

'Everyday' Life during the Hospitaller Period: Sources and Approaches

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Introduction

To set the parameters for this paper, three episodes from the records of the *Magna Curia Castellaniae* will be cited by way of examples of the 'everyday'. The first example takes us to Gozo. In late August 1680, at around 6 pm, Maestro Juliano Muscat, who ran a barber shop in Rabat, was on his way home to Xewkija, riding a donkey. He was not alone because his six-year old son Mariutto was riding along with him. It is an almost idyllic image from a simpler time: a man, Juliano, working as a barber in Rabat, Gozo, going home after a hard day's work. The young Mariutto, presumably, had spent the day in his father's barber shop, listening to men's tales and subtly learning the trade he would be expected to carry on. And when the working day was over, father, son and donkey, were heading back home. Suddenly, this picture of harmony was torn asunder when Michaelae Mercieca burst out of his house with a stick in his hands, hit Juliano with it and threw him off the donkey, toppling also the young Mariutto, who ended up with a bad bruise to his right eye.

The incident ended in front of the law court, with several witnesses appearing to provide their version of the events. In this way, more details about the 'everyday' emerge. For instance, one witness, Petro

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Paolo Fenech, described how he was standing in front of the house of Cathariniutta *la Maltia* ('the Maltese'), when he witnessed this episode. Cathariniutta *la Maltia* was clearly an emigrant to Gozo, one of a number of Maltese who, for a variety of reasons, chose to migrate against the flow, from Malta to Gozo, rather than from Gozo to Malta and the harbour cities in particular.² Another detail of the everyday to emerge is the imprecision with which age was recalled: Juliano described his son Mariutto as about 6 years old; but one witness described Mariutto as being about 8 years old, while yet another witness described him as about 10 years old. Numeracy, like literacy, was an art that needed to be acquired and recalling age was not seemingly essential to the everyday. If need be, you could always go to the parish priest who would check the baptismal record. A further aspect of the everyday that we learn about from this case concerns the way law and order were administered in Hospitaller Malta. The barber Juliano Muscat was also a *Iudex Idiota* in Gozo; that is, he was a non-legal person appointed to sit as judge to preside over minor cases. He had not received any legal training, but was probably well versed in local customs.

Juliano Muscat explained that he had passed a sentence against Michael Mercieca (we are not told about what) and so he suspected Mercieca of having attacked him by way of revenge. On the other hand, a number of witnesses did not hesitate to state that Mercieca was known for being a peaceful man so that his behaviour against Muscat was very unusual.

Hence, we may have here a hint of how social tensions based on what we could call class or socio-economic differences played a part in the everyday experiences of late seventeenth-century people. The law court took a very severe view of an attack on a member of the judiciary because this was 'an attack on the laws of the grand master ... carried out with fear neither of God nor of Justice'.³ Mercieca was condemned to a year of

2 For a discussion of such migration patterns cf. Mercieca, Simon (2014) "Ċensu Tabone (1913-2012): A study in demographic mobility and social dynamism in Gozo through ancestral research", in *Melita Historica*, vol. xvi no. 2, 131-33.

3 National Archives of Malta (NAM), Magna Curia Castellaniae (MCC), Processi Criminali (PC) 92/04, ff.1rv, 8 September 1680, Box 219, Doc.9, 'de contraventione practice magisteriali... no temendo Iddio e la Giustitia'. The documentary material from the MCC cited in this paper was originally consulted between 2002-2003. At the time, this material was not catalogued and the reference 92/04 was an accession number, meaning that this was the fourth accession of 1992. The reference 'Doc. 9' is a personal one, which simply means that the document was the 9th in a particular box. This order may have changed since and the date is the best indicator to be observed by anyone interested in following up a reference.

hard labour, his feet bound in chains and to pay a hefty fine of 25 scudi. He was also incarcerated in Gozo. Mercieca's everyday was, from that point onwards, very different to what he had known before.⁴

Here is another story from the everyday, with the protagonist being Caroli Ricard who one Saturday in August 1720 was sitting on a stone bench outside his house which, in his words, 'is close to the Venerable auberge of Provence',⁵ which is today's National Museum of Archaeology on Republic Street. We can imagine how Caroli was probably resting in the shade or just whiling away some time in the August heat when suddenly fourteen-year old Lorenzo Momal began pelting him with the peels of a melon. Invariably, the situation degenerated into a fight.⁶ The third example takes us to October 1720, when thirteen-year old Bartholomea Gatt described how she and her aunt stood with some merchandise in the space between the Auberge of Aragon and the Auberge of Germany (today's Independence Square, where St Paul Anglican Pro-Cathedral stands instead of the German auberge). She said that she had seen a mysteriously cloaked woman and a boy hanging around the door of the house of the Knight de Teler, but she could not recall whether any women had actually gone inside the house or left it. In Bartholomea's words, 'I had other things on my mind'.⁷ Purposefully or not, Bartholomea did not let the episode of the cloaked woman (and other possible women) disturb her every day.

So what do these various examples of different experiences of the everyday in Hospitaller Malta tell us? What they alert us to is the elusive quality of the 'everyday' as a conceptual category. It means everything, but at the same time, it means nothing at all. There are two elements to consider here. First, when discussing the everyday in the Hospitaller period, that is, from 1530 to 1798, it must be borne in mind that is a very long and eventful stretch of years. Some elements of the everyday are very constant, possibly even unchanging: say for instance, the dominance of agriculture in the lives of many Maltese. Other elements of the everyday invariably changed over the period: in particular, the

4 NAM, MCC, PC 92/04, ff.1r-7r, 23 Aug – 8 Nov 1680, Box 219, Doc.9.

5 NAM, MCC, PC 92/04, f.1r, 19 August 1720, Box 334, Doc.48, 'ritrovato a seder sopra un baco di pietra quale è vicino alla porta di nostra Habitatione quale viene ad essere puoco distante dalla Ven Albergia di Provenza'.

6 NAM, MCC, PC 92/04, ff.1r-3v, 19 August 1720, Box 334, Doc. 48.

7 NAM, MCC, PC 92/04, f.2v, 6 October 1720, Box 334, Doc.7, 'poteva bensi entrare et uscire qual che donna senza esser da me osservata mentre io avevo altro per la mente'.

comings and goings occurring in Malta's dynamic international harbour and the steady growth of the population from about 20,000 in 1530 to about 100,000 by 1798.⁸ The second element is the question 'whose everyday are we focusing on'? And there are two sides to this question. First, is the recognition that there were many inhabitants, many 'Maltese' on these islands during these almost three centuries, each with her/his perception of the everyday; and we should be sensitive to this. Second, is the recognition that each historian brings a fresh pair of eyes to bear on history through which to view the past. Different individuals and groups have different notions of what constitutes the everyday for them. This holds true for the past as much as for the present. This paper will focus on the everyday from the point of view that we are dealing with pluralistic societies; and pluralistic societies demand pluralistic histories. To discuss this, the paper will be divided into three parts: a discussion of a possible conceptual framework for the idea of the everyday; an outline of sources, both primary and secondary, for the study of the everyday; and some case-studies of the everyday, focusing on war, Malta's position as a frontier society and issues of neighbourliness in urban spaces.

A Framework

The emergence of what can be called 'everyday life' studies – at times referred to also as 'history from below' though the two are not necessarily interchangeable – has for several decades now been an important element in shaping the study of history. The historical discipline and its practitioners at the dawn of the twenty-first century are faced with some particularly significant challenges; among these is the key question about the 'unnerving relationship between history, reality, and truth' in the face of post-modernist discourse; another key question relates to the relevance of history to societies trying to deal with global issues – such as troubled financial markets, environmental degradation and mass human migration – but which are nevertheless anchored in local circumstances and interests.⁹ The fascinating and complex relationship between the

8 For an overview of various aspects of life on early modern Malta see the contributions in Mallia-Milanes, Victor ed. (1993) *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798: Studies on early modern Malta and the Order of St John of Jerusalem*, Malta: Mireva.

9 Rublack, U. (2011) "Preface" in *A Concise Companion to History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, vii-viii.

macro and the micro levels underscores various debates about the scope and range of historical investigation.¹⁰

A challenging and useful starting point for a meaningful discussion of the everyday is the work of French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991). He spent an intellectual lifetime thinking about the everyday, particularly within the context of twentieth-century capitalism and produced a three-volume work called *Critique of Everyday Life*. In Volume 1, he stated:

In their arguments and reflections the historians of the old school always made sure they introduced painstakingly detailed and often repellently trivial descriptions of everyday life at a given period, of royal illnesses and love affairs, of life in the medieval castle or of the seventeenth-century "peasant interior". Such details have no relation whatsoever with the idea we are likely to develop of a knowledge of everyday life. They only appear to do so.¹¹

What Lefebvre was taking issue with were descriptions of the everyday in the past that tended to romanticise the lives of individuals, in particular the lives of working folk. He argued that there has always been a strong link between 'theatre, acting and life itself', even arguing that 'historical scenes have always been cleverly and cunningly "staged" by certain men who were aiming for specific results'.¹² Lefebvre was a Marxist and this comes across in his concern that those whose task it is to communicate ideas should seek to go beyond 'those appearances which use reality in a way that enables the "great men of this world" cleverly to nurture their prestige and present their own reality to its best advantage'.¹³ To do so, it is necessary for the historian's work to take 'the whole into account: spectators, situations, the canvas of the immense *commedia dell'arte*'.¹⁴ This is, of course, an ideological stance with which one may agree or disagree. Nevertheless, it is a useful framework to direct our discourse in such a way as to give a deeper meaning to the everyday. This connects with an earlier point made in this paper: historians have

10 Peltonen, Matti (2001) "Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research Author", in *History and Theory*, vol. 40 no. 3, 347-59. Burke, Peter (2008) "The invention of micro-history", in *Rivista di Storia Economica*, anno XXIV fascicolo 3, 259-7.

11 Lefebvre, H. (2008) *Critique of Everyday Life*, London and New York: Verso, vol. 1., 133.

12 Lefebvre, 135.

13 Lefebvre, 136.

14 Lefebvre, 136.

varied audiences to whom we have a duty to cater because there are pluralistic societies. Following on from the above, this paper proposes an approach to the everyday which entails looking at the past beyond traditional political narratives and with a focus on social experience and activity. The protagonists could be both the rich and the poor – to use such basic categories – but importantly one should try to bring in as many diverse individuals and groups as possible into the analysis.

Sources

A source is anything that has been left behind by the past. The written word is probably the most obvious kind of primary source, but there are also non-written sources such as buildings, clothes, paintings, toys; what is called 'material culture'. All artefacts are sources because they shed light upon aspects of the past. However, a document, an object, only becomes historical evidence when it is used by a historian to make a particular point. What needs to be always borne in mind – obvious as it may seem – is that whatever a historian is using as 'a source' was originally created for a particular purpose, be it practical or decorative, and rarely for a historian to pore upon. Artefacts are created to aid the present, seldom to study the past. Hence, an effective historical investigation needs to be underscored by an awareness of both the possibilities and the limits offered by sources.

This section will seek to highlight some of the sources that one can delve into in order to study the everyday. In terms of primary, archival sources, it will highlight three particularly rich repositories. First, the still largely untapped records of the *Magna Curia Castellaniae*, the secular law court of these islands throughout the Hospitaller period, whose records are under the care of the National Archives of Malta.¹⁵ It is from these records that the stories recounted at the opening of this paper were taken. The *Magna Curia Castellaniae* can be considered as the court with the largest jurisdiction in Malta. The secular courts were split: in Mdina there was the *Corte Capitanale*, with jurisdiction on the immediate surrounding villages including Mosta, Naxxar, Rabat and Żebbuġ; the remainder

15 A significant amount of this documentation has now been digitised thanks to the ongoing co-operation between The National Archives of Malta and The Malta Study Center at the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library; 'National Archives of Malta announce completion of the digitisation of the magna curia castellaniae', www.independent.com.mt 5 August 2015.

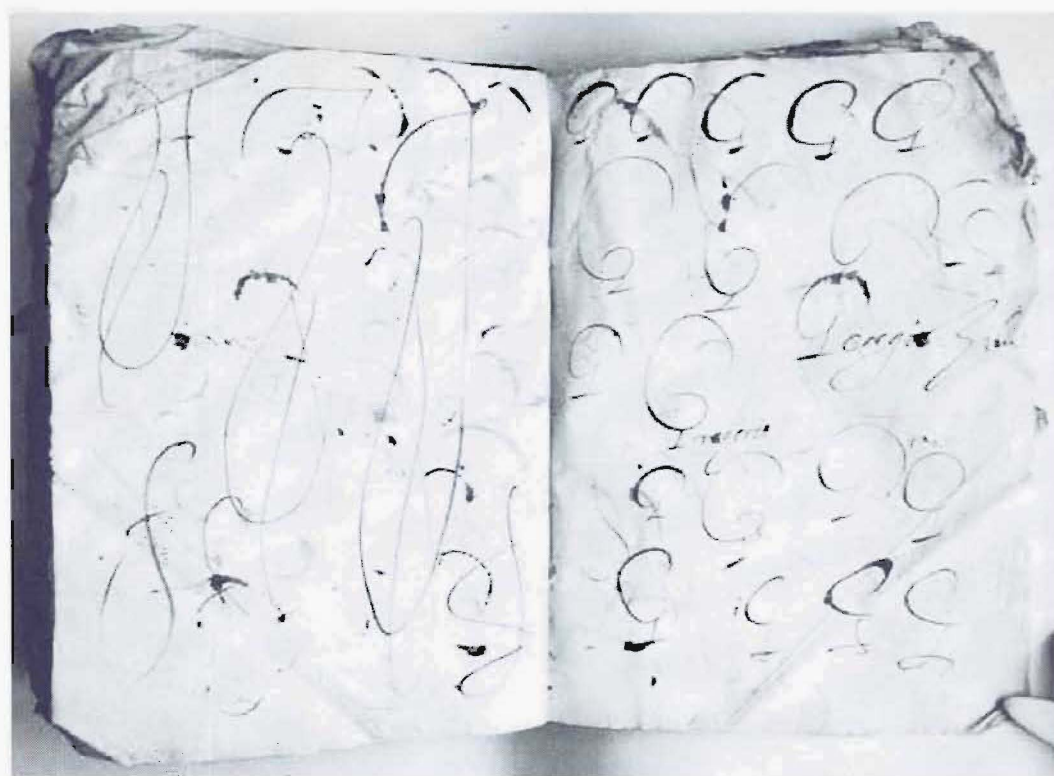
of the island fell under the jurisdiction of the *Magna Curia Castellaniae* based in Valletta. Gozo had its own court. However, being the seat of the *Suprema Corte d'Appellazione* (the Supreme Court of Appeal), cases from other jurisdictions waiting for appeal were decided at the *Magna Curia Castellaniae*. This makes the *Magna Curia* of Valletta a particularly important depository of archival material related to crime on the Maltese islands during the early modern period. Conversely, being court records, the images that emerge from these documents can lead to an impression of an overly-criminalised society with high rates of conflict; those who were not accused of breaking the law would not be summoned here (though they could still be witnesses), a factor that needs to be taken into consideration in any analysis. Nevertheless, as various historians have shown, crime records are some of the richest depositories of the everyday, in that all kinds of details and individuals can be found there, and often not elsewhere.¹⁶

A second archive to highlight is that of the Inquisition of Malta, now part of the Archives of the Cathedral of Mdina. Contrary to the *Magna Curia*, a lot of work has been done using the records of the Inquisition (although there are still many areas to study) and there are many valuable published works that one can turn to. What needs to be borne in mind with regards to the Inquisition is that being primarily a religious tribunal, which was set up to correct the errant ways of the faithful, the tribunal was an ideological machine of a kind. A particular picture of the Maltese people emerges from the records of the Inquisition: a people immersed in religion and the supernatural, a people seeking solace either in conventional religion represented by the Church or by turning to darker powers mediated by Muslim slaves, old hags and village wise wo/men for the comforts provided by talismans and spells. A people, in short, whose everyday was governed by a blur of religion and superstition. Religion was of course fundamental to daily life and people did behave in the ways described above, but reality was more varied. This is a clear case which proves that by appealing to different sources we can form a better image of that prismatic thing: the everyday truth.

The third archive to highlight here is the Notarial Archive, housed in St Christopher Street, Valletta. Neglected and abandoned for many years, in recent times, thanks to the work of the Notarial Archives Resource Council, these archives are being given a new lease of life which is

16 Muir, E. and Ruggiero, G. eds. (1994) *History from Crime*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

not only preserving the documents but also allowing their stories to resurface. In the early modern period, the notary was a key figure in society whose services were sought out by one and all, even the most humble.¹⁷ The notarial acts, written in Latin, do lose in proximity to the mother tongue, but they gain in proximity to the remembered experience of the individual, with all its specificity.¹⁸ Take for instance the examples in Figures 1-4 of a notary practising his writing; they constitute a truly marvellous object. The notary was Lorenzo Grima (1595-1649) and the scribbles are found in a *bastardello* (minutes and notes) volume R309, after the last page of text. It is an everyday artefact which captures such a particular moment in time in the life of a man, presumably just starting out as a notary, perhaps nervous as the first day on the job approached. It is an everyday that many can relate to. Notarial records are another rich window onto the everyday, particularly if one is interested in material culture, that is, in what people owned, valued and decided to pass on.



17 cf. Abela, Joan (2008) "Some early forms of financial instruments founds in mid-sixteenth century Malta", *Storja*, 30-46.

18 cf. Zemon-Davis, N. (1987) *Fiction in the Archives – Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth Century France*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 22.



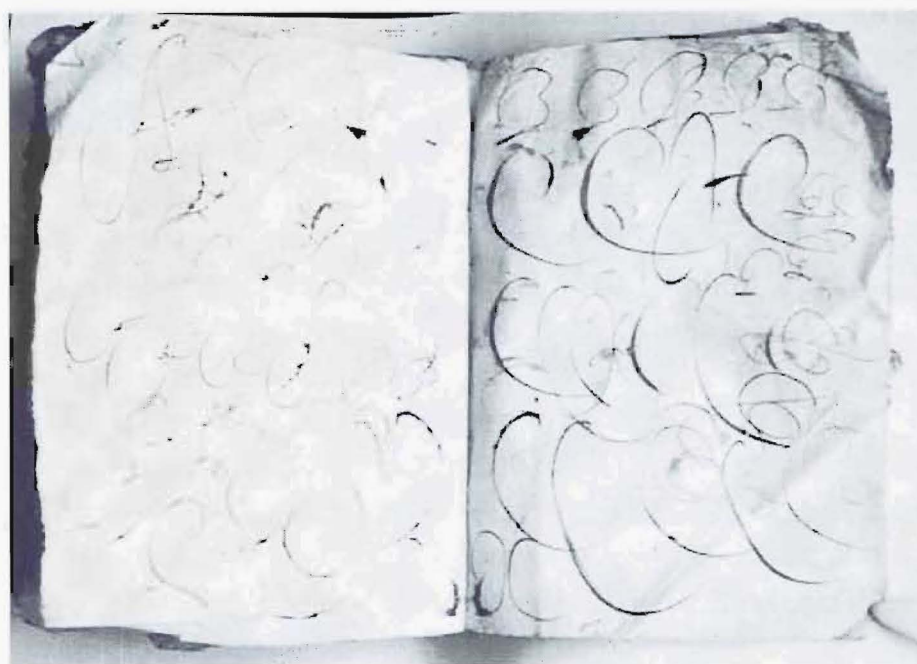


Fig. 1-4 Volume R309 Notary Lorenzo Grima (1595-1649).
Courtesy: Notarial Archives Valletta. Photo: Ms Lisa Camilleri.

The final primary source this paper will focus on are what historians call non-written sources, that is, objects. Anything from the past – when presented well, when communicated effectively – can have that wonderful immediacy that brings the everyday of the past close to the everyday of the present. Take for instance Antoine Favray's well-known 'Maltese ladies paying a visit' (1751), now housed at the Louvre.¹⁹ There are many tales of the everyday that it can tell us: upper class female sociability, ideas about fashion and good taste, motherhood, pets (there is a small pet dog in the left-hand corner) and so on. Two characters in this image lend themselves in particular to help bring to life the everyday of the eighteenth century: the wet nurse and the female black slave. The wet-nurse was for centuries a pivotal female role in many societies, including the Maltese one. Elite women rarely breastfed their children; they hired another woman to do so, the wet-nurse.²⁰ This reflects ideas about

19 Sciberras, K. (2009) *Baroque Painting in Malta*, Malta: Midsea Books, 331. For a reproduction see the official website of The Louvre http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=10272 (Inv.4376) 3 October 2015.

20 cf. Fildes, V. (1988) *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present*, Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 79.

relations among women, relations that cut across social class, relations between parents and children and so on. On the other hand, the female black slave, playing very intimately with the white baby, the child of her masters, is a telling reminder that black people are not a recent novelty in Maltese society. Just like today, such people were brought to these islands, unwillingly, and by boat. Just like today they faced hostility and discrimination; after all, they were enslaved. Yet there is something in scenes such as this one that provides clues to a Maltese early modern society that was multi-ethnic and multi-cultural; not always pleasant, but somehow at ease in its interactions with diverse people. And that, too, needs to be taken into account in a comprehensive analysis of the everyday on early modern Malta. As with the other sources highlighted above, non-written sources also present their methodological challenges: questions of production, dimensions, location, colours, patronage and so on, all need to be considered. Nevertheless, with objects having always been so central to human life, an analysis of the past is enriched when it acknowledges their centrality in the experiences of those being studied.²¹

Moving on to secondary sources, Carmel Cassar's paper 'Popular perceptions and values in Hospitaller Malta' (1993) continues to be a useful starting point for anyone interested in everyday life in Hospitaller Malta.²² This may in fact be read alongside his other paper, 'Everyday life in Malta in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' (1988) in order to have a sense of continuity and change in the everyday from the Hospitaller to the British period.²³ In 'Popular perceptions', Cassar emphasized aspects such as kinship to point the way in which the everyday can be approached. Some other works that are worth highlighting as useful entry points into the everyday – and of course one has to be selective out of necessity here – are: Carmel Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta* (2000), Frans Ciappara, *Society and the Inquisition in Early Modern Malta* (2001) and Kenneth Gambin & Noel Buttigieg, *Storja tal-Kultura ta' l-Ikel f' Malta* (2003). These are just examples of three works that – while not being exactly about the everyday – shed light

21 Jordanova, L. (2012) *The Look of the Past. Visual and Material Evidence in Historical Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-14.

22 Cassar, C. (1993) "Popular perceptions and values in Hospitaller Malta", in *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798: Studies on early modern Malta and the Order of St John of Jerusalem*, ed. V. Mallia-Milanes, Malta: Mireva, 429-74.

23 Cassar, C. (1988) "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: Mireva, 91-126.

on various aspects of everyday life in Hospitaller Malta. There are, of course, a variety of journals and similar publications that come out more or less regularly and which often carry papers that deal with the everyday: *Melita Historica*, *Proceedings of History Week*, *Storja*, *Arkiwju* and others.²⁴ Furthermore, one should not neglect to consult the many dissertations produced by students of the Department of History (and other departments with an interest in the past) at the University of Malta. Every kind of topic is covered; there is so much to discover and it is a shame that dissertations do not receive more attention. For the more recent dissertations, there is now the additional service that they can be accessed online.

Case Studies: War and the Frontier

The geography of the Maltese Islands is a combination of insulation and smallness; their history is a combination of isolation and connectivity. Isolation is almost always a matter of degree: the sea isolated Malta but was also its medium of constant connectivity.²⁵ Early modern Malta experienced a high level of openness to other cultures; hence the 'Maltese everyday' was influenced by this ongoing interaction between the local and the broader context. A powerful factor that shaped everyday life in early modern Malta was the islands' experience of war and the state of being on the frontier. Hospitaller Malta was a frontier society, the point where Europe and Africa, Christianity and Islam, interacted and clashed. Invariably, this had a profound effect on everyday life across all strata of society, even if as we progress into the eighteenth century Malta seems increasingly safe from direct attack. Hence, talking about war, violence, corsairing and piracy can be a good way of entering the world of the everyday in Hospitaller Malta.

On 25 June 1605, the French Hospitaller Frà Petro Queyran appeared in front of the Inquisitor and recounted this strange story:

Two months ago I was talking with a servant-at-arms of the Langue of Provence called Barducci ... he told me that one day he went hunting in the company of a Spanish knight of the Langue of Castille [called

24 Back-copies of these and other journals are available online at <http://melitensiawth.com/Index.html>.

25 cf. Henk Driessen (2008) "Seascapes and Mediterranean crossings", in *Journal of Global History*, vol. 3, 446.

Frà Antonio Moretto Giron][.] The said knight [Giron] told him [that is, told Barducci] ... [“]I will show you something terrifying but you need to avoid making the sign of the cross, and you should not be afraid[”][.] Barducci replied that he would not be afraid even if he were to behold all the Devils[!] [Giron] then told Barducci to turn his face around and look towards the sea[.] Having done so, Barducci saw a whole troop of armoured horses and black men and these surrounded them[.] Barducci saw one of these [black men] with his sword unsheathed moving towards him and getting ready to strike him. Frightened by what he saw, Barducci pronounced the name of Jesus and all the [black] men and armoured horses immediately dissolved.²⁶

Fantastic as it may first appear to a twenty-first century reader, what this story reveals is the day-to-day concern of those on Malta – Hospitallers and Maltese – that the sea was the medium through which enemies could land. The Great Siege of 1565 was the most serious assault on the islands throughout the Hospitaller period. Luca De Armenia, a resident of Mdina on the eve of the Great Siege, wrote a poem to express the anxieties that he and everyone else must have felt as that impending doom descended upon these islands:

*Now fury on anger or a heavenly sentence is against you,
powerful of his fleet, he prepares a return in blood and fire.²⁷*

There is no doubt that living through the siege – particularly for those constantly exposed to hostile fire in Birgu and Isla – would have

26 Cathedral Archive Mdina (CAM), Archive of the Inquisition of Malta (AIM), Criminal Proceedings (CP) Vol. 168, Case 26, f.1rv, 25 June 1605, ‘Circa doi mesi sono un giorno ragionando io co un fra serviente della lingua de provenza chiamato Musi di Barduccj ... mi hebbe a dire che essendo egli un di andato a’ cacchia Incompagnia de un cavaliere spagnolo della lingua de casteglia [he was called Frà Antonio Moretto Giron; this emerges later on in the same file] Il detto cavaliere gli disse che ... vi farò vedere cosa spaventuosa ma no bisogna fare segno de croce, nemoeno havere paura, e Il detto barducci havendogli risposto che si havesse visto li tutti li Diavoli no haveva pahura, Il detto cavaliere allora gli disse dunque girate la faccia et guardate verso lo mare e havendo egli guardato, vidde una squadra di cavalli armati et di homini negri a’ cavallo et li circondarono al detto cavaliere, In questo vidde uno di loro che co la spada Inmano sfodrata andava contro do lui cioe detta fra serviente mostrando de volergli dare, et il detto Barduccj pigliando terrore di cio, nominio il nome di Giesu, e subito disse che scomparsero tutti q.lli homini e cavalli armati.’ cf. Buttigieg, E. (2013) “The Maltese Islands and the Religious Culture of the Hospitallers: Isolation and Connectivity c.1540s-c.1690s”, in *Islands and Military Orders, c.1291-c.1798*, eds. E. Buttigieg and S. Phillips, Farnham: Ashgate, 39-51.

27 Magna Curia Castellania, Cedulae Supplicae et Taxationes, Vol.2, 1565-1566 [last folio]. Cassar, Carmel (1981) “O Melita Infelix – A poem on the great siege written in 1565”, in *Melita Historica*, vol.8 no.2, 149-155. Cassar, C. (2000) *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta*, Malta: Mireva, 201-3, 289.

been very stressful. And yet, there is evidence that even during war, the everyday experiences of those inside the besieged towns was not only about war. Notarial documents of those months in 1565 show that business transactions were still going on: people were borrowing money and buying and selling the renowned donkeys of Malta. Balbi di Correggio, in his diary about the siege, noted how in the haste to seek the protection of the cities, many Maltese had abandoned their beasts of burden in the countryside and the Ottomans were able to use them for their own purposes.²⁸ The notarial documents tell us another facet of that story; some – Maltese and others – clearly managed to take their animals with them into Birgu. And they were even making a profit out of them. Aside from donkeys, notarial acts also show that marriage contracts were still being entered into during those months of war; then, as now, marriage was an important marker in one's everyday experience.²⁹

With regards to the subject of marriage in the context of war, it is worthwhile remarking upon how in the years between 1560 and 1580, there were instances of freed slaves who got married, either to another freed slave or to a local Maltese. War brought the slaves to Malta; when, in one way or another they gained their freedom and opted (freely or because they had no choice) to stay in Malta, a number of them married.³⁰ Thus, in 1561, we come across Cristoforo Nigro del Burgo, a freed slave, who married Apollonia, another freed slave.³¹ The name Cristoforo Nigro del Burgo seems very indicative. It tells us that he had very likely converted to Christianity, hence the name Cristoforo. It tells us that he was black or very dark-skinned: Nigro. And it tells us that he lived in Birgu, the most cosmopolitan place on the island at the time. Just like today, if one is different and wants to fit in, or at least not be too visible, a city is often the best place to do so.

To take a final leaf from this story of war and love, we can zoom forward to the early 1790s and the story of Pietro Stellini, a corsair from Bormla. There is increasing evidence that towards the end of the

28 Cassar, Carmel (1996) "U Mulu di Malta: The Maltese trade in donkeys and mules", *Storja*, 16. Dalli, C. (2005) "The rise and fall of the donkey: The Central Mediterranean Islands", <https://www.soas.ac.uk/history/conferences/previous/donkey-conference—collected-papers-from-previous-conferences/file98157.pdf> 23 January 2016. <http://www.tvn.com.mt/news/il-kummerc-tal-hmir-anke-fl-eqqel-tal-assedju-l-kbir/> 08 October 2014.

29 Caruana, I. (2014) 'Aspects of Marriage in the Maltese Islands in the second half of the Sixteenth Century (c.1560-1580)', Unpublished University of Malta M.A. dissertation, 156.

30 cf. Wettinger, G. (2002) *Slavery in the Islands of Malta and Gozo ca.1000-1812*, Malta: PEG.

31 Caruana, 45.

eighteenth century, corsairing in Malta was alive and kicking, rather than moribund as previously thought.³² Pietro Stellini, like many Maltese and other men from across the Mediterranean and beyond, sailed on corsairing vessels from Malta to try his luck at making his fortune. Pietro's first journey went rather well and he made a decent return; he had a wife and three young children to support. His second journey, however, turned sour when a freak storm sank the vessel he was on; only he and six others survived, only to find that the sea had thrown them onto the North African and enemy shore. Slavery followed. We know all of this because as a slave, Pietro wrote two letters. We do not know whether he wrote them himself or had dictated them to someone who could write. One letter was to his mother, and it was tender in nature: 'I beg you dear mother do not lament my great misfortune since it is better to be a slave than dead like the others.'³³ While there is life, there is hope, he seems to be telling her. The second letter was to his wife and the tone was different:

*I give you the news you have always wished for me, that is [when you] always cursed that I would fall a slave or perish at sea. ... Now I will give you your greatest consolation and also console your friends and sisters who always had a grudge against me. You and your curses that I may drown, I actually drowned and God saved me. You have wished me a slave and God has conceded you this grace.*³⁴

Not much love was lost between husband and wife; nor did his mother and wife spare each other, for they went to court to fight over Pietro's money, presenting the letters as part of the evidence.³⁵ Pietro Stellini's story captures a whole range of facets of daily life: issues of work, war, faith, marital relations, and so on; all areas that require further study.

32 Gauci, L. (2015) "A Majorcan Captain's adventures as a 'Maltese' corsair in the 1770s: Rum, Coffee and a Silver Watch", in *Proceedings of History Week 2013 Second Colloquium on Spanish-Maltese History*, eds. J. Abela, E. Buttigieg and C. Vassallo, Malta: Malta Historical Society, 109-18.

33 Gauci, L. (2013) "Shipwreck, enslavement and an angry wife: Corsairing in Malta in the late eighteenth century", in *Proceedings of History Week 2011*, eds. J. Abela, E. Buttigieg and K. Farrugia, Malta: Malta Historical Society, 123.

34 Gauci 2013, 124.

35 Gauci 2013, 124-6.

Case Studies: Family Life and Neighbourliness

The second set of case-studies which will be discussed here focuses on family life and neighbourliness in the harbour towns from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries. In 1676 an outbreak of plague claimed 11,300 lives, one of the worst demographic disasters to hit early modern Malta.³⁶ We can only imagine what the usually bustling city of Valletta must have felt like shrouded in death and mourning. Medical experts commissioned by the government were able to point out the moment when the plague started. During December 1675 and January 1676, the young children of the Valletta merchant Matteo Bonnici fell mysteriously ill and died. Doctors initially attributed the death of Bonnici's two-year-old son to teething: 'while in a fit he died. This is very common in little children while teething'.³⁷ There was nothing unusual in this; teething was an extremely common cause of death among young children. An old Maltese proverb plainly stated: '*Man-nejbiet lesti il-kfejriet*', that is, 'When children begin to cut the eye-teeth, get the shrouds ready'.³⁸

The rate of mortality among children and young persons during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was extremely high. In the Valletta parish of Porto Salvo, of 1,600 mortality cases during the 1640s, 873 were aged between one and nineteen.³⁹ In the parish of Qrendi, between 1758 and 1779, 144 infants less than a year old died, leading to an infant mortality rate of 224 per thousand live-born children.⁴⁰ The seemingly matter-of-fact manner in which the doctors dismissed the death of Bonnici's son as commonplace, and statistical information such as that

36 Micallef, J. (1985) *The Plague of 1676: 11,300 Deaths*, Malta: John Micallef. Sciriha, M. (2015) 'Disaster management in late seventeenth-century Hospitaller Malta (c.1675-c.1700)', Unpublished M.A. Dissertation, University of Malta.

37 National Library of Malta (NLM), Archive of the Order of Malta (AOM) 262, ff.46rv (42rv), 28 January 1676, 'nell istesso parosismo cadde morto. Cosa molto ordinario alli figliolini nell'atto della dentitione.'

38 Aquilina, J. (1972) *A Comparative Dictionary of Maltese Proverbs*, Malta: Royal University of Malta, 178. Cassar-Pullicino, J. (1976) *Studies in Maltese Folklore*, Malta: University of Malta, 253-4. On teething in England see Coster, W. (2001) *Family and Kinship in England, 1450-1800*, Harlow: Longman, 73.

39 Borg, A.P. (2003) 'Migration and mobility in early modern Malta: The harbour city of Valletta as a case study, 1575-1650', Unpublished M.A. Dissertation, University of Malta, 162-3.

40 Ciappara, Frans (2010) "Religion, kinship and godparenthood as elements of social cohesion in Qrendi, a late-eighteenth-century Maltese parish", in *Continuity and Change*, vol. 25 no. 1, 166.

quoted above, have left historians wondering about the nature of family and community life in pre-modern / pre-industrial societies. There are two schools of thought here: one which argues that parents accepted the death of children as commonplace and became almost indifferent to it; while the other argues that this was not so.⁴¹ If we go back to the case of Matteo Bonnici and his family, he brought in doctors to treat his children and other members of his household; he himself died through his continued contact with his offspring. At least in this case, the evidence points to parental care rather than indifference.⁴²

Landscape paintings and maps of Valletta often depict a 'moralised geography', where few or no people appear, and the ones that are depicted tend to look very neat. By contrast and importantly, court records such as those of the *Magna Curia Castellaniae* make it possible to 'inhabit' the streets of Valletta, to fill them with characters and give them life.⁴³ For instance, on 7 July 1760, thirteen-year old Josepho Sant from Birkirkara, who described himself as 'one of the carriers' ('*uno de bastasi*') of Valletta appeared in the *Castellaniae* to denounce a certain Giuseppe known as *Ta' Sich*. Josepho described how during the previous Friday he had been playing with other *bastasi* in Valletta when Giuseppe hit him with a pipe on the right-hand side of his face, wounding him and causing him to bleed. Therefore, in front of the court, Josepho accused Giuseppe and 'expected satisfaction for what I was suffering'.⁴⁴

The everyday of the harbour towns of Malta can be described as a 'feminized' everyday; many men spent considerable periods of time at sea so that women – and invariably associated with them children – played prominent roles in their communities. Take for instance a fight

41 Buttigieg, Emanuel (2008) "Childhood and adolescence in early modern Malta (1565-1632)", in *Journal of Family History*, vol. 33 no. 2, 141-8.

42 Buttigieg, Emanuel (2010) "Family life and neighbourliness in Malta (c.1640-c.1760): Some preliminary observations based on evidence from the *Magna Curia Castellaniae*", in *Arxivju*, vol. 1, 47-58. As recently as the 1930s, infant mortality was still high. Mothers who had lost a child would stop their household work when a baby hearse passed and say 'glorja lilek, mistrieh 'l ommok; u sellili għal uliedi'; see Kilin (1993), *Fuq il-Għajn ta' San Bastjan*, Malta: Bugelli Publications, 186.

43 On the uses of trial records by historians see Muir and Ruggiero; Peyronel Rambaldi, S. ed. (2007) *I Tribunali della Fede: Continuità e discontinuità dal medioevo all'età moderna*, Turin: Claudiana. Laven, M. (2003) "Testifying to the self: nuns' narratives in the early modern Venice", in *Judicial tribunals in England and Europe 1200-1700*, eds. M. Mulholland and B. Pullan, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 147-58.

44 NAM, MCC, PC, 92/04, Box471, Doc.42, n.p., 7 July 1760, 'l'accuso e pretendo l'interesse che sto patendo'.

which broke out in July 1740 between Gratiella Tabone, wife of Angelo the baker from Bormla and Maria Balzan known as *ta' Siriedech*. Gratiella Tabone had ordered some stockings from Madalena di Lorenzo of Bormla and she sent Paulica 'her daughter of seventeen years still a spinster'⁴⁵ to fetch these stockings from Madalena. After a while Tabone was alerted by a neighbour that Paulica was being beaten up; Tabone rushed to the door to find a tearful and battered Paulica who said she had been beaten up by Maria *ta' Siriedech* and her son. Tabone therefore sought out Maria to ask her why she had beaten Paulica, to which Maria replied that Paulica had offended her daughter. Tabone told Maria that she 'had not behaved in the manner of honourable women when she beat her daughter',⁴⁶ after which a fight ensued between the two women who had to be separated by onlookers. While Tabone was redressing herself, Maria hit her with a cross-bar on her head causing her to bleed; a neighbour intervened to restrain Maria.

Tabone, who described herself as a baker, asked the *Castellaniae* to make Maria compensate her for the losses she was suffering because of her inability to work due to her injuries.⁴⁷ Witnesses were called in: Gratiella Darmanin known as *ta' Piziezen* said she was injured by Maria while trying to help Tabone, while Maria Micallef known as *ta li zeccaila* said that she gave refuge to Tabone after the fight with Maria. The court fined Maria *ta' Siriedech* 4 *uncie* for her violent behaviour.⁴⁸ What does such a case tell us about neighbourliness? It is clear that these characters had a strong sense of belonging to their particular street/quarter in Bormla, knew their neighbours and were participants in the daily life of their community. The Tabone family were known by their occupation as bakers, which probably meant they were a family with a good income, while other characters were acknowledged by their nicknames: *ta' Siriedech*, *ta' Piziezen*, *ta li zeccaila*.⁴⁹ These characters also had a clear sense of place, identifying streets and landmarks (such as the

45 NAM, MCC, PC 92/04, Box 404, Doc. 19, ff.1rv, 13-28 July 1740, 'mia figlia d'anni dieci sette ancor zitella'.

46 NAM, MCC, PC 92/04, Box 404, Doc. 19, ff.1rv, 13-28 July 1740, 'che non aveva fatto da donne d'onore in aver bastonato a detta mia figlia'.

47 NAM, MCC, PC 92/04, Box 404, Doc. 19, ff.1rv, 13-28 July 1740, 'dimando dalla medesima tutti i danni, et interssi, che sto patendo per causa di detta infermita essendo io fornara'.

48 NAM, MCC, PC 92/04, Box 404, Doc. 19, f.6r, 13-28 July 1740.

49 cf. Wettinger, Godfrey (1971) "Late medieval Maltese nicknames", in *Journal of Maltese Studies*, vol. 6, 34-46.

mill) which constituted their everyday bearings.⁵⁰ What was missing in this community was a desire to avoid conflict, with women abusing each other both physically and verbally, going to court and not living in a very Christian manner. Maria *ta' Siriedech* seems to have been poorer than Gratiella Tabone so their fighting was likely underlined by wider socio-economic differences. The neighbours of these two women ensured a return to peace by separating and keeping them apart; however, informal neighbourly measures to ensure harmony were not enough and had to be backed up by formal court procedures which punished Maria.

Conclusion

In 1528, the religious reformer Martin Luther defined the community as follows:

*'Community here means common possession, shared and enjoyed by the many ... for common things mean that many people enjoy it in common, such as the public fountain, the public street, public fields, meadows, woods.'*⁵¹

Although this definition of community belongs to the Protestant Luther, it would have resonated among all Christians in Europe in the sixteenth century and for most of the early modern period. There can be no community if its members do not share their everyday. Ultimately, it is the interaction of people with their environment and amongst themselves that creates the drama we call *everyday*. The subject of the everyday is too vast to do justice to in such a short space. This paper recalls the experience of Theresia Bonnici who in 1740 – needing to step outside into the darkness – needed a *lume in mano*, a candle or a lantern, in order to be able to inspect her neighbour's door.⁵² In the same manner, this paper will hopefully act as a lantern of sorts to help those interested in the everyday to better navigate it, while avoiding what Lefebvre called the 'repellently trivial descriptions of everyday life'.

50 NAM, MCC, PC 92/04, Box 404, Doc. 19, f.4rv, 13-28 July 1740, 'mentre passavo nell strada, che conduce al molino vicino a G. Gioie [?] elemosinario della Burmula, appellate ta' Mact'rittin [?]; 'abitante nella Strada del Crocefisso della Burmula'.

51 Scribner, B. (1996) "Communities and the nature of power", in *Germany. A New Social and Economic History, 1450-1630*, ed. B. Scribner, London: Arnold, 295.

52 Buttigieg, Noel (2010) "People of an urban night culture", *Arkivju*, vol. 1, 61.

It is here that the crux of the argument is located: simply describing what happened can end up contributing to the myth of romanticisation of a 'golden age' of social cohesion in some ill-defined past, or lead to sensationalist accounts about the 'unusual'. Lefebvre's equation of life with theatre, taking 'the whole into account', calls for an approach (rather than a method) that seeks not only to describe but also to understand, in as inclusive a manner as possible. In approaching their audiences, historians need to remember that we need to cater for pluralistic societies (past and present) and hence produce pluralistic histories. Maltese historiography is moving from a focus on great men, great deeds and antiquarian parochialism to paying attention to a broader swathe of society, including minorities.⁵³ These include groups such as children, the elderly, the differently able, homosexuals, migrants, and all those who help to form the diary of society but who were never mentioned in it; they are still waiting for their histories to be written. The everyday of these and other past inhabitants of the Maltese islands beckons and the future of historical studies in Malta looks decidedly exciting.

53 cf. Muscat, C. (2013) *Magdalene Nuns and Penitent Prostitutes*, Valletta, Malta: BDL.