carriages. Travel on donkey seems to have been the normal trend. By the early eighteenth century, the price of donkeys fell to four *tari* per head. These donkeys had slit noses so that they could breathe better and run faster.⁹² At the end of the century the *kaless* came into use. According to Galt, the *kaless* was a horse-drawn carriage which seated two passengers.⁹³

Communications between Malta and Gozo were ensured by six boats which travelled and transported goods daily to Valletta and vice-versa.⁹⁴ This appears to agree with the theory put forward by Fernand Braudel that, while distance

⁹¹ NLM, Lib. 643, 286.

⁹² F. Skippon, 'An Account of a Journey made through part of the Low Countries, Germany, Italy and France', in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, ed. Awnsham and Churchill (London, 1732), vi, 622.

⁹³ J. Galt, *Voyages and Travels* (London, 1812), 122.

⁹⁴ F.E. de Comte de Saint Priest Guignard, *Malte par un voyageur français* (Paris, 1791), II, 28.

was the main problem faced by travellers, shipping routes proved to be the safest and most reliable means of communication.⁹⁵

Town and village streets were so poorly paved that one could easily trip over and break a limb. This happened to Oliverio Seichel, an official of the Inquisition, while walking in the streets of Vittoriosa on a November day in 1598.⁹⁶ In fact, until the end of the eighteenth century, the streets of Valletta were the only ones which could be considered decently paved.⁹⁷ Work on the streets of Valletta was only undertaken in January 1770 under Grand Master Pinto and it continued uninterruptedly until the end of the Order's rule in Malta.⁹⁸

Poor lighting had a negative social influence. All roads were deserted after sunset as everywhere would be enveloped in darkness, a situation which favoured the spread of burglaries at night time. Townspeople and villagers were thus compelled to lock and bar their doors by sunset. The authorities did all they could to control the situation. Valletta was patrolled by armed companies and so were the villages of Malta and Gozo. Fights between the constables and gangs of robbers often ensued, in which a few robbers were usually caught. In 1759 the Mdina prison cells were so packed with such culprits that it was considered dangerous to keep them there. In fact, they were removed to Fort St Elmo.⁹⁹

People spent much of their time in the company of others and tended to participate in collective activities both at the

⁹⁵ Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, I, pt. 2, *passim*.

⁹⁶ AIM, *Proc. Crim.* 146, case 6, ff. 120-125, 11 November 1598.

⁹⁷ Carzì, *L'Ordine de Malte devolle ou voyage de Malta ... sur la nature, les productions de l'île, la religion et les moeurs de ses habitants*, II (Paris, 1790), 82-3.

⁹⁸ Testa, 317-8.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 236-7.

local and the national level. The village feasts are a case in point. In the sixteenth century, the Maltese *fešta* was usually a small affair. It was often organized thanks to the generosity of some local benefactor with above-ordinary means. It generally took the shape of the distribution of food or money to the poor of the village.¹⁰⁰ By the late seventeenth century, feasts started to include a procession with the statue of the patron saint.¹⁰¹ However, the popularity of feasts was boosted in the eighteenth century. Perhaps such an interest had developed thanks to other factors. Joseph Cassar Pullicino remarks¹⁰² that

'The eighteenth century also saw the Order organizing popular festivities under all sorts of pretexts - the election of a Grand Master, the accession of a new pope, the yearly feast of the Order's Protector, St John the Baptist, the occurrence of a centenary such as that of the Great Siege, the birth of a son to some royal household in Europe connected with the Order - and each such occasion gave rise to street decorations, illuminations, fireworks, and other merry-making.'

There was yet another social occasion where people could meet and enjoy themselves. This was carnival. Carnival enjoyed popularity ever since it was first known to be officially held in Birgu in 1535. By the early eighteenth century, carnival balls attracted a large sector of the social élite to the Manoel Theatre.¹⁰³ Carnival merry-making was mostly confined to Valletta, but villagers from all over Malta came to watch, enjoy themselves, and sometimes participate.

However, due to the nature of the particular environment in which they lived, the Harbour-area people were able to

¹⁰⁰ Cassar-Pullicino, 'Social Aspects', 41; Micallef, *Hal-Luqa*, 32, 62, 76.

¹⁰¹ V. Borg, *Il-Knisja Parrokjali ta' Hal Tarxien* (Malta, 1973), 44, 80; Cassar-Pullicino, *Studies*, 36-7.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 21-5.

develop other pastimes which they could enjoy in their free time. Many of them appear to have enjoyed rowing boats on summer evenings, especially in the vicinity of ships which they could view at close quarters in the Grand Harbour. Very often these rowers could even spot people in balconies and insult them without having to bother that they could be spotted in the dark.¹⁰⁴

Country people developed different pastimes. Hunting for birds during the migratory season was apparently one of the favourite pastimes among men who 'are excellent shots, and seldom miss those birds which they do not take in nets'.¹⁰⁵

Wine was drunk by all, and it was customary for men, after a day's work, to meet at wineshops both in town and country. Wineshops served as bars, restaurants, and recreational places. Francesco Consumato of Cospicua admitted that he often frequented taverns 'to eat a hunk of bread and drink a *terzo* of wine'. He also played cards there and frequented prostitutes.¹⁰⁶

Excessive drinking was not only shameful but was also considered a grave crime by the authorities. Among the accusations brought against Giovanni Domenico Azzupard in December 1705 was that of drunkenness.¹⁰⁷ Taverns were generally held as centres of vice and disrepute by the authorities. Frequently they were the only place where men could meet to drink, eat, and play cards or dice. They were therefore closely watched in case swearing and fighting ensued. An incident in the tavern of Domenico Haxixa at Luqa, which took place in 1600, gives a clear indication of how a fight could break out in such places. At sunset, on 8 May, three men, including an official of the Inquisition in

¹⁰⁴ Testa, 152-3.

¹⁰⁵ Boisgellin, I, 106. This has been kindly brought to my attention by Mr N. Fenech. N. Fenech, *Fatal Flight* (London, 1992), 25.

¹⁰⁶ MCC, AO 617, f. 255, 5 September 1701.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 652, f. 350.

charge of the Luqa area, were still playing cards to while away their time. Haxixa ordered them to stop playing, calling them rascals. A fight ensued in which one of the players was hit by a knife in the arm by Haxixa.¹⁰⁸

Taverns in both town and country remained popular throughout the period of the Order's rule. Strong French influence led eventually to the introduction of coffee and chocolate in the eighteenth century. In the mid-1770s, a visitor commented that the higher classes drank coffee, chocolate, and Sicilian wine.¹⁰⁹ Tobacco was widely diffused in Malta by the mid-seventeenth century such that sailors were prohibited to smoke on the galleys of the Order.¹¹⁰ Snow water was also available, but it was mainly a luxury reserved for the rich. Most of the snow came from Mount Etna in Sicily, although sometimes the Order was supplied by Naples. Braudel points out that on one occasion the Knights claimed they 'would die if they did not have this remedy to break their fevers'.¹¹¹

Men from all walks of life and social classes had more time to spare than women. Even those men pertaining to socially emarginated classes were not expected to help their womenfolk. Instead they went to the tavern, played cards, got drunk, and quarrelled. Women were less fortunate. They were responsible for child-bearing, did the housework, and much else. They had so much work to do that they had very little time for themselves. Their only pastime seems to have been that of enjoying a chat with other women. Even then, someone like Rosa Grech took her spinning-wheel with her

¹⁰⁸ AIM, *Proc. Crim.* 147B, case 22, ff. 340-344.

¹⁰⁹ R. de la Platiere, *Lettres écrites de Suisse, d'Italie, de Sicile, et de Malte*, III (Paris, 1776), 91.

¹¹⁰ Cutajar and Cassar, 'Malta's Role', 132.

¹¹¹ Braudel, *Civilization*, I, 231.

when she went to visit her friend Maria Rizzo.¹¹² The subordination of women to their fathers and husbands and their lack of freedom must have been culturally inbuilt, primarily meant to control women's activities.

4 KINSHIP AND INHERITANCE PATTERNS

In a world where the old were constantly being replaced by the new, the worst affliction for society was sterility. Sterility broke the cycle of the domestic group, disrupting the continuity of the family line. Marriage and child-bearing established a link between the past and the future. In such circumstances women played a special role, bearing and nursing the children on whom the future of society depended.

In Christianity, marriage was decided upon by the couple although consent by the parents was necessary for a valid marriage.¹¹³ Children were 'exhorted earnestly that they owe it as a tribute of respect to their parents ... not to contract marriage without their knowledge, still less in defiance of their expressed wishes'.¹¹⁴ Typical of pre-industrial society, marriage was meant above all for procreation and not for recreation, a reality which was even maintained by the priesthood.¹¹⁶

The life of the family was open to scrutiny from outsiders. Family was but one of the many networks of relations on which people relied to make a life for themselves. The essence of the family was therefore to live in day-to-day confrontation

¹¹² F. Clappara, *Marriages in Malta in the late eighteenth century (1750-1800)* (Malta, 1988), 67.

¹¹³ *Concillium Tridentinum*, sess. xxiv: *De Reformatione Matrimonii*, ch. 1.

¹¹⁴ *Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests*, trans. J.A. McHugh and C.J. Callan (New York, 1954), 354; after Clappara, *Marriages*, 21.

¹¹⁵ ACM, Misc. 56, ff.62-95v (by the eighteenth-century Maltese scholar and Capuchin, Padre Felaglo).

with other people.¹¹⁶ Marriage was a form of convenience. Few if any held a sentimental or romantic view of marriage. It was, above all, a hard and fast bargain. Marriage was the concern of the girl's parents or guardians. It was considered a necessary evil, entered into for fear of being unable to lead a chaste life. It was thus a remedy against illicit fornication. This explains the worries of someone like Maria Paporiceforo, who complained that her son Nicola died as a sailor, serving the galleys of the Order, and leaving four virgins behind. The eldest, Rosa, of fourteen was considered to be of marriageable age. Thus Paporiceforo asked the Order to grant her a sum of twenty-five *scudi* which she would give Rosa for a dowry in order to protect her from 'the dangers of the world'.¹¹⁷

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century records, notably the *Status Animarum*, reveal that girls often married in their early teens, evidence which supports Haynal's early modern marriage patterns. Haynal pointed out that in northwestern Europe marriage occurred later, celibacy was relatively common, and marriage often involved the establishment of a separate household, in contrast to southern and eastern Europe where nearly all women married at an early age and marriage did not necessarily result in the establishment of an independent household.¹¹⁸

Couples were emotionally distant from each other, and the tone of their relationship was poor and devoid of affection. The fragility of this family type, its 'unstable' nature clearly emerges in a society where there was no form of social protection. If a family was broken up by the death of one of the spouses, it meant immediate isolation, desolation, economic

¹¹⁶ A. Farge, 'The Honour and Secrecy of Families', in *A History of Private Life*, III: *Passions of the Renaissance*, ed. R. Chartier (Cambridge Mass., 1989), 574.

¹¹⁷ AOM 647, L 188, 17 May 1702.

¹¹⁸ J. Haynal, 'European Marriage Patterns in Perspective', in *Population in History*, ed. D.V. Glass and D.E.C. Eversley (London, 1965), *passim*.

collapse, and disaster, making life almost impossible. Francis Ciappara has revealed that in Malta hasty remarriage after the death of a partner was frequent in the late eighteenth century, as if both men and women looked to remarriage as their necessary rescue.¹¹⁹ Men tended to remarry more often than women. Gratio Zahra of Safi remarried three times between 1673 and 1705.¹²⁰ Men are never referred to as widowers in the *Status Animarum* records of Porto Salvo (Valletta) for 1667, although a good number lived with their children but without a wife. That it must have been taken for granted by the parish priest that these men should remarry, explains in part why men were not enlisted as widowers.¹²¹

'Houses' were made by men, and kinship determined by males. Family structures and the framework of economic, legal, political, and social life remained under the control of level-headed males where family values were inspired by a severely masculine ideal. Women's identity depended on their movements in relation to male lineages. Marriage brought women out of the paternal household, while widowhood often led to her return.¹²² Marriage guaranteed the honour of women and the houses from which they came. Unmarried women and those living without masculine protection were considered incapable of living alone without falling into sin. Women who decided to live a holy life as tertiaries of some religious order placed their family honour in jeopardy by the mere fact of their celibacy.¹²³ This is again supported by the Porto Salvo *Status Animarum* for 1667, where only nineteen women parishioners are listed as *bizocche* (tertiaries) out of a

¹¹⁹ Ciappara, *Marriages*, 58-9.

¹²⁰ Micallef, *L-Istorja ta' Nai-Safi*, 31.

¹²¹ AP, Porto Salvo, *Status Animarum*, 1667, *passim*.

¹²² C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. L.G. Cochrane (Chicago, 1985), 117.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 119.

total female population of 2,074. Furthermore, only four of these were under the age of 45. For those women who wanted to live as spinsters the convent was the only way out, although there were serious doubts about the security of the cloister, particularly before the imposition of the new rules promulgated by the Council of Trent. Suspicion on the chastity of some nuns is confirmed by the accusation of Soro Clementia Muscat of the Convent of St Scholastica, Mdina, before the Inquisition Tribunal. In 1560 she had been accused of having made love to the Canon of the Cathedral Church, Joanns de Nava.¹²⁴

Maltese law advised fathers to give their daughters in marriage between the age of twenty and twenty-five.¹²⁵ However, it was common for women to marry in their teens, as evidenced by the *Status Animarum* records. Females over twenty were therefore generally married. One could apply Klapisch-Zuber's assertion on the position of women at the time.¹²⁶

Shunted between two lineages ... her father's and her husband's ... a woman was not a full member of either. She had an excellent chance of spending her life under several roofs, as her successive marriages dictated.

In fact, widowhood, especially at a young age, created suspicion, and not without reason. Although the Church advised widows not to remarry, secular society did not leave them much choice. A widow was a threat both to her family of birth and that of her late husband's. Fathers and husbands were guarantors of her good conduct. The social group to which they belonged added constraints to women. Hence, it was easier for a widow to live independently in the city than in the country. Thus, while a considerable number of women

¹²⁴ AIM, *Proc. Crim.* 1A, case 6, ff. 70-123.

¹²⁵ *Del Diritto Municipale di Malta* (Malta, 1784), 115.

¹²⁶ Klapisch-Zuber, 225.

lived without the protection of an 'adult male' in the Porto Salvo Parish at Valletta in 1667, only one woman lived alone at Sannat (Gozo) in the same year.¹²⁷

Definitive widowhood came much earlier for women than for men. A large number of women, widowed before the age of 40, normally remarried; beyond that age they stood only a slight chance of remarrying. Again, the Porto Salvo parish of Valletta is an ideal source of reference. In 1667 there was a total of 539 widows, 469 of whom were over the age of 40. Only a minority of women were heads of households. They were not generally identified by any occupation. The only remark the parish priest inserted next to their name was the term 'widow'. It is not plausible to assume that female heads of households were in no way engaged in some form of paid employment. It is perhaps more likely that the parish priest had found it difficult to associate the concept of 'woman' with that of 'occupation', a practice which seems to have been in common use even in Italy at the time.¹²⁸

The majority of these women must have found it hard to live decently and were therefore forced to lead a miserable life. Petronilla Ricci, for example, lived with her two daughters, one a widow and the other a spinster, yet they had to work as washer-women in order to be able to survive.¹²⁹ Desperation was a common feature of widowhood. Rosa, widow of Carlo Busco of Cospicua, denounced herself to the Inquisition for having questioned God's justice. Her husband had drowned while he was serving as sailor, leaving her in a state of misery, with four young children to look after.¹³⁰

A woman's occupation was essentially domestic. She had to embody the image of wife and mother as sanctioned by both

¹²⁷ J. Bezzina, *Sannat fl Graffiet Gnowdex* (Malta, 1989), 118.

¹²⁸ Burke, 36-7.

¹²⁹ MCC, SAC 392, f. 16, 5 August 1700.

¹³⁰ AIM, *Proc. Crim.* 99B, f. 336, 25 February 1707.

Church and civil society. It was her responsibility to bear children, cook, clean, sew, weave, spin, and mend clothes.¹³¹ It was not uncommon for women to do part-time work, such as weaving and sewing, as Ursula Hagius and Vincentia Lagarde, both from Valletta, declared in 1705.¹³² Nevertheless, although women frequently contributed to the welfare of the family, it was not customary for society to praise them for their participation.

Whatever their status or social prestige, women enjoyed no professional or political capacity, and they found themselves unwittingly brought into the lineages of their husbands. The negotiation of their marriage would be based on the 'social capital' their fathers and brothers enjoyed, but they did not benefit directly from it - a factor which diminished the chances of women being recognized as full members of a male kinship group. Thus women varied in their attractiveness as marriage partners according to their endowment. This, in turn, encouraged a tendency to make matches between individuals of similar wealth and status.¹³³ In Malta the Government stipulated that it did not recognize marriage proposals between partners of a different social position as this would bring dishonour to their kin.¹³⁴

In principle, the dowered goods that a wife brought to her husband were attached to her for life: they had the double function of providing for the expenses of the household and, when the household was dissolved at the husband's death, of

¹³¹ N. Castan, 'The Public and the Private', in *A History of Private Life*, III: *Passions of the Renaissance*, ed. R. Chartier, 407.

¹³² MCC, AO 645, ff.44, 50v.

¹³³ J. Goody, 'Inheritance, Property and Women: Some Comparative Considerations', in *Family and Inheritance*, ed. J. Goody et al. (Cambridge, 1976), 11.

¹³⁴ *Del Diritto Municipale*, 116.

providing for the surviving wife.¹³⁵ A woman looked at her dowry as a means to assure her subsistence. The dowry was supposedly kept by the woman as inheritance, but grooms usually attached great importance to it. A man might be attracted to marriage by the value of a particular dowry. This was the reason why Agostino Farrugia separated twice from his wife Pascha. They had many disputes over the dowry which she had promised to bring from her father's home.¹³⁶ Quarrels over dowry could lead to serious consequences. Giuseppe Pace of Qrendi even threatened to kill his wife if she did not give her consent to sell part of her dowry.¹³⁷

The dowry was usually stipulated in a marriage contract. However, this practice was more often resorted to by urban society than by the peasants, whose arrangements tended to be *colla parola*, or verbal agreement, in front of witnesses.¹³⁸ In this type of contract all goods belonging to the man and his wife were divided among the three parties - the husband, the wife, and the legitimate children born in wedlock.¹³⁹

Marriage contracts generally included a trousseau, cash payments, and occasionally a piece of land, a house, or both. The presence of cash payments in most contracts indicates that the Maltese economy was heavily influenced by external factors. It implies that there was an emphasis of cash on marriage, while land could have been retained by the parents as a form of old-age security.¹⁴⁰ Dowries consisted generally of movable goods, which varied according to the family's wealth and the urgency of the family's desire for the matrimonial

¹³⁵ Klapisch-Zuber, 121.

¹³⁶ MCC, SAC 400, ff. 240-242, 7 April 1701.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, AO 625, f. 253v.

¹³⁸ NLM, *Lfb.* 142 v, f. 219.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, *Lfb.* 149, f. 23.

¹⁴⁰ Impression of P. Sant-Cassia, personal communication.

match. Widowhood threatened the economic equilibrium which the domestic group had achieved during the father's lifetime. It revived the claims of the woman's family of birth on the goods brought as dowry. These were irrevocably attached to the physical person of the woman for the duration of her life. It was up to her husband's heirs to persuade the widow to remain with them. In his lifetime, the husband would also do his utmost to encourage her to remain a widow. Among the well-to-do the husband would agree to assure her of a life-long income and other advantages if she would remain with his kin.¹⁴¹ But very few rich widows continued to live independently. The fate of a marriageable widow was definitely of critical concern to the children of her late husband. In the marriage contract between Magnifica Cleria, widow of Mastro Giovanni Ciumi, and Magnifico Gio. Maria Mochi of Lyons, it was stipulated, among other things, that the bride's property should be transmitted to the children of her first marriage, Giuseppe and Dianora Ciumi. If Cleria died intestate, leaving children by her second marriage, those of her first could claim part of the inheritance on condition that they paid back 200 *scudi* assigned to them by their mother Cleria in her second matrimonial contract.¹⁴²

The emphasis on the conjugal estate and the match-making process was closely linked to the emphasis on monogamy. In such conditions, to acquire a second spouse was to diminish the interests of the first.¹⁴³ Thus, the marriage of a widow who had borne children could damage the interests of the conjugal estate that had been established by a previous marriage.

Sharp, distinctive features existed between the marriage patterns of the Harbour area and those of the countryside, where a high surplus of women in the 14-45 age group led to

¹⁴¹ Klapisch-Zuber, 121.

¹⁴² NAV, 16/521, Not. Tommaso Agius, 2 June 1652.

¹⁴³ Goody, 12.

high rates of outmarriage with foreign grooms. Between 1625 and 1650, 32.3 per cent of brides from the Porto Salvo parish in Valletta were with foreign grooms, mainly French, Sicilian, Italian, and Greek. Most of these appear to have been sailors, while others were merchants and petty traders attracted by new commercial opportunities.¹⁴⁴ It is clear that on the level of the kinship and marriage patterns, the Harbour area had a dynamic and mobile population. Mobility, however, created problems. Some husbands went abroad and never returned, leaving their wives destitute, with no other means of sustaining themselves but to turn to prostitution. One such wife, Petriassa, had her goods stolen from her by her French husband who left for France. In order to survive, Petriassa resorted to prostitution with Knights and other men.¹⁴⁵

The *Status Animarum* records of Porto Salvo for 1667 offer relevant insight. A reasonably large number of *donne publice* existed in the parish. They amounted to 165, or almost eight per cent of the total number of females within the parish, confirming that households without the presence of adult males were overtly suspicious.

In early modern Malta prostitution was officially illegal. The Church buried those who died unrepented in unconsecrated ground.¹⁴⁶ None the less, bawds were implicitly sanctioned and tolerated, even though they were summoned at the Bishop's curia for not fulfilling their Paschal obligations.¹⁴⁷ This is hardly surprising since Valletta was notorious for its unbridled licentiousness and its 'hordes of priestesses of Venus from every nation'.¹⁴⁸ Prostitution was so widespread

¹⁴⁴ R. Bowman and P. Sultana, 'Marriages between 1627-1650', (Unpublished BA dissertation, University of Malta, 1973), *passim*.

¹⁴⁵ AIM, *Proc. Crim.* 6C, case 44, ff. 984-1027, 24 May 1581.

¹⁴⁶ NLM, *Ltb.* 13, f. 881.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, f. 134-135.

¹⁴⁸ C.L. Dessoulavy, 'Visitors to Malta from the 15th to the 16th century', *The*

that as late as 1802 an English visitor remarked¹⁴⁹ that 'prostitution is carried on, both by married as well as single women, and with the knowledge of their husbands and relations, [it] is not ... considered a crime.'

Illegitimacy, which was negligible in the countryside, reached a high percentage of total births in the Harbour area, and particularly in Valletta. Infants baptized at Porto Salvo included children abandoned by their mothers at the Foundling Hospital. The registers of the parish of St Paul Shipwrecked included those born at the women's hospital. In both cases, these foundlings and illegitimate children could have belonged to inhabitants from the city as much as the rest of the island. The number of suspected illegitimate children or foundlings was so high that for the years 1600-1613 they totalled over 85 per cent of all baptized children at Porto Salvo.¹⁵⁰

In the countryside, marriages were usually contracted among members of the same community, although there was a sharp distinction between villagers in the south and north of the island. Ciappara's analysis for the years 1750-98 shows that while the rate of endogamous marriages in the southern and central Malta never exceeded 85 per cent of total marriages, this tended to be higher in the north of the island. Endogamous marriages comprised over 86 per cent in Mosta, almost 62 per cent in Siggiewi, and over 70 per cent in Gharb (Gozo).¹⁵¹ Many Gozitans preferred to marry their own kin after having obtained a dispensation from Rome. In fact, Pope Paul III had conceded a special arrangement for Gozitans as early as 1542. Thus marriages contracted in Gozo between

Sundial (Mata), III (1940), 104.

¹⁴⁹ A. Anderson, *A Journal of the Forces* (London, 1802), 163-84.

¹⁵⁰ J.G. Testa and H.E. Zammit, 'The Parish of Porto Salvo, 1600-1613: A Demographic Study', (Unpublished BA dissertation, University of Malta, 1973), 62.

¹⁵¹ Ciappara, *Marriages*, 48.

relatives of the third and fourth degree were commonly given a dispensation.¹⁵² Indeed, almost half the dispensation cases for 1750-98 concerned the island of Gozo. At Gharb, dispensations were particularly high, amounting to 14.3 per cent of all cases for the period under study.¹⁵³

Marriage and kinship patterns reflected the lifestyle of a society based on an agrarian economy, where wealth was measured in terms of landownership above all else. Women were at the centre of all this activity in their capacity as wives and mothers. This tendency helped to establish the idea that the woman was, at law, inferior and therefore subjected to the man. On the other hand, there emerged the counter-doctrine of the woman as mother, which propounded the idea that kinship was rooted in the *matricell* (mother-child dyad) as the most natural relationship.¹⁵⁴ The early modern theory on women was destined to have profound social effects for centuries to follow. It helped to determine the concept of marriage which prevailed well into the twentieth century.

5 CONCLUSION

Early modern Malta, like most northern Mediterranean societies, was marked by a strong urban orientation. One recalls the emphasis on town-dwelling throughout the ancient Mediterranean area, contrasting with the more tribal and migratory character of the ancient peoples of northern and eastern Europe.¹⁵⁵ Disdain for manual agricultural work was characteristic of the whole Mediterranean. Those who worked

¹⁵² A. Mifsud, 'Ricordi del Passato', *Archivum Melitense*, III (1917), 108-9.

¹⁵³ Clappara, *Marriages*, 51.

¹⁵⁴ M. Verdon, 'Virgins and Widows: European Kinship and Early Christianity', *Man* (1988), 488-505.

¹⁵⁵ J. Pitt-Rivers, *The People of the Sierra* (New York, 1954), 47.

the land were considered to be socially inferior, so that only an urban lifestyle conferred prestige.¹⁵⁶ In Hospitaller Malta the Harbour area became the main centre of a cash economy. It was a centre of minting, exchange, and manufacture. This was in sharp contrast to the mentality of the countryside. Country people had an easy-going attitude to life, implying that they lacked a 'work ethic' which had initially developed in the Harbour area thanks to the presence of the Knights and their retinues. Furthermore, the Harbour towns attracted a multitude of Maltese and foreign artisans who worked beyond mere subsistence level. The agriculturally based society of pre-1530 Malta made use of craftsmen, but these were essentially auxiliary to the fundamentally agricultural concerns. In the towns, craftsmen helped to promote a more autonomous industry, even though raw materials remained chiefly of an agricultural nature and were simply processed in towns. The mid-seventeenth-century records of the Porto Salvo parish provide evidence of a multitude of craftsmen working at Valletta. They refer to bleachers, glove makers, lace makers, hatters, wool carders, armourers, cutlers, gunsmiths, locksmiths, bakers, cooks, carpenters, and others.

A new situation had thus been created, dividing Maltese society into two distinct sections. On the one hand, there was the country where the functional model of medieval Maltese society - priest, landowner, peasant - fitted the reality of the village. On the other hand, there was the Harbour area which was largely inhabited by migrants who came to the towns in different ways. Some proceeded from abroad, others from the villages scattered all over the Maltese islands; some came in family groupings; others from abruptly deserted villages; while others still arrived as lone individuals. In these circumstances the village pattern of stratification could not accommodate the complexity of urban existence. The new classes, who were 'alien' and lived in the centre, were cosmopolitan and had no 'past culture' to which they could

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

refer in a communal sense. Differences between the two cultures were noted by visiting travellers to Malta. Carasi, who visited the island between 1780 and 1782, noted a great difference between the manners of town people and those of the country folk.¹⁵⁷ This division was commonly adopted by the Maltese themselves. Vincenzo Barbara, exiled from Malta for his open attachment to the French cause, informed the French Directory in September 1798 that Malta consisted of 75,000 people in the *campagna* and about 39,000 within the fortifications enclosing Valletta and the Three Cities.¹⁵⁸

This dichotomy of peasant versus urban culture helped to accentuate a distinct Maltese culture, so that by the end of the seventeenth century, the code of Maltese norms of behaviour and the particular characteristics of the Maltese were already there. The rapid change from one mode of production to another, as a result of the contact with a more developed economic system, saw a shift from a peasant to a commercial way of life. With the passage of time this new system came to appear as a foreign threat to traditional society. The creation of a Maltese past became inseparable from the idealized image of the pre-1530 culture. The Maltese came to see themselves as having inhabited their homeland since time immemorial and considered themselves the 'permanent components in a polyethnic society'.¹⁵⁹

Concepts of ethnic feeling and consciousness deeply affected Maltese society in the eighteenth century at a time when the French Enlightenment generated a powerful upsurge of nationalism. Such a feeling was so greatly felt by the Maltese bourgeoisie of the time that Spreti, writing shortly after his visit to Malta in 1760, pointed out that the Maltese treated the Knights Hospitallers with polite disdain. Thus, although

¹⁵⁷ Carasi, 24.

¹⁵⁸ A. Creten, 'On Short Commons - Side Lights of the Maltese Insurrection against the French (1798-1800)', *Scintilla* [Malta], xvi, 1 (1950), 11.

¹⁵⁹ Smith, 110.

they knew Italian, they frequently spoke Maltese in the presence of the Knights.¹⁶⁰ The fact that Maltese was used by high society indicates that peasant culture had become synonymous to Maltese civilization. The works of most of the illustrious writers of the time - particularly Count Ciantar's updated version of Gian Francesco Abela's *Della Descrizione di Malta*, renamed *Malta Illustrata* (1772); Canon Agius de Seldanis, who supplied invaluable details on Maltese customs and language; as well as Mikiel Anton Vassalli, whose theory on the Punic origins of Maltese created a controversy which was only settled a generation or so ago - all are evidence of this attitude. The change of sentiment in the interest of cultured Maltese brought about the cultivation of peasant customs as symbolic of a common past, associated with the eventual political freedom of the Maltese islands. This trend tends to support Max Weber's view that the existence of an ethnic community is realized in the connections society makes with its common store of symbols.¹⁶¹ The creation of statehood and the construction of an ethnic national culture thus became embedded in the historical memory of the Maltese during the later phase of the rule of the Order of St John.

¹⁶⁰ NLM, *Lib.* 1202, f. 196.

¹⁶¹ Max Weber, *Ethnic Groups, Economy and Society*, ed. G. Roth and C. Wittich (New York, 1968), I, ch. 5.