

# Preface:

## On Resuscitating a History Journal

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Having founded *Storja* as the journal of the University of Malta's History Society way back in 1977/8 upon coming down from Oxford, with the support of the then Professor of History the late Andrew P. Vella, I am pleased and honoured to write this preface at the invitation of its new editor Mark Aloisio and his board.

Dr Aloisio is a onetime member of the Society and a contributor of the article in the journal's 1996 edition entitled 'From Jerusalem to Valletta: The Evolution of the Order of St John's Chapter-General (1131-1631)'. So too are two members of his team. Emanuel Buttigieg, who was an MUHS committee member, and authored the article 'Church Bells and Street Fighting: Birkirkara and Don Joannes Matheo Camilleri (1545-57) in 2008, in the journal's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition. Stefan Cachia, another Committee Member, wrote about marriage in Late Medieval Malta 1486-1488 in the 2011 edition.

*Storja's* history has been one of hiccups for political and logistical reasons but I am glad to see it is back on track, and I wish it many more years of regular publication. Its purpose has been to offer researchers, especially but not only history students, an early opportunity for - and an introduction to - the disciplined skills of history writing and divulgating research findings.

The 30<sup>th</sup> edition listed the main articles published since 1978 as well as the composition of largely student-driven committees and editorial boards, with Charles Dalli and Charles Cassar in editorially supportive roles. As editor I could never rely on any funding so we depended on the occasional sponsorship and on sales. The first edition, which included an interview with Archbishop Sir Michael Gonzi, had sold best of all.

I understand that all these contributions have now been digitised and placed on line.

This 2015 edition, after an interruption of seven years, contains an emphasis on early modern history, especially the Great Siege of 1565 on its 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

By way of a backdrop to what would follow, a contribution by Kate Fleet of Cambridge University takes us back a little earlier than that, to the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. The driving forces behind Sultan Mehmed II's Mediterranean policy were strategic and economic, largely paving the way to a continuum and indeed an escalation in Muslim-Christian rivalry and vice-versa in the following century and indeed beyond it.

We have three articles related to the Great Siege of 1565 (18<sup>th</sup> May – 7<sup>th</sup> September). One, in Italian, is by Federica Formiga, from a somewhat Italian and bibliographical perspective. Although in his seventies, the Sultan Soleyman 'the Magnificent' would not renounce the idea of enlarging his empire '*e Malta rappresentava la base per invadere l'Italia*'. She quotes, *inter alia*, Balbi di Correggio, Onorato de' Medici and Vincenzo Laurenza. In his letter to Pope Pius IV, La Vallette held, in a typically Christian vs. Muslim strain and to arouse support, that '*la Cristianita' tutta deve essere liberata da queste crudelissime oppressioni*'. She even cites popular poetry to show how other nations were much interested in Malta's role and fate. She adds that some 120 texts were published in Latin, Italian, Spanish, German, French, English and Greek about the 1565 event, spreading '*la fama della vittoria*' in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. '*Non ci fu forma artistica che non sia occupata dell'assedio perche' come scrisse Voltaire "Rien n'est plus connu que le siege de Malte"*.'

In a revisionist mode Victor Mallia-Milanes questions the actual impact of this legendary epic posture in the context of a continuing Ottoman resilience in Mediterranean warfare after 1565. The siege did not really 'break the advance of the Ottoman Empire into the Western Mediterranean', he holds, citing examples of subsequent successful

raids. However, Balbi di Correggio's assertion that it was Suleyman's 'dearest wish to capture Malta' is not to be under-estimated. While no empire takes kindly to defeat, the event may not be said to have remained so unaddressed in official Ottoman circles as we may have been led to believe by 'Malta yok' rhetoric (where is Malta?). At an academic conference in Izmir in 2010, in his paper 'The Great Siege of Malta (1565): New Information from the Ottoman perspective', Professor Akif Erdogru showed how the Great Siege was held to have been 'one of the most cumbersome and large-scale campaigns led by the Ottomans in the Mediterranean during the 16<sup>th</sup> century.' The attempt to take Malta as a priority negatively affected other Ottoman foreign policy interests in the Balkans and North Africa. Erdogru was basing his script on archival sources from the proceedings of the Ottoman High Court for 1564-1565, the Muhimme Defterleri. He was unaware of Arnold Cassola's work in this area (listing many Turkish participants) until I alerted him to it. What was at stake in 1565, Mallia-Milanes concludes, was not the Christian cause or Malta's, but the Hospitallers' 'risk of total extinction'. In other words they were fighting for their own survival, which is also true.

Mariana Grech gives a different perspective in her article 'Gozo after the Siege of Malta', basing herself on the acts of Notary Tomaso Gauci. This mainly contains an account of how Gozo sought to recover from the devastating attack on it and its population by the Turkish admiral Sinam Pasha and the corsair Dragut in 1551 after these had failed to take the Maltese citadel of Mdina. Demographically and culturally instructive, this assault of 1551 in Gozitan history was almost certainly more of a 'great siege' than that of 1565.

A telling entry is that by Iona Caruana on the matrimonial bed as an expression of the customary marriage *mentalite'* in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Malta. Based on notarial archives, this article is a fascinating read, almost a throw-back to Vico's '*verum factum*' principle in his *Scienza Nuova*. In more mundane terms it brought to mind the evocative re-enactments of early modern marriages in Malta periodically staged in the square at Bubaqra, complete with notarial deed, period attire and musicians,

even an *ghannej* for good measure, dowry readings and ritualistic manifestations, sheets and mattresses included. We also get the window sill with its pot of basil (*habaq*) plant, to indicate that the maiden inside was ready for marriage if a suitor presented himself. At Bubaqra he invariably does. Whether that was always so is a moot point. Security and status were part of all this; in other words, of course, it was not simply about going to bed - as implied by Favray's well-known 18<sup>th</sup> century painting 'The Visitors'.

Timothy Gambin's story about HMS Olympus - 'a tale of tragedy and heroics' - is historic in its own right but more so because it ties up with the discovery of the submarine itself off the Gozitan coast in recent years. Apart from the submarine's story in war, it highlights the value of marine archaeology as a source of knowledge, and of wonder. Based on his Andrew Vella Memorial Lecture in 2013, Gambin's work and career show what a very long way he has come since I had first met him years ago as an evening student in history. In further research undertakings about the Olympus story I was also delighted to note his collaboration with Joseph Stephen Bonanno, who wrote a first-class Honours thesis about the Four Lawyers in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Malta. History pays (don't get me wrong; life is not all about money).

A seventh contribution, by Stefan Aquilina, brings us into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a different way. Called 'The Manoel Theatre Academy of Dramatic Art: 1977-1980', this expose' focuses on the valiant attempts made at producing a professional Maltese theatre through this nascent Academy, the main life-blood of which was Mario Azzopardi, greatly helped along by a small team of British 'theatre-makers' - above all Adrian Rendle, and Peter Cox.

One arresting statement, not solely applicable to the theatre, to the art of acting or to the crop of very valid artists produced, is that from Robert Gagne's study *The Conditions of Learning*.

'Learning', he writes for the edification of us all, 'is a change in human disposition or capability, which persists over a period of time, and which

is not simply ascribable to processes of growth.' That 'learning' includes attitudes of precision, carefulness, competition and compromise.

I have no doubt that *Storja* will be injecting its fair share of learning and motivation among history students, practitioners and other readers of this very worthwhile surviving journal, which deserves every encouragement from students in different disciplines, members of the academic corps and the general public.