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A Long Fermentation: Lords, Vassals and Intermediaries

In our mental agenda for this work, set out in the previous pages, we asked what the relationship of history to politics was and what the history of freedom in Malta was.

Let us begin with the former, which may be easier to size up. One can probably distinguish, if not too precisely, between what for our purposes we shall describe as a Nineteenth Century image, and a more recent Twentieth Century image of Maltese history. Both these pictures of the past are influenced by politics (that is by the condition of power, powerlessness or power-seeking, policy making and decision-taking with regard to the sharing of such resources as existed). At the risk of much generalisation, one is tempted to take this distinction further still and to postulate that whereas in the first variant of popular historiography, Maltese leaders were concerned with portraying themselves mainly to others, in the second one, they were more concerned with impressing their own kind. The change in packaging is

largely the consequence of markedly different political conditions. Whereas in the earlier phase, Malta was a foreign possession struggling in the face of insuperable odds to win for herself a measure of respect and credibility as the territory of a people with historical characteristics that could lead the owner to grant some measure of internal freedom, in the second phase this hurdle had in principle been slowly overcome, the franchise was greatly and eventually completely extended, and indeed independence from the occupier ceased to be an overriding preoccupation. Instead, it was the people themselves, i.e. the electorate who were in principle the sovereign, who became the consumers of popular historiography. The all-important difference here was that whereas previously there was an 'us' and 'them' that was fairly (although never all too easily) identified, subsequently, and increasingly, it was 'us' to 'ourselves' and, one might add, on our own as well. If earlier there were two presences that needed to be convinced - the foreign, generally itself in harness, and the local, generally caught in unfulfilled aspirations - now there was increasingly only one audience, the local one. Although resident ambassadors of other countries sent home their assessment reports of what these Maltese were up to, it was basically they (Maltese) who said what they liked about others and, indeed, about themselves as well.

A common characteristic in all this was that there continued to be an obsession with role in history. And that for the most part, and possibly to a greater extent now than then, was determined by political leaders who were technologically better equipped to impress upon the multitude what the multitude had to think about itself (i.e. about how they, the leaders, had succeeded in changing the course of history to the people's advantage). But the times had changed. In our first image of ourselves, there was all the romance of the nineteenth century - the elite erudition moulded in the classics and the idealism of a suppressed people seeking desperately to breathe, to move their limbs. *Malta piccola fior del mondo*. In the second, there was the taste of real power in a more existentialist and materialist world of States, large, small and tiny; the fleeting impression of split second recordings of "meaning" on television sets controlled and programmed according to the norms of a system, or the whips of stooges in the studio; the trans-oceanic flights right around the planet; and a sudden imposing grandeur that could be taken for the equality of States, if not also of peoples living in these. *Malta l-ewwel u qabel kollox!* Brawn rather than brain, muscle rather than mind (for a feel of Malta in the seventies or eighties see Wojda's "Man of Marble" and "Man of Steel"!) No time for Latin quotations in the Parliament here; no reference to *civitas foederata*, no oaths of fealty, no ethics of chivalry. This was the age of the masses, when - as some would have it - the microphone told 'them' who they were, and the screen would show 'them' how to behave - how to speak (or shout), how to dress (or undress), how to think (or not to at all).

In the first phase, by and large, politicians told history to their sovereign overlords: we have been civilized since ancient times, we are more civilized even than you are, look at our history, the glories and achievements of our forefathers, here was a cradle of European civilization, of the Mediterranean world, possibly the birthplace of the Italian language even (perhaps after Florence). In the second phase, sovereign overlords 'made' history and then, *qua* sovereign overlords, told their people how good they had been at it, and how these (the people) should celebrate their grand achievements (showing due reverence to their saviours). This is not to suggest equivalence. Nor equality (which, truly, is almost always imagined rather than real). There were 'saviours' of different kinds. One might deliver you of the foreign dominator; the other might deliver you of your freedom in quest of still greater sovereignty; the other would than deliver you of the former saviour.

On the one hand, then, we tended to have a string of memories of the past to bolster our self-confidence as a people deserving of respect and self-assertion - the majestic temples of prehistoric times, the benefits of Roman civilization, laws, roads, villas, baths; the whole of Europe assembled in our Maltese version of the Renaissance, witness the Order in Valletta, and, finally, a people up-in-arms against French tyranny. There was much merit in this of course, it was not quite made up; but our question is was this Maltese history, or Maltese history as leaders saw it, or Maltese history as it needed to be presented to the British (or whoever) to entitle Maltese to what they sought? What were - and where were - the Maltese freedoms in this gallery of woven tapestries?

For the second part of our duality - that involving freedom and independence in contemporary times - we shall return in due course. Meanwhile let us take a closer look at what outstanding Maltese rights and representations we can point our finger to in the whole period preceding the coming of Napoleon Bonaparte.

For a start, the very term 'Maltese' here needs serious qualification. An Egyptian today - especially if s/he is a Copt - will tell you they are the direct descendants of the Pharaohs - of course; in the temple of Karnak in Luxor (Thebes) the Egyptian guide from Osiris Tours in Lower Egypt will describe how 'we' did the hieroglyph, and tell you what 'our' obelisks represented. (Would the Maltese tourist guide go round Hagar Qim and Mnajdra saying the same?) 'Maltese' means simply those inhabitants (assuming there were always some) who lived permanently on the Maltese Islands: it does not mean Karmena Abdilla and Zeżal-Flagship, Goma and Menz. But there is also the phenomenon of 'collective memory', no matter whether St. Paul actually came to Malta or not. In this way past fuses with present: legends can take on a real life, imposters assume credibility and may even demand homage. The other note to be entered here concerns the important distinction between community and society - a distinction which may well parallel that between a nation and a state. But our basic distinction has to be between a group of islanders who live on a patch of earth, earn their living, pray to their gods,

make love to their partners, and relate primarily to the land they till, the waters they fish, the game they hunt, and the immediate circle they move in - that is a community. Wherever there are people somewhere, there is bound to be some kind of community, if only out of sheer necessity - survival in case of need. On the plantation, where bucks and wenches kow-towed as necessary to the overseer's whip, where mothers and fathers were sold apart as were their offspring, and buyers checked the teeth and organs of their would-be purchases, there was a community: we even got negro spirituals. Read Gilbert Osofsky. This was true in America; in different ways it was true elsewhere, from Russian mir to Arabian harem. Communities, by their very being, presume nothing except the existence of a group of individuals in a situation that of necessity requires back-scratching and make-do and preferably some verve. Essentially it is a rather basic, primitive form of being. In 'multicultural' societies, as in Canada and Australia, one talks of 'ethnic communities', that is, of communities known unto themselves but tending to remain outside the wider society, or emarginated groups not fully integrated into the mainstream. People living in Malta certainly must have formed some such community. Did they, however, become a society? In a society one would presume rights and obligations that are regulated by mores and indeed by laws; one would also presume responsibility for one's actions not only in one's own interest or in the interest of one's kith and kin, but more generally and responsibly in the interest of the society as a whole. Blaspheming and littering in public places, for example, would be anti-social because they impinge on the rights and legitimate expectations of others in a society.

Surely the great significance of Roman rule to Malta is that it introduced to the Island not so much the notion of empire as that of a citizenship within it, a belonging to empire *qua civis: civis romanus sum*. There was pride - and right - in that belonging. A contradiction in terms it may well have been - for Maltese were not Romans, were they? - and perhaps a false presumption as well, although Cicero did defend their rights - at any rate, rights - against Caius Verres, that thief and scoundrel. Not only that, Malta was given a constitutional status within this empire. In other words, what community there was on the Islands then - shall we call it the "Publius entity" - could begin to conceive of itself, or at least of the territory where it lived, as a political body, a civil institution, organised according to set regulations. There was, in Roman law, the strong admission of ownership - indeed of total ownership, including the total ownership of persons. These were not only the slaves, but, early on, even the members of the family of the *pater familias* himself. The *jus vitae necisque* gave to the *pater familias* the right (at law, that is) to kill off wife and children with impunity if the thought fit - an archaic, and soon abolished, 'right'. But would the centuries of Roman occupation not have fostered ideas about laws and rights, property and ownership? Ideas, moreover, which are intimately tied to those of Rome, which at the time was synonymous with the civilized world.

Now how far did the Roman presence actually influence the Maltese, particularly those we can begin to identify (and to identify with) in modern times? Nobody quite knows, and it is probably difficult to find out exactly. The influence of Rome certainly came to be contained in the Maltese civil code, but that was centuries later under the knights. During the British occupation, that was one of the features of differentiation as of identity - how could the common law of London quite supersede the civil law of Rome?

Are we suggesting Malta was free or independent? We are not. It was under Rome, therefore not independent. Rome rested on slavery and domination, therefore not "free". But were the excesses of paganism not gradually tempered by the emergence of Christianity, and was it not the conversion of a Roman emperor, Constantine in the fourth century, that put paid to gladiators and soothsayers? And was it not also a Christianity that came to Malta, it having travelled westwards? Law and right, property and ownership, God and Sovereign were the preliminary ingredients of statehood. Malta did not possess that, but seeds would have been scattered and not altogether perhaps to the wind. Certainly not in so far as collective memory was concerned. Here was a wreath to throw at generals of a later vintage.

Yet, in truth, it is not clear what kind of citizenship the Maltese, or some Maltese, could acquire, nor how autonomous their municipal administrations actually were. Gozitans apparently looked up to Emperor Caracalla's brother, Geta, who was co-Emperor, but when these sons of Septimus Severus clashed and Geta was murdered, Gozo seems not to have experienced any of the atrocious punishments meted out elsewhere to former Geta partisans. Bonanno postulates two possibilities - either Gozo was too insignificant a backwater in the vast empire to attract attention, or "the Gozitans managed to escape unscathed by promptly manifesting their readiness to comply with the desires of the new monarch". Interestingly enough, at least two researchers find no evidence of Vandals and Barbarian invasions in Malta; these did not cause any obvious break in the Roman life of Malta and Gozo. It would seem that here again remoteness could have been a saving grace: the suggestion that Malta was strategically and centrally placed, invariably attracting the attention of the powers that be, may have been a trifle exaggerated by Maltese who were perhaps too mindful of their own importance.

"The social and cultural framework of the Maltese islands in the third century", writes Bonanno, "must have been more or less the same as that obtaining in the first two centuries of our era: a superstructure of a Latin - and Greek - speaking class of foreigners and Romanized and Hellenized Maltese, and a substructure of farmers, craftsmen and, very likely, slaves speaking a language other than Greek or Latin, probably Punic..." The process of Hellenization, apparently limited to the higher ranks of Maltese society, began as soon as Malta started to form part of the Roman province of Sicily (certainly by the first century A.D.) and must have continued until the islands were absorbed within the Byzantine Empire around the beginning of

the sixth century A.D., i.e. for six to eight hundred years. In all Malta's Graeco-Roman past would have lasted close to a millenium, from the second century B.C. to the ninth century A.D. This then would constitute far the longest close association with any country or power in Maltese history; even if the Roman and Byzantine empires were to be regarded as different powers they essentially belonged to the same civilization emanating from the southern parts of the same continent.

One writer, F.P. Rizzo, has tried to assess in some detail what political and constitutional repercussions Roman times would have had on Malta and Sicily.¹

Before Malta could return to the 'European' fold, however, there was a major break, or brake, with which nonetheless the southern shores of Europe were also intimately effected: the rise of Islam and the consequent Arab advance.

There are problems here, for what continuity, if any, could one draw from the ninth century (when the Arabs took over) and the Knights which codified the laws according to Roman precedents, most notably in the Code De Rohan? Yet we know from many studies that laws need not be codified for them to be accepted as regulatory norms of social life. Illiterate bedouins in the Sinai have sophisticated understandings as how to delineate territorial boundaries, adjudicate transgressions and resolve conflicts, as indeed Papuan cannibals and bushmen have had for as long as they existed. Would the use of a property for a long period of time by, say, a Maltese farm tenant, prescribe that land to him as its rightful owner? Would such prescription have clashed with the Shariah law of the Arabs, or would that only have concerned itself with the Muslims?

Here we enter another somewhat nebulous phase of our history. What were Maltese rights under the Arabs? Did most convert to Islam, in which case the Shariah law would have dominated their lives civically and juridically no less than socially and religiously.

Wettinger has speculated a still worse fate for possibly many or even most of the inhabitants of the Maltese islands, not so much when the Arabs first arrived (when the better-off local Greeks could have left for southern Italy and elsewhere) but a year or so later when the Byzantines were again menacing the Arab hold on Malta, and Maltese loyalties may have been with the former. The Maltese, he writes, could have been enslaved and kept in Malta (*f'jasar mill-agħar*); they could also have been expelled from Malta into an exile from which they never returned. The men could have been all killed. "We don't know what happened. But we have indications that in the year 870 or the year before it there was widespread destruction of buildings in Malta". Years later, when faced by the possibility of another Byzantine attack, the Muslims in Malta took a head-count, they found there were more slaves than free men. What apparently took place from now on was that a pact was entered into between the slaves and the free men that the former would

enlist to fight with the latter against a Byzantine invasion, which they did successfully, whereupon the slaves were freed and all these inhabitants, now happily converted to the cause of Mohammed, lived together as one people.²

Emancipated slaves could hardly be unified with their former masters, or free in any profound sense, even if the law would have been modified according to a 'mutual' pact. "But", asks Wettinger, "why should they have expected the same death from the invaders as their Muslim rulers if the invasion succeeded? Would Christians, in fact, have helped their Muslim rulers against a Byzantine liberating force?"² This would explain why after the coming of Roger the Norman in 1090 there were few Christians, if any, and Muslims - presumably the Maltese, that is - continued to live here for many more decades. The evidence is not too strong, and in succeeding generations this theory was unpopular, and it would be today as well. But it is plausible to believe that slaves, in return for their freedom, would have changed allegiance from one master to another or indeed from one holy book to another. Yet hardly a generation had passed before the Normans arrived, so what kind of people could have been moulded in so short a time? If we accept this position, we would be led to believe that a Maltese population as such actually formed during the time between the arrival of Count Roger and the second Norman coming, when Roger II came in the thirteenth century, and only then expelled the Muslims - or was it the Arabs? As the Normans were Christians, they would have brought Christians with them, but unless there was a population transplant, it is logical to presume that local inhabitants converted back to Christianity gradually. In his history of architecture, Leonard Mahoney tentatively and interestingly pondered on Luttrell's interpretation of a 1240 survey to suggest that after the Arabs left, the former Maltese slaves may have openly returned to their former faith, the number of slaves and of Christians seems to tally.

Adopting Ibn Haldun's date of 1249 when Frederick II "chased out" the Muslims who lived in Malta, he noted that Luttrell's interpretation of the 1240 survey was not unreasonable. Calculating numbers on the basis of five persons per family, Mahoney goes on:

"Therefore, before the Arabs were expelled from Malta there were 4000 Muslims and 6000 Christians. It will be recalled that in 1050 there were in Malta 4000 Arabs and 6000 Maltese slaves. Is this close agreement not suggestive? Does it not appear that all the Maltese had returned to their former faith?"³

In constitutional terms, the implications of all this boggle the mind, and one may hardly conceive of freedom, let alone discuss it, in such circumstances. A more abject fate could hardly be imagined. On the other hand, such transformations were by no means unknown. Suffice it to mention the mass conversions of Jews during the Spanish Inquisition, and their change of name, seeking to be as un-Jewish and as ultra-Catholic as possible, with surnames such as for example, Santamaria. If the Jews could do it, why not the Maltese? Politically, what was at stake was survival

and hence compromise all the way would have provided an escape, but faced with such harsh odds, there was no space for free will, other than that of an emancipation of the person from the bonds of slavery. Noble or ignoble, in the context that was a quest for freedom - the slave bargained and lobbied for his emancipation.

In the nineteenth century and up to the second world war, part of the opposition to the Maltese language derived to some extent from its association with Arab rule - tyranny and slavery. But it seems the language was derived from that period, and given the above version of what happened quite understandably so. The German romantic school would insist that the absorption and adoption of language by the dominated is the worst badge of conquest: it is when the fetter wears through, an unconditional surrender of the tongue, therefore of the soul itself. This would only be relevant to the Arab conquest unless some form of Arabic was already spoken in Malta previously. At one time Greek, at another time Arab, these former Romans and Phoenicians continued to speak a Semitic language dressed in Romance scripts and overtones. Without the Arab interlude, it is possible that the language of Malta might have been more akin to Sicilian Italian, and Malta under the British then would have been truly *terra irredenta*.

So far as rights and entitlements were concerned, however, it would seem that the Arab period was not at all conducive to anything other than would be regulated by Shariah law in a theocracy with lines of demarcation between the pedigree residents and the newly assimilated or assimilating native inhabitants. This could reverse by several centuries the theory of Malta's Christianity before the fourth century when, thanks to Constantine, it became quite harmless and possibly preferable or convenient to be a Christian. That was three centuries later than the coming of St. Paul. Could that early legacy have evaporated into thin air, and we start just about from scratch in the thirteenth century, i.e. nine hundred years later?

As the twentieth century draws to a close, could one bridge over the gap and pretend that the Arab interlude, changing language and religion, was but a sugar lump in a cup of tea?

Much water passed under that bridge since - water washed too by blood and bone.

The succeeding periods prior to the British occupation may be briefly summed up as characterised by feudal overloads, knights hospitallers, and republican revolutionaries.

Under the first dispensation, Malta possibly fared best, on the whole, so far as local liberties and internal autonomy were concerned. To this time especially is attributed the *Università* or *Commune*, and a *Consiglio Popolare*, about which Valentini, Mifsud, and others have written. This autonomous and home-grown body makes a profound impression on Maltese political consciousness and remains in the forefront of the rights charter in succeeding generations, right up to independence in 1964. While subject to the sovereign, the Consiglio raised taxes

and decided on public expenditures; it had a provincial head (*Hakem*), jurats (*giurati*), police officials, a treasurer, a notary, mayors (*sindaco*) in the towns or villages, lawyers and judges. Here is a little sample of its significance in the history of Maltese political thought, taken from a pamphlet, **Del Comune Maltese**, by Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici and published by the Empire Press. "*La fierezza e l'indipendenza del Comune e sulle sue orme l'Assemblea Nazionale*" explain the Maltese Congress of 1798:

"In vero rifiorisce l'istituzione Comunale con tutta la sua possanza antica, resa ancor più efficace perchè in alcun modo impastoiata da vescovi o re o feudatori o vice-re... e determinatosi il popolo a rivendicare la propria indipendenza e libertà, si riconnette subito alla sua istituzione giuratale; il nuovo governo..."

But the going was tough because the island was always dependent for its food, if not also for its security, on other countries. It was also subjected to the whims of the overlords, sometimes resident, sometimes non-resident, or of their representatives and agents, creditors and overseers. But as these changed, and they did not really belong in Malta, the chain of continuity was the local one. The notables and their council were rather like the senior civil service vis-à-vis incoming and outgoing governments: they retained and conveyed superior local knowledge to best advantage. But ultimately they were by no means sovereign: if a particular lord wished to strain their forbearance he was free to do so. He reported to the King and Emperor, and stood as a buffer suffocating their own aspirations. But to this we know that there could be a limit as well. Feudalism after all was predicated on a mutual reciprocity: protection in return for fealty. As King John found out when he came round to signing a *magna carta* for his barons, the bond of respect and service was a delicate one and could not be stretched unduly. If a lord abused of his subjects, his subjects might rise against him, in much the same way as the lord might rise against his king if the king abused of him.

To Malta, all this was brought home forcefully by Gonsalvo de Monroy. In their struggles to make do, the Maltese had to put up with much hardship - shortage of rain and of grain, changing masters some better others worse; but finally a point was reached where enough of them could stand up and say 'no'. Maltese resistance to exploitation by Monroy in the early fifteenth century must rank as the first major instance of determined and, ultimately, successful opposition to a foreign ruler. Not only did the locals succeed in obtaining a lever in their power struggle - the lord's wife became a hostage in Fort St. Angelo - they made their voice heard through direct representations to the Emperor's court. Our man here seems to have been Castaldo Cusburnellu, an Mdina ecclesiastical dignitary and delegate of the so-called *Università*, who went to Sicily to plead Malta's case⁴. Rather than submit further to excessive taxation and harassments, they struck upon a plan to redeem themselves. They raised among themselves - selling their heirlooms - the amount of money owed: twenty thousand florins. In return, Alfonso V gave them a charter of rights. This was in 1428. Much more research needs to be undertaken about this

exciting episode, which truly marks the first concrete step towards collective self-assertion by the inhabitants of the Maltese Islands that we know of.

That the charter was transgressed in later years is what might have been expected; but that it had been obtained in the first place continued always to be important. Here was a recognition of entitlement by the sovereign himself: here was a yardstick against which future violations could be measured: and here, too, was a lesson for posterity that the small need not always be powerless, putty in the hands of the mighty. Malta would be spared from feudal tenures: no more Monroys.

In the recognition of direct access to the king and the right to resist oppression even by force of arms, there was nevertheless, as always, the assured loyalty and faithfulness of the subjects to their sovereign.

"No doubt", writes Luttrell, "the average Maltese disliked being detached from the Crown, partly for traditional sentimental reasons of political loyalty, partly because such action heralded baronial exploitation; and doubtless such feelings were voiced through the *Universitas*, membership of which was broadly based. However there was another class of Maltese or Siculo-Maltese who really dominated the *Universitas*; these were the leading men of Malta such as Francesco Gatto and Anton Desguanes, Pedro de Busco and Simone de Mazzara, men whose interests were threatened by the Cardonas and the Monroys, men who aspired to dominate Maltese incomes themselves..." But Luttrell's conclusion fits in well with our general understanding here. He writes thus:

"Post-Muslim Malta looked towards the Christian, Latin Europe of the Western Mediterranean, and it was bound to Sicily by reason of its exposed position and its foodstuff requirements. Its ruling class and government officials, its garrison and clergy, were often Sicilians. Yet in some special sense its inhabitants were conscious of being Maltese; and the Gozitans, with their own *Universitas* remained distinctively Gozitan. In 1533 Jean Quintin evidently found that those who were raised in the islands and spoke the language had a character of their own; the women beautiful but so timid in their veiled seclusion that 'to have seen a woman was to have seduced her', and the men so religious in their Maltese way that they 'thought St. Paul was God'. These people kept their Semitic language, yet their Christian sentiment was so intense that by the sixteenth century there were more than 430 churches and chapels on Malta and Gozo. In 1530 the Knights were received at Mdina by bearded Maltese, some of them extremely old, who were mounted on donkeys, armed with swords, daggers and *azagaglio* or axes, and dressed in bullet-resistant, arrow-proof lengths of quilted cotton. Malta inherited a measure of Muslim tastes and traditions; its architecture and customs were clearly influenced from Sicily, yet Sicilian fashions were themselves affected by Sicily's Iberian links and Muslim past, so that it is often impossible to judge the movement of trends and influences. When Charles V granted Malta to the Order of St John in 1530 there was still, practically speaking, no such thing as 'Spain', and even Machiavelli did not define the 'Italian state' in such a way as to include it in the Kingdom of Naples ...Malta and Gozo formed a distant and special part of the Sicilian kingdom, within which they preserved many of their own ways of life and speech and thought; they were neither Spanish nor Italian".⁵

This period is also extremely important for another reason. It sees the birth of a Maltese aristocracy, titled by the Spanish crown, and starting a tradition of class, of

noble birth and of the sophistication and aspirations that went with it. The aristocracy has been much maligned by the French revolution, and some of its finer exponents were butchered to cheers. It was a sign of the times. Earlier on, however, when status had to be earned somehow, and when without it there could not be much representation or regard, an aristocracy was a significant and handy accomplishment for a country, and all the more so for such a tiny tot in the Holy Roman Empire as Malta was. The grant of titles and estates to some Maltese families in the fifteenth century, and the fusion of Siculo-Spanish and Maltese knightly classes, is probably the first time that a "local" feudalism could come into being. That is, the vassal-lord relationship could be or become a native-native one rather than, as before, a native-foreign one. In other words, a Maltese titled aristocracy with lands that required cultivation, permitted a new rapport between different categories of Maltese and would have tended towards a deference for nobility on the part of the common man. As Walter Bagehot noted, deference can provide a social bond, be a source of stability and even of nationhood. It is not clear how strong a bond that was, nor how far it could act as a constraint on the powers of government. The estates were small, and certainly there could be no private armies, but it was to be expected that intercession by a nobleman could lead somewhere, one way or the other. Here too was the old wealth against which a gentry would have to compete through skills and professions; here was an embryo for the eventual growth of a consciousness of class and station and a focal point for underdog rebellion. Here was also a possibility for some patronage, perhaps also for the arts, painting and musical composition. The existence of an aristocracy cannot be disregarded in the formation of a national entity, so much so that the decision by Charles V to renege on our charter – and again to give Malta as a fief to the Order of St. John - caused a significant clash with the Maltese aristocracy, who more than any other group rallied to speak up. How now, another aristocracy to rule over this one here? A veritable ensemble of aristocracies from all over Europe, to shun and disdain the Maltese variety, to exclude and to subject it, to divest and to denude it of status and power? No, said the aristocrats in the Citadel, better to fly the flag of the Empire, than that of this motley Order - as they did, in defiance, and in vain. But the remaining Maltese aristocracy nevertheless was a presence, tiny and weak but grounded in the Island with some history and tradition of its own; much as the Knights sought to dismiss it, they could not be unaware of it.

It was not only the Maltese nobles who were left out by these new and haughty Knights; so were the gentry and squirearchy whose *Università* or commune suddenly seemed not to matter much any more. What had hit Malta this time was not another overlord or agent, but a veritable State transported on galleys, equipped with a large entourage of lieutenants, men-at-arms, servants and slaves, an Order that was more than a monastery, more than a hospital staff, more than a corsairing navy crew. Who in Malta could begin to compete with these wealthy overlords -

scores of them swashbuckling in lavish attire, putting on airs as they strode down the cobbled alleyways? Emperor and Pope were both on their side; what could the Maltese do? They could make the most of it - serve the galleys, harbour and repair them, clean and service them, they could build anything in stone, and so they did, especially bastions and churches.

The Order did not give Malta any freedom. It was an aristocratic, theocratic institution; it fought battles; it built cathedrals and churches, bastions and ramparts; it used cannons and shot, and very much ran the show. Even the Bishop was ill at ease, what with a Grand Master and even an Inquisitor, all competing for the Pope's favour, or the Emperor's favour, or both. What the Order did, however, was build in the island the infrastructure for a European State, with a capital city in the best Renaissance tradition, with a market and a mint, a hospital and a university of studies, with a grain storage and a water supply system. Of necessity, it tended to Europeanize the place by almost everything it did from its fashions to its cuisines to its languages and its musics. It gave stability and security, leaving behind it values, precedents, models and monuments that appertained most definitely to a Christian European State - a modern State that then became old, because the *raison d'être* of the Order waned and almost vanished. Without the Order, however, there would have been no modern Malta, no State of Malta. This State may be said to have preceded the nation, to have helped it grow, and as the conscience of freedom grew so the backdrop of a Malta of the Knights was power to the elbow in the novel crusades for the creed of rights and liberties. Under this dispensation, we also find some incidents that show a separate Maltese soul, a throbbing "national heart".

One of the earliest manifestations of the refusal to comply with suppression of the rights of the long-established local Council was given by Dr Callus of Mdina, who was executed for writing to Barcelona in protest at the behaviour of the grand master, La Valette. Another was the so-called Rising of the Priests of 1775, about which Francesco Laferla and more recently Philip Callus, among others, have written. Priests or no priests, this was in many respects a Maltese rebellion against the Order's regime, and the insurgents, foremost among these Gaetano Mannarino and Pasquale Balzan, were brutally treated. Balzan suffered the same fate as Callus: death by strangulation, followed by decapitation, and - as an example to the population (and anyone who might dare raise his voice against established authority) sticking the head up on a pike in the square. Some freedom!

One who escaped this terrible fate, but who had much to say about power relations even at the local level, was Don Filippo Borg in the 1630s, half-way between the executions of Callus and Balzan. In his article on early Maltese popular attitudes to the Order, Godfrey Wettinger described the '*Relazione*' of Borg, or Borgia, as "our main source on the popular attitude of the Maltese as distinct from that of their ruling classes to the coming of the Order in 1530 and to its rule over them during subsequent years. It is really the oldest source for the common opinion

that there was a clear opposition between the reaction of the 'nobilita' of Malta and that of the common people, the former rejecting the proposed new rulers while the latter were prepared to accept them". Hence the prayer that God would send the Maltese a master who would ill-treat the nobles as much as the commoners and the pseudo-prophecy that a plucked sparrow-hawk would come out of the Levant and chase the peregrine falcon away from its nest. Textually: "*Verra da levante un sparvere spennato che caccerà il falcone peregrino dal suo nido*". That would have been the dream inspiring many a *jacquerie* as peasants risked everything to rebel against unyielding masters throughout Europe in those times. Come the new *seigneur*, it seemed for a while as if a new world had emerged. Alas, Filipp Borg goes on to say how the Order's rule had degenerated and how these Maltese became once again unhappy and resentful. But the importance of the Borgia document lies also in the fact that it is, sociologically, a marker of power relations and conflicts, of patron-client relations, of conflicting loyalties and allegiances, even at the parochial level; and of how these in turn related to the general state of affairs in the island or were a reflection of it.

The underlying motivations and considerations in all these three 'sign-posts' (Callus, Borgia, Mannarino) in our Maltese version of this people's history - and particularly of the urge to be free and secure at the same time - are unmistakably political. They even play on the same chords in spite of the passage of time from the 1560s to the 1770s.

Although so far we have no biography of Matthew Callus - his real name was actually Giuseppe, and posterity owes the mistake to Borgia - Malta's leading medical historian Dr Paul Cassar has given some attention to him as has, to a lesser extent, that old-time Bibliotheca devotee and self-made writer. Guzè Gatt. Depending on how one defines tyrants and heroes - and definitions may well change with the times - from a Maltese perspective we could say Callus ranks as one of our first national heroes. By contrast, Grand Master La Valette would be a bloody tyrant, and other epithets are not to be excluded. It was the time for tyrants, and tyrants could even be heroes. But in our vocabulary, and in the history of our national independence, he stays a tyrant, albeit with the reservations concerning statehood and hence the facilitation of emergent nationhood in a later era, to which due weight has already been given above. We know from Borgia that this Gascon knight muzzled the people and imposed burdens on them in 1560, helping himself to the municipality's income from customs, the taxes on wine, on the sale and transfer of property and on loans, while arranging to take out of the hands of the Mdina-based commune, the *Università*, the payment of the salaries to the town officials, and apparently never handed over to the *Università* any of the monies collected from taxes. To such infringements of the assumed rights and expectations of the age-old council of Malta, at least one man took grave exception and risked his life in dignified protest. Matthew Callus was strangled in the town square as a

rebel: he wrote a bold letter to His Catholic Majesty to assert the Maltese rights against La Valette's high-handedness. If Maltese literature has produced a truly lyrical poet surely that is Rużar Briffa, like Callus a medical doctor, and it is Briffa who has immortalized the Callus saga in his ballad to him. But this is also a poem about him, and about integrity. It is also about Maltese nationhood, more precisely the strength and weaknesses of it. "Matti! Matti!", Briffa calls out to Callus, almost as if his were a voice in the desert. But there is an ambiguity here, because the Callus stand created a precedent, which inspires Briffa to hope that Malta would yet emerge from the abyss in which it found itself. He was writing less than four years before Malta became independent. Here is part of the original Maltese text as composed by the great poet:

"X'qed tfittex? X'qed tfittex?
Ix-xita fil-qrib,
Iriegħed w iberraq.
X'qed tfittex, ħabib?"

"Infittex lil Matti,
Lil Matti Callus".
"Xi tridu lil Matti.
Dak bniedem bla flus!"

"Lil Matti xi tridu?
Mhux iżjed tabib.
Lil Malti, ħabibi,
Tgħoddux bħal ħabib".

"Irrid jien lil Matti,
Lil Matti Callus;
Irrid nara 'l Matti,
Lil Matti ħa nbus".
.....

"Min raqqdu lil Matti?
Għaliex Matti miet?
Għaliex, f' dit-tempesta,
Għaliex dan is-skiet?"

"Għaliex Matti raġel;
Ta' raġel hu miet.
Il-ħajja ta' Malta
Ma' Matti intfiet".

... ..
“Għidilhom, ħabibi,
Għidilhom dan biss,
Li Maltamhux mejta
W għad tqum mill-abiss”.⁶

If the coming of the Order put paid to the then existing political organisation vested in the Università at Mdina, it could not so easily subdue the growing power of the Catholic Church as a separate and indeed rather independent entity in Malta. In terms of arm-twisting, it was easier to suppress a local somewhat home-grown organism without outside supports. With the Church, the Order - “*La Sacra Religione*” - was caught in a cleft stick situation. This was a Holy Order, it was sovereign, and military, with the Pope himself as its head, but it was not the Church itself. Christianity was well-established in Malta by the time the Order arrived, there were bishops and orders and religious institutions, which also had local attachments and roots, and which may be said generally to have been closer to the common people than the Order ever was or could be.

In Borgia’s “*Relazione*” we can see how as the medieval *constestabili* declined, the onus for village representation fell increasingly on the parish priest, who however came to be challenged in that role by the knight serving as captain of the militia. We have here the extension of the patronage of one against the other. In Zurrieq we know of a case where the militia captain was so hated that he was in fact murdered (at about the same time that Callus was executed), whereas in Birkirkara (in Borgia’s own lifetime) the militia captain, a Catalan knight, was popular and a Maltaphile - talking to peasants about their traditions and folk customs. In a credible hypothesis, Wettinger observed that such a person would tend to collect around him all those who wanted the Order’s patronage, especially for employment or the grant of public land, and who were, perhaps, not on the best terms with the parish priest. “The latter also collected chickens and what not from the parishioners - because, after all, the ‘Capitana’, as Dun Filippo nicknamed the captain’s housekeeper, was not really starting anything very novel by her exertions”.⁷

Chickens and what not apart, what we have here are two rivals for allegiance, two corruptors of public innocence or misery, two pulls tending to split the community apart into factions, mirroring the interest of the powers - Pope or Grand Master (or Inquisitor) - to be supreme in their own right.

The other very telling revelation in the “*Relazione*” lies in the fact that Borgia and at least one other articulate ecclesiastic we know of, Don Francesco, were lawyers. Lawyer-priests. Lawyer-politicians. Here were men of the cloth who were also men of the law and who were, most importantly, courageous enough to speak up.

Social relations throughout this period have been looked at by Valentini, Luttrell and Henri Bresc, among others; in "Marxist" terms what we could have here is an incipient bourgeoisie rivalling and overtaking the traditional aristocracy as exponent of public affairs. In the nineteenth and twentieth century it is the lawyer-politicians more than any other single category who take up the cudgels of nationalist resistance, in Malta as in most other colonies right across the British Empire, and indeed other empires. Although by then, as we shall see, a process of secularisation sets in, nevertheless we already can hear the later slogans of 'il popolo', and more significantly still, 'il Popolo Maltese', with a capital 'p' and a capital 'm'. Dun Filippo refers repeatedly and emphatically to 'il popolo' and to 'Malta', even to 'lingua nostra', and he kicks off by recalling the Sicilian Vespers. Here is a sample to whet your appetite:

Il Popolo Maltese non potendo tollerare le Impertinenze di questo Prencipe, quale insino adesso in lingua nostra chiamamo il Mula, il che sona signore, con una raccolta di trenta mila fiorini ricattati si diedero al Re di Aragona...Un'altra volta il Popolo Maltese con la medesima somma si riscattò dall'obbligo del pegno e si rese alla obediienza del Regno di Sicilia ed Aragona. Allora veduta e considerata questa fedeltà di Maltesi li sono concessi dal Re molti priveleggii tra i quali nomina Malta la più pregiata gemma che tiene nella sua corona, e che Malta sia partecipe di tutti privileggi che gode la Città di Messina, ed che sia annoverata come uno delli quarteri di Messina libera ed esente da tutte gabelle ed imposizione...Al principio la Religione doveva esser troppo piacevole e dolce alli Maltese carezandoli...ma al fine sarra' tanto dura ed aspera con il Popolo che sara' sforzato fugire da questa Isola per le tante angarii e dazii che li vengono imposti...Consideri Vostra Signoria Illustrissima in che stato si ritrovi la povera Malta...

Such a lament, obviously addressed to the King, allows us to view a scenario for the so-called Rising of the Priests - so called, because the implications in this event are more far-reaching and have to be seen in the light of national politics and the nature of government.

What is really at issue in 1775 is not whether or even who could hunt hares or not, just as a century later the issue is not, essentially, who should learn Italian or English, or Maltese for that matter. The *privilegium fori* - that is, briefly ecclesiastical immunity — was an issue that greatly annoyed Strickland and later, was one of Mintoff's *sitt punti* in the early 1960s and one that the church hierarchy led by Archbishop Gonzi resisted along with secularising and other measures. However, one must not presume that Malta under Mintoff or Borg Olivier in the second half of the twentieth century would be the same as that under Ximenes or De Rohan in the second half of the eighteenth.

A "puerile and badly organised attempt, which was easily put down by the government", as Philip Callus has noted, the Rising of the Priests brought into question the whole gamut of immunities and privileges accorded to the church and to all those under its umbrella in one way or another.

"In virtue of the privilege of the tribunal, ecclesiastics could not be brought before the secular court and tried for any breach of the law. They could not be detained in civil prisons or punished by the secular authorities. They were to be judged and punished for their crimes by the

ecclesiastical tribunal. This held good even when clerics were charged with high treason, as in the case of a rebellion against the State. Hence the measures adopted by the government to trace all persons involved in the revolt, and the legal proceedings instituted against them, had canonical implications".⁸

There had been long-standing disputes and feuds as well as a number of skirmishes before the rising broke out: the summoning to Rome of the bishop, Mgr. Pellerano, was apparently the last straw that broke the camel's back.

What is most telling for our purposes in this presentation, is a patriotic implication in the Rising itself. It is simplistic to think of this event simply or perhaps even primarily as an ecclesiastical one. Take the timing: the night of the *Otto Settembre*. This may be explained away as a convenience - as there would be many people participating in festivities marking the Great Siege victory on that day it would be easier to elude the authorities, but this was not the only day when festivities were held in Valletta. When the rebels took possession of St Elmo and of St James Cavalier, they lowered the flag of the Order on both posts. And what banner did they raise? The Papal ensign? Certainly not. The Neapolitan colours? No. It was the white and red Maltese banner that was hoisted on St James Cavalier and on Fort St Elmo in September 1775 - presumably for the first time ever.

The number of clerics and of knights directly involved were small; the number of ecclesiastics was eighteen. Ironically the rebels were evicted from Fort St Elmo, after they had shown clemency to some of their prisoners, when these led by De Guron and De La Coliniere, had the rebels provided with wine and other liquors, and instructed the *tavernaio* to mix wine with salt so that they would be intoxicated. Which is what happened. The clash of authority, of jurisdiction, of adjudication, of prestige, even of primacy, which we noticed in the '*Relazione*', came to a head in an open clash. Who was to decide, who to sign, to sit in judgment, to punish or acquit, to kill or to torture, to grant immunity or sanctuary, to exact or exempt from taxation, to do military service or be a *chicrico*, in the service of the diocese, instead. In order words, who governs what. With whose authority? And for whose benefit? The populace or at any rate the *chicrici* and their families and associates rallied to the bishop and expressed their anger at an arbitrariness or interference shown by the Grand Master. When crowds of Maltese assembled before the Bishop's palace in Mdina to offer sympathy and support, the Bishop sent them away. Yet he was eventually recalled to Rome whence he never returned.

The Grand Master won, in the short-term at least. But it is probably impossible fully to understand the success of the Second of September insurrection two decades or so later, without close study of these earlier rumblings. To stretch an analogy we could suggest that 1775 is to 1798 in Maltese history what 1905 is to 1917 in Russian history - "a dress rehearsal." There is a difference in that whereas in Russia the government remained the same, at least until the czar's abdication, in Malta it had changed, but, by Maltese reckoning, it had changed for the worse. Still worse! What were the demands of the rebels of Gactano Mannarino in 1775? They

wanted impunity, the observance of the national privileges, and a reduction in the price of wheat. Here again we have a familiar backdrop for later grievances - political and social - in the long and tortuous journey to independence. Indeed economic problems feature prominently in 1775 as Peter Fava has shown in his 1978 article in *Storja*.

So far the fate meted out to rebels was much the same - torture and execution: thus fell these Maltese ecclesiastics and *chierici* - it is not exactly clear how many were implicated, though Mannarino under torture is believed to have revealed several names of co-conspirators.

One other point needs to be raised about 1775: was this not a Maltese rebellion as much as, if not more than, an ecclesiastical one? Given that the local Church gave protection to hundreds of clerics, who were mostly Maltese, and that the Knights exclusively were non-Maltese, was there not an ingrained element already there of 'us' against 'them'? The manner in which Maltese leaders were summarily and barbarously executed, produced feelings of revulsion, and no doubt, of blood-bond, which could not be easily forgotten.

¹"Malta e la Sicilia in età romana" (1977). See A. Bonanno, "Malta in the Third Century" in A. King and M. Henig (Eds.): *The Roman West in the Third Century; Contributions from Archaeology and History* (BAR, Oxford, 1981), p.p. 505-512.

²See G. Wettinger, "Malta Fiż-żmien Nofsani", in T. Cortis (Ed.): *L-Identità Kulturali ta' Malta* (Ministeru ta' l-Edukazzjoni, Floriana, 1989), pp. 207-223; and his article "The Arabs in Malta" in *Mid-Med Bank Limited* (Valletta, 1984), pp. 23-37, reprinted in *Malta; studies of its Heritage and History* (Valletta, 1986).

³Leonard Mahoney: *A History of Maltese Architecture from Ancient Times up to 1800* (Valletta, 1988), p.51

⁴Professor Stanley Fiorini supplied us with a reference to Cusburnellu's name.

⁵See A.T. Luttrell, "Approaches to Medieval Malta", in A.T. Luttrell (Ed.): *Medieval Malta; Studies on Malta before the Knights* (British School at Rome, London, 1975), pp. 1-70.

⁶See Oliver Friggieri (Ed.): *Rużar Briffa: l-ahhar poeziji u tahdita letterarja* (KKM, Valletta, 1973) pp. 67-68 and pp. 109-110.

⁷See G. Wettinger, "Early Maltese Popular attitudes to the government of the Order of St John", in *Melita Historica*, Valletta, Vol. VI, no. 3, pp. 255-278; published in 1974, this includes the text of the "*Relazione*", pp. 255-270 and pp. 271-278 respectively.

⁸See Ph. Callus: *The Rising of the Priests* (Valletta, 1961), *passim*.