

# Africa e Mediterraneo

C U L T U R A E S O C I E T À

54

**DOSSIER**

**Approdi: immigrazione e allargamento europeo**

Lo scenario migratorio attuale e i paesi dell'Est Europa

Is Islam in Europe becoming European?

La alarma social ante la ampliación de la UE

**ARTE**

Percorsi dell'arte etiopica contemporanea

**LETTERATURA**

Derek Walcott tra metafora, storia e memoria

## Models of migration from the past

### Maltese settlement in Italy: 16th-19th centuries

by Simon Mercieca

The aim of this article is to bring highlight those aspects of Maltese history relating to the Mediterranean Sea as a basin of massive movement of people: aspects which many people today, in the face of current debate over immigration, tend to ignore or forget. Migration to Europe is, of course, not a new phenomenon; it is old as history itself. The island of Malta has always been caught up in this movement – indeed, it could be argued that its history is formed by it – and I shall therefore be using Malta as an example of both a source and a destination of immigration. I shall be concentrating on emigration in the early modern period, and my short study will focus on the three centuries spanning the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century.

In fact, migration in the Mediterranean in early modern times was focused on particular places. First of all, important harbour cities were a point of reference to migrants. North Africans sought to migrate to Tripoli, the town of Algiers, the city of Tunisia or to Alexandria. Constantinople was the ultimate point of reference for people living in the Ottoman Empire. Many of the political elite living in the Ottoman-ruled lands, from Albania to Greece, from Egypt to Algiers, aspired to go and settle at the hub of the Empire. In the Western and central Mediterranean, the harbour cities of Southern France, such as Toulon, La Ciotat, and Marseilles were of particular appeal to migrants coming from Christian countries. Barcelona, and Cadez were important Spanish cities which also exercised a particular appeal on seafarers. In Italy, the cities of Genoa, Venice, Rome and Naples exercised a strong pull on migrants coming from the central Mediterranean. In the case of Malta, Rome became one of the preferred abodes and throughout the early modern period, Maltese from different social strata adopted the eternal city as their new place of residence. Maltese migration has been the subject of a number of studies by many scholars, but the focus has typically fallen on nineteenth-century migration. The available studies focus especially on North Africa, the Greek island of Corfu, and later, the American and Australian continents. In this study, I shall be focusing on Maltese migration to the Italian peninsula for the period ranging from 1530 to 1800. Somehow, the word "migration" does not sit comfortably in the context of the early modern Malta, as we are used to thinking that during these times people were not forced to migrate – as was in fact the case with the mass migration of

the nineteenth century – but voluntarily moved out of their home country. Perhaps the word "settlement" would sound more appropriate. Nevertheless, whatever term one uses, Italy was probably the place that, up to the end of the eighteenth century, received the greatest number of Maltese settlers, followed by Marseilles in France, and Spain. The first author of a complete history of Malta, the seventeenth-century scholar Gian Frangisk Abela, mentions the settlement of Maltese in Sicily in his book *Descrizione di Malta*. A century later, Ignazio Saverio Mifsud in his volume *Bibliotheca Maltese* elaborates on Abela's work, and refers those Maltese who made a name for themselves in Europe. The published material about the Maltese in Italy is sparse, and the individuals studied by Mifsud are successful emigrants, but it is well-known on the island that there were streams of Maltese who moved to the continent. One has only to glance through a telephone directory in Italy, France, and Spain (just to mention three Europe countries) to discover Maltese surnames, amongst which are *Maltese, Fenech, Mercieca and Caruana*. Often the Maltese identity of these families is so fused with the Italian that any trace of the past has been obliterated.

Searching through the *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, one discovers names of Maltese, such as the above-mentioned Gian Frangisk Abela, Leonardo Abela (a bishop and one of the Vice-Regents of Rome during the Pontificate of Sixtus V) and Antonio Bosio (the archaeologist, who discovered, excavated and popularized the Roman Catacombs). From studying the factors which were behind Maltese migration in the past, and the results produced by the migrants, as the above case studies show, one has to conclude that migration is not as negative as it is sometimes portrayed by certain sections of the media. The receiving country is also deemed to benefit from this movement of people.

**The Hospitaller Order's legacy**

For Malta, 1530 marked a turning point. The distance that separated Malta from Europe was bridged. The Order of St. John brought with it investment and a large group of foreign settlers. People of different ethnicity and culture began to circulate on the Island in a number never experienced before. A significant proportion of the Order's European revenues began to be invested in the island, increasing well-being in the country. A thorough

DOSSIER

59

defence policy became feasible, creating a sense of security. A new spirit of seafaring was injected. A special vessel called a *brace speronara* was designed, becoming the most used form of sea transportation in the eighteenth century and which, in the words of the English traveller, Patrick Brydona, was longitudinal in shape, paddled like a Venetian gondola, unstable in choppy sea but very swift; most importantly, it could outrun the piratical *xebecs* which infested the region. Thus the most serious stumbling block for sea travellers; i.e. piracy or corsairing, was gradually overcome. And in the meantime, the presence throughout Europe of the Order's consuls or ambassadors continued to help Maltese emigration to Europe since a point of reference was created for prospective travellers. In attempting to compete with Rome's artistic grandeur, the Order of Saint John sought out, throughout its long sojourn in Malta, the best talents in Europe, but was ready to commission locals who had received their training in Rome or another cosmopolitan city. But more importantly, Rome represented the seat of the Order's ultimate head, the Holy Father. Henceforth, the Maltese diocese's ultimate point of reference ceased to be the archbishopric of Palermo, as was the case in medieval times, for Rome took its place. Despite the fact that most bishops were former chaplains to the Langues of the Order, they allied themselves with the Maltese clergy against the Knights. The Order adopted the misguided policy of nurturing on the one hand the aspiration of the Maltese clergy and people whilst on the other hand excluding the Maltese from posts of highest authority. Church Institutions provided the required refuge to the intellectual elite. Those Maltese who wished to forge a career abroad often chose to do so under the church's patronage, which led to a distinct pattern of migration. Indeed, one finds an endless list of Maltese priests and

friars who achieved high positions abroad. The above-mentioned Leonardo Abela was a Maltese priest, who thanks to Holy Orders, attained a post of power, which to this day remains matched by any Maltese. Thanks to the strong contacts in the Vatican, he was made Bishop of Sydon, and later appointed to the even more powerful post of Vice-Regent of Rome. The various study centres in Rome attracted Maltese students. Possibly, the one most frequented by them was Urbaniana University. Among the successful students were Carlo Magri and his brother Domenico. Carlo Magri was appointed the librarian of the Arcigymnasium of "La Sapienza". Domenico, having caught the attention of Pope Urban VIII, was chosen for a mission to Mount Lebanon. He was a prolific writer and one of his works contains a description of his mission to Mount Lebanon. He was appointed Canon of the Cathedral of Viterbo. Thus, as happens today, and not only in poor countries, those to whom aspiration, influence, and power are denied often seek out the road to a better future through migration.

**Flows of mainstream migration**

The Maltese settlement in Italy was not only restricted to high-ranking priests and artists. There were also humbler folk who, either forced by pestilence or attracted by economic prospects, went to Italy in search of a better life. The geographical proximity of Malta to Sicily aided the common Maltese migrant in having a point of reference in the Italian peninsula. Thus, while the church sought to suppress its strong medieval Sicilian identity in favour of the Roman one, the common folk continued to hold steadfast to their cultural and social affinities with Sicily during their sojourn in Rome. Up to the early nineteenth century, the Church of Santa Maria d'Itria in Via di Constantinopoli (nowadays del Tritone), popularly known

Willy Zekid, Gio Batta, lo schiavo nero di Malta, storia pubblicata in Approdi, www.approdi.net



60

as *dei Siciliani*, not only cared for their spiritual salvation, but also catered for their material needs. The Maltese were accepted members in the Sicilian confraternity, a religious social guild. Many seem to have subscribed to this confraternity, while some even gave donations to the church. Two Maltese are said to have financed a copy of the image of the Madonna to be sent to the Sicilian community in Constantinople. For Malta, Sicily continued to maintain its importance, especially for the economic and commercial treaties better known as the *tratto* agreement, involving importation in Malta of tax-free wheat. The continuous population growth made such deals indispensable. Maltese settlements cropped up in various Sicilian harbour areas, such as Syracuse, Catania, Messina and Marsala, which were havens for the Maltese *speronara*. One particularly interesting example is that of the town of Licata. In its efforts to better organize Malta's commercial activities, the Order developed Licata into one of its wheat transshipment centres. A biscuit (galletta) factory was even set up to provide the Order's squadron with fresh supplies. Such an investment generated around it a Maltese community, warranting the modern of a church, dedicated to St. Paul. During the early modern period, the village of Pachino in Sicily also originated as a colony of Maltese migrants, in particular the Sultana families.

The fact that Europe, in those days, had no form of official identification permitted migrants to move about freely. The only form of restriction was linked to religion. It was through religion that people who moved and settled on the opposite sides of the Mediterranean integrated with the residing community. Religion permitted the integration of people, as it helped the migrant to integrate better with the town's or village community. But at the same time, religion was also a barrier, as movement outside one's religious sphere could turn out to be a hazardous endeavour.

Ironically enough, this religious model is still revealing today when trying to understand problems associated with migration. At one level, it is tempting to think that the religious model can be a source of inspiration for the search and creation of a common European heritage, which might supersede the nationalistic problems we have inherited through the superimposition of the nation state, though it hardly makes multicultural harmony. At the same time, one needs to realize that, in the past, harmonization was brought about through long centuries of integration. Unfortunately, nowadays we expect that kind of harmonization to take effect immediately, and to eliminate difference.

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## Modelli migratori dal passato: la migrazione maltese in Italia

La migrazione è all'interno dell'area euro-mediterranea non è certo un fenomeno nuovo, è bensì un elemento fondamentale per la comprensione dei processi storici e politici dell'area. Prendiamo come punto di riferimento Malta, luogo di approdo e di partenza di migranti. Il 1530 rappresentò un punto di svolta nella storia dell'isola: in seguito all'insediamento dell'Ordine di San Giovanni, Malta usufruì di collegamenti stabili con il resto dell'Europa. Giunsero di conseguenza popoli di diversa provenienza e, grazie ad investimenti promossi dall'Ordine, si svilupparono nuove tecniche e mezzi di navigazione, che avrebbero in seguito permesso di accorciare le distanze. Nel tentativo di competere con la grandeur artistica di Roma, i rappresentanti dell'Ordine canalizzarono l'emigrazione maltese verso l'Europa, commissionando opere ad artisti e intellettuali locali, nella maggior parte dei casi formati nella città papale o in altre metropoli europee. Essendo la sede del vertice dell'Ordine, divenne il punto di riferimento della diocesi maltese, sostituendosi così a Palermo, che aveva mantenuto questo ruolo durante tutto il Medioevo. Le istituzioni ecclesiastiche si resero dunque garanti dell'élite intellettuale, favorendo l'afflusso a Roma di artisti e sacerdoti. Esempio il caso di Leonardo Abela, prete maltese che, grazie ai contatti con il Vaticano, giunse ad occupare ruoli di grande prestigio a Roma; come lui, numerosissimi altri maltesi, non avendo possibilità di carriera nel luogo natio, andarono alla ricerca di un futuro migliore altrove. La migrazione in Italia non fu però limitata ai più stimati ecclesiastici e artisti; numerosi furono gli appartenenti ai ceti popolari, costretti dalla fame e dalle pestilenze a sbarcare in Sicilia. Certamente la vicinanza geografica favorì i contatti culturali, sociali ed economici tra le due isole, rapporti testimoniati da numerosi accordi commerciali, in particolare con città portuali quali Siracusa, Catania, Messina e Marsala. Nell'epoca presa in considerazione, in linea di principio, non esistevano restrizioni agli spostamenti di popolazione: l'unica forma di limitazione era legata alla religione, barriera oltre che ponte. La religione facilitò l'integrazione dei gruppi migranti con le popolazioni locali; ma, nello stesso tempo, rese le migrazioni da un'area religiosa a un'altra quasi impossibili.

Anche oggi il modello religioso si rivela un utile strumento cognitivo per l'analisi dei problemi associati alla migrazione, in un'epoca in cui si va alla ricerca di un comune retaggio religioso (europeo e non solo) che accomuni i vari stati nazionali, dimenticando forse che l'affermazione di tale identità renderà più difficile lo sviluppo di una società multiculturale.

61