

The 'Culture of Writing' in Late Sixteenth-Century Malta: Oliviero and Caterina Vasco's Charitable Deed

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The economy and political structures of Malta developed rapidly in the sixteenth century. The arrival of the Hospitaller Order of St John on the island in 1530, 'generated an enormous activity in all spheres (political, social, economic, and religious)' especially around the harbour towns. It 'changed the rules and style of government, and with their ideals, values and inordinate taste for luxury created new demands, new expectations, and new problems.'¹ Unprecedented quantities of written documents began to be produced, recorded and stored at this period. Besides the Church and the governing bodies, private individuals also became increasingly immersed in a culture which relied upon the written word in many areas of life. Formal documents were largely dependent on the professional services of notaries and scribes. A strong Maltese notarial tradition gradually developed, as it did in Italy and elsewhere in Europe. The extant notarial registers are among the richest primary sources of written material of the late medieval and early

1 Victor Mallia Milanese, 'The Birgu Phase of Hospitaller History'. In Lino Bugeja, Mario Buhagiar and Stanley Fiorini, eds, *Birgu: a Maltese Maritime City* (Malta: Malta University Services, 1993), 88. Also see Joan Abela, 'Some Early Forms of Financial Interests Found in Mid-Sixteenth Century Malta'. In Henry Frendo, ed., *Storja: 30th Anniversary Edition 1978-2008* (Malta: Malta University Historical Society, 2008), 30-46.

modern periods on the island. Surviving documents created by private individuals are relatively scarce in Malta before the sixteenth century.²

Literate persons in Malta at this period were often members of the clergy.³ Nonetheless some clerics were illiterate and there were even ‘judges who could not write their own names.’⁴ The report of the apostolic visitor Monsignor Pietro Duzina, who visited Malta in 1575, noted that several priests knew no grammar and could hardly read or write, ‘and if they did, they could not translate what they read.’⁵ The nuns at the Benedictine monastery in Mdina were all unable to write (*moniales nesciunt scribere*).⁶ Yet Duzina’s report also confirms that higher officials of the Church, such as parish priests, were familiar with Latin and the art of letters.

Besides the clergy, notaries also taught grammar and writing skills. Notaries Giacomo Cannarella and Giacomo Bondin ran schools before the Order came to Malta.⁷ In the late sixteenth century, notaries Placido Abela⁸ and Andrea Albano⁹ had schools in Birgu.¹⁰ Together with the legal profession, other literate persons tended to be members of the medical profession (physicians, barber-surgeons (*cirurgici*), or

2 The author thanks Dr Joan Abela for her insightful comments and review of this article.

3 See Stanley Fiorini, ‘The Notary in Maltese Medieval Society’. In *Journal of Maltese Studies: Essays on the Cantilena* (2014) (29-74), 34.

4 Mario Buhagiar and Stanley Fiorini, *Mdina: The Cathedral City of Malta*, vol. 1 (Malta: Central Bank of Malta, 1996), 117-18. Also see Fiorini (2014), 33-34.

5 Joseph Cassar Pullicino, ‘Malta in 1575: Social Aspects of an Apostolic Visit’. In *Melita Historica* 2, no. 1 (1956), 35.

6 Cassar Pullicino (1956), 33.

7 Notary Giacomo Cannarella (1471-1472) and Notary Giacomo Bondin (1519-1525; 1528-1531). See Fiorini (2014), p. 53. Also see Joan Abela, ‘A Window on the Acts of a Maltese Sixteenth-Century Notary: Placido Abela’. In Joseph F. Grima, ed., *60th Anniversary of the Malta Historical Society: A Commemoration* (Malta: Malta Historical Society, 2010), 207-36.

8 Notarial Archives of Valletta (NAV), Notary Placido Abela, MS514 & R4 (1557-1585).

9 NAV, Notary Andrea Albano, MS523 & R12 (1582-1636).

10 Carmel Cassar, ‘Education in Hospitaller Malta’. In Ronald G. Sultana, ed., *Yesterday’s Schools: Readings in Maltese Educational History* (Malta: PEG, 2001), 17.

apothecaries), schoolmasters, and a small number of merchants and administrators.¹¹

The ability to read and write was not yet considered essential throughout society. Over time, however, written documentation was not only produced by the nobility, landed gentry and professionals, but also extended more widely to other economic and social groups such as merchants, master artisans and craftsmen. As argued by Malcolm Richardson, the 'functions of literacy need to be established in relation to a particular society's needs. As those needs change, so do the particular contexts in which literate modes are required.'¹² Maltese society increasingly recognised and absorbed the importance of written culture, in line with similar developments elsewhere.

Increased interest in literacy skills in Europe at this period was partly driven by developments in commercial activity. In London, for example, the importance of legal documents and the utility of the written word to secure the terms of financial transactions became increasingly recognised.¹³ Even if individuals did not always learn to read and write fluently themselves, they engaged others to write on their behalf and influenced the content of the documents produced. As described by Richardson, 'most medieval people found the act of personal writing wholly unnecessary for daily functioning ... however... after 1250 they found it necessary first that *someone* keep careful written records and second that they knew how to *use* other people's writing effectively'.¹⁴

Trade activities also increased in Malta, especially around the port area in the sixteenth century after the arrival of the Order.¹⁵ Since at least the fifteenth century, Maltese from all social groups had often notarised

11 Fiorini (2014), 34.

12 Malcolm Richardson, *Middle-Class Writing in Late Medieval London* (London: Pickering Chatto, 2011), 7. Also see Nigel Wheale, *Writing and Society: Literacy, Print and Politics in Britain 1590-1660* (London: Routledge, 1999).

13 See Richardson (2011).

14 *Ibid.*, 10.

15 See Joan Abela, *Hospitaller Malta and the Mediterranean Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (Boydell Press, 2018)

important private and public actions.¹⁶ By the sixteenth century, writing was steadily becoming an essential social tool.

This essay explores some of the documented activities of the spouses Oliviero and Caterina Vasco, and illustrates a growing reliance on the written word in early modern Malta. The representativeness of a case study to a wider sample is always debatable, however the notarial archive indexes indicate that growing numbers of individuals documented both personal and commercial acts as this period. The Vascos produced a large number of notarial records. The registers of five notaries in the Valletta archives contain at least 200 deeds of either Oliviero or Caterina, or of the two spouses jointly.¹⁷ These generally record private agreements of some type, signed in the presence of a notary and witnesses. The majority are business deals involving immovable property, chiefly the granting of servitudes, leases and sub-leases, debts, rents and sales. Yet a smaller number of documents relate to decisions on personal family matters, or to charitable acts.

As most of these notarial deeds involve business deals, the writing does not strive for an elegant prose style and generally displays a repetitive use of language with typical legal terminology and abbreviations, primarily aiming for a legally-binding statement avoiding the possibility of misinterpretation or lack of clarity in case of future disputes - much like many legal or notarial documents today.¹⁸ As shall be explained, however, one of their deeds appears to participate in wider literary influences and styles, moving beyond the functional transcription of actions, sales or other transactions.

16 Godfrey Wettinger, 'The Village of Hal Millieri'. In Anthony T. Luttrell, *Hal-Millieri: A Maltese Casale, Its Churches and Paintings* (Malta: Midsea Books, 1976), 58-59. Also see Cassar (2001), 21-22.

17 Research for this essay was conducted on the registers of only five notaries at the notarial archives in Valletta, namely Giuseppe De Guevara R224, Matteo De Brincat R214, Placido Abela R4, Nicola Vincella de Santoro R481 and Andrea Albano R12. There may be further deeds concerning the Vascos in the registers of other notaries of the period.

18 For an analysis of notarial 'business Latin' in medieval Italy, see John F. McGovern, 'The Documentary Language of Mediaeval Business AD 1150-1250'. In *Classical Journal* 67, no. 3 (1972), 227-39.

People used the services of notaries, who were viewed as trustworthy and respected members of society, to commit their private or public actions and intentions to paper. While seeking clarity and unity as legal documents, at times the writing styles of such notarial deeds appear to echo more complex rhetorical conventions, perhaps reflecting the personal statements, ambitions, fears and desires of clients. This type of writing moves beyond the serviceable recording of economic activity, and can help to reveal the social aspirations of individual members of the community. It sheds light on attempts to 'self-fashion' identity at this period, seeking to convince the reader or audience through eloquence and verbal strategies of persuasion.

Handbooks or manuals on all aspects of life were popular in sixteenth-century Europe. Among the best-known is Baldassare Castiglione's *Il libro del cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*) of 1528, guiding members of society who participated in courtly life, close to centres of social and political power. Treatises on proper behaviour extended to all areas of life, instructing people how to present themselves 'with an eye to audience and effect.'¹⁹ Manuals also encompassed the art of writing, instructing the literate classes on how to excel in their writing style and strategies, and providing formulaic examples to follow. A principal linguistic tool, in line with Humanist teaching, was the use of rhetoric. Poetry, history and oratory were often approached as a form of argument or persuasion, or as a performance.

Relevant manuals on the art of writing commonly used at this period in European universities were based on the *ars dictandi* and *ars dictaminis* (letter writing), and the *ars notaria* (notarial writing). These forms of writing were distinct, yet also related.²⁰ They were also followed, or at least known, in Malta as inventories of deceased Maltese notaries included manuals on notarial writing and the *ars dictandi*.²¹

19 Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 162.

20 See Jerrold E. Seigel, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 206.

21 Besides the *manuali di notariato* (notarial manuals), another volume of interest which has been noted in the inventories of Maltese notaries was the '*ars dictandi*'

As noted above, therefore, most notarial deeds in late medieval and early modern Malta, as in Italy, were primarily business documents recording agreements or transactions. They employed written language chiefly as an instrument to achieve clarity and unity within a deed. In Malta, such documents were written ‘in a Latin very similar to that in use in Sicily, interspersed with words and phrases in the Sicilian vernacular’.²² Tuscan Italian began to be introduced after the Great Siege of 1565.²³

Some family and social background on Oliviero and Caterino Vasco is relevant here. The surname ‘Vasco’ is uncommon in Malta and suggests foreign origin, however in 1556 Oliviero Vasco is described as Maltese and from the *casale* (village) of Curmi (today’s Qormi).²⁴ He was married by at least 1559, and he and his wife Caterina owned some property and fields in that area and elsewhere in Malta, which they leased out for agriculture. Sixteenth-century Qormi was one of Malta’s largest parishes, noted as having 2,000 residents and 400 households when the Order of St John first came to Malta in the 1530s.²⁵ The total population of Malta at this period was around 20,000 persons.

By the early 1560s, the Vascos were living in Birgu, then the main harbour town of Malta. Oliviero’s brother Marco is described by Giacomo Bosio (1544-1627), historian of the Order of St John, as a ‘*servitor domestico*’ of Grand Master Jean de Valette (1494-1568).²⁶ Marco was killed in battle against the Ottomans during Malta’s famous Great Siege in 1565, while defending the Post of Castille with the knights. Corregio di Balbi’s diary of the siege states that among the losses on 20 August, ‘was master Marco, the Grand Master’s tailor, a Maltese who on this day, and on all other occasions, fought like a

by Tommaso di Capua, possibly his *Summa Dictaminis*. Di Capua was Archbishop of Naples and later a cardinal in the thirteenth century. See Fiorini (2014), 54.

22 Charles Dalli, *Malta: The Medieval Millennium* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2006), 246.

23 See Fiorini (2014), 30.

24 NAV, Notary Giuseppe De Guevara, R224/14, 21 March 1558, ff. 285-285v.

25 Alfie Guillaumier, *Bliet u Rhula Maltin*, vol. 2 (Malta: Klabb Kotba Maltin, 2005), 595.

26 Giacomo Bosio, *Historia della religione et ill.^{ma} militia di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, vol. 3 (Rome: Facciotto, 1602), 638.

very good Christian and a soldier. He was burnt to death at the Post of Commander Maldonado after fighting like another Hector.²⁷ Besides an intriguing list of the varieties of cloth and buttons kept in his workshop (*bottega*) above which Marco lived, the inventory of his assets²⁸ drawn up after his death also lists some property and land, suggesting a middle-class lifestyle. Marco is described as *magister* (master)²⁹ and *honorabilis vir* (gentleman), indicating that he held a respectable status within the social hierarchy of the day.³⁰ Oliviero is likewise described as *honorabilis vir* in early documents.

By 1569 Oliviero Vasco is described in some notarial deeds as '*magnificus*', suggesting that he enjoyed a relatively high social status.³¹ Oliviero and Caterina bought a large plot in the new city of Valletta in the first sales of land on the Sceberras peninsula after the Great Siege.³² This was a large site on Strada San Giorgio (Republic Street), corner with Strada Fontana (St Christopher Street), on which they first constructed eight workshops (*botteghe*). In 1572, they obtained a papal licence under Pope Pius V (r.1566-72) to build a church along Strada San Giorgio, in an area of the site which they had reserved for this purpose.³³ The Vascos erected their church and dedicated it to Our Lady of the Assumption. They also built a spacious house for themselves adjacent to the church.

27 'Extracts of a Diary of the Siege of Malta of 1565 as Translated by Henry Balbi', in Bugeja, Buhagiar and Fiorini, eds, (1993), 111.

28 National Archives of Malta (NAM), Officium Causarum Delegatorum (OCD) 90, 1566, ff. 268v-272.

29 '*Mastri*' were the social class of artisans or craftsmen. See Fiorini (2014), 46.

30 A notarial deed of 1558 describes Marco Vasco as '*sutori*' (shoemaker) not '*sartori*' (tailor), however the contents of his workshop point towards the latter trade. See NAV, Notary Giuseppe De Guevara, R224/14, February 1558, f. 728.

31 Fiorini (2014) notes that in fifteenth-century Malta the honorific title '*magnificus*' was used for knights (*militēs*), as well as the nobility and higher officials such as captains, jurats and ambassadors. The title '*manifku*' was later again used for notaries in early modern times. Also see Joseph Aquilina, *Maltese English Dictionary*, cited in Fiorini, 30.

32 NAV, Notary Placido Abela, R4/2, 17 August 1569, ff. 153-154v.

33 NLM, Lib MS 09, f. 690.

In 1580, when their church was already standing, they entered into a public deed to create a foundation (*institutio* or *benefice*) for this church and to donate their material assets to it.³⁴ They also provided an income and residence for a chaplain of the Order of St John to administer the church. This was an *inter vivos* donation applicable during their lifetimes, however they retained usufruct until their deaths. This included, in particular, their large house adjoining the church, with its 14 rooms, courtyards, four cisterns and garden, and the chaplain's much smaller house on the other side of Strada San Giorgio, opposite the main door of the church.³⁵

Personal wills at this period often included pious bequests for the celebration of Holy Mass for the soul of the testator, or for the distribution of alms to the poor. Bequests were also left for the building of chapels, the setting up of family foundations, to provide dowries to girls without the means to get married, or to give donations to religious institutions.³⁶ These practices persisted over time and were still widespread in the eighteenth century.³⁷ Unlike bequests made in wills to take effect after the testator's death, however, *inter vivos* donations were implemented during a donor's lifetime.

Charitable behaviour is often based on a complex set of motivations. One significant difference between an *inter vivos* donation and a will (*testamentum*) is that, while a will was generally not made public until after the death of the testator, an *inter vivos* donation was immediately available and irrevocable. The donor might thereby desire

34 NAV, Notary Nicola Vincella de Santoro, R481/2, 5 October 1580, ff. 68v-83.

35 The Vascos bought this plot in 1575, and constructed the chaplain's house. NAV. Notary Placido Abela, R4/2, 18 June 1575, ff. 819-819v. Today the large Vasco house is the monastery of St Catherine, rebuilt to the designs of Romano Carapecchia (1668-1738) in the eighteenth century. The monastery still owns the smaller chaplain's house opposite the church.

36 Dalli (2006), p. 246.

37 See Frans Ciappara, 'Strategies for the Afterlife in Eighteenth-Century Malta'. In Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon, *The Church the Afterlife and the Soul*, Studies in Church History (Suffolk: Ecclesiastical History Society, 2009), 301-10; and, Gabriella Cauchi, 'A Study of Death and Material Culture in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Malta through Notarial Records' (unpublished master's dissertation, University of Malta, 2017).

to acquire immediate prestige or elevated social status through the bequest, by influencing the opinion of peers.³⁸ Beyond their openly stated pious or charitable aims, bequests could therefore also be used as a means of self-advancement. Substantial charitable donations are rarely straightforward. Besides their explicit aims, such actions contain an element of conspicuous consumption, potentially raising the perceived status of the donor within the social hierarchy. Large bequests may embody genuine religious or charitable motivations, but are also a public act sending out a message to the community.

A study of benefactors in the city of Turin in early modern Italy identifies a range of underlying motivating factors for charitable activity at this period, ranging from conflict over family wealth to the search for prestige. The identity of the individuals and groups concerned, the conflicts and dynamics of their social and political milieu, as well as their private lives, may all influence charitable actions.³⁹

Similarly, the social context and personal lives of Oliviero and Caterina Vasco illuminate the rhetoric and style of their deed of 1580 setting up their ecclesiastical foundation. This notarial document employs a very different type of language to that generally used in their more clear-cut 'business' deeds. Its opening stance is entirely self-conscious, clearly positioning the donors in relation to God but more indirectly also to the knights of the Order of St John, the highest-ranking social group in Malta at the time.

Like the Order which 'espoused a vision of itself as "Soldiers of Christ and Servants of His Poor and Sick"',⁴⁰ in their document the Vascos combine piety and devotion to God with a charitable act to the poor or disadvantaged in society. The deed refers to poor virgin girls, who were to be provided with dowries and permitted to marry in the

38 See Else Van Nederveen Meerkeek, 'The Will to Give: Charitable Bequests, Inter Vivos Gifts and Community Building in the Dutch Republic c.1600-1800'. In *Continuity and Change* 27, no. 2 (2012), 241-270.

39 See Sandra Cavallo, *Charity and Power in Early Modern Italy: Benefactors and Their Motives in Turin 1541-1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

40 Emanuel Buttigieg, *Nobility, Faith and Masculinity: The Hospitaller Knights of Malta c.1580-c.1700* (London and New York: Continuum Publishers, 2011), 90.

church. At this stage, the foundation was not yet a nunnery or monastery. Neither is it clear that it focused on the daughters of prostitutes at this time, as it may have done after the death of the Vascos in 1611, when it merged with a house for such girls first set up in Valletta by Fra Francesco Condulli.⁴¹

The document is written in Latin and begins by praising Grand Master Jean l'Evesque de la Cassière (1502-81). Here the tone loosely resembles the characteristic dedication of a book of the period, where the author would typically begin with an elaborate stance of praise, humility and submission to his patron. The *ars dictaminis* recommended that letters should begin with an appropriate greeting (*salutatio*), and an introduction (*captatio benevolentiae*) persuading the reader to be sympathetic to the author's intention. After paying tribute to La Cassière and the Order of St John of Jerusalem, the deed adopts a position of humility towards God. Before coming to the main business of the terms of the bequest, the text describes at some length the wretched and pitiable state of man, fallen into sin, but building a church and oratory to worship almighty God. This section functions as an introductory 'apology', to persuade the reader and to justify the appropriateness and importance of the ensuing charitable act.

In the Church teachings, St Augustine praised humility as a virtue for the City of God. Humility was fundamental to Christian identity, enabling the soul to recognise its fallen state and the need for God's grace. Opposed to the virtue of humility was the sin of pride. Such a large donation could have risked exhibiting pride by the Vascos, and a high moral tone is adopted in the deed, partly to mask and obscure any perceived desire for self-advancement. While the donation was clearly a magnanimous gesture, yet the deed also attempts to confirm the pious

41 The Vasco house and foundation developed into the monastery of St Catherine of Alexandria, and its church was rededicated to the Presentation of Our Lady at the Temple in the seventeenth century. See Bartolomeo Dal Pozzo, *Historia della sacra religione militare di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano detta di Malta*, vol. 1 (Verona: Berno, 1703), 523. Also see Christine Muscat, *Magdalene Nuns and Penitent Prostitutes Valletta* (Malta: BDL, 2013), 72. The church edifice was later rebuilt by Antonio Cachia (1739-1813).

humility of the donors, with a strong emphasis on the fallen state of man at the beginning of the text. On the other hand, social rank was of central importance in early modern hierarchical society, and was not readily side-lined or downplayed. A measure of pride was considered appropriate to those of high social status, distinguishing them from the lower ranks of society. In *Il libro del Cortegiano*, Castiglione suggested that modest self-praise was acceptable. From this perspective, humility restrains any pride considered to be excessive, but still enables the proper social hierarchy to be maintained.⁴²

The Vascos invoke Jerusalem in their text, the holy city with special importance to the Order. The new Vasco church was dedicated to Our Lady, while St John the Baptist and St Catherine are also given a special mention in their deed. The cult of St Catherine had already been popular in Malta since the late medieval period, before the arrival of the Order of St John on the island, yet it was also it was also a Hospitaller tradition.⁴³ The Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist were the strongest cults of the knights. In particular, Hospitaller Marian devotion in Malta was marked 'through the building of chapels, setting up of altars, commissioning and restoring paintings, making vows, bequeathing money towards feasts and taking part in them'.⁴⁴ During the sixteenth century, the Counter-Reformation strengthened devotion to the Virgin Mary, as a means of reinforcing the doctrine of the Catholic church. In line with this important Marian devotion, Oliviero and Caterina dedicate a portion of their bequest to the annual feast of Our Lady of the Assumption, traditionally on 15 August, to be celebrated at their Valletta property by the young virgin girls or '*verginelle*' who were to be assisted by the Vasco foundation. Once again paying attention to

42 See Jennifer Clement, *Reading Humility in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2016), 29-32.

43 See Michele Bacci, 'Shaping the Holy Topography of Saint Catherine in the Late Middle Ages'. In Charlene Vella, ed., *At Home in Art: Essays in Honour of Mario Buhagiar* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2016), 325-338; and, Mario Buhagiar, *Essays on the Knights and Art and Architecture in Malta 1500-1798* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2009), 36-37.

44 Buttigieg (2011), 106.

the importance of written documents, the Vascos also notarised their appointment of chaplains from the Order, to serve in their church.⁴⁵

The value which the Vascos attached to the text of their 1580 deed emerges in another set of documents, the records of the *Officium Commissariorum Domorum*, also known as the ‘*Officio delle Case*’, the equivalent of the planning or building authority of the day. Once construction of the fortifications of the new city of Valletta was well underway, the Order shifted its attention to the construction of streets and buildings inside the city walls. A commission was appointed, and on 12 May 1569 a new set of building regulations was issued.⁴⁶ The Order had originally planned to divide Valletta into two areas - one central area as a *collachio* for the residence of the religious of the Order, and the rest for the general public. Regulation 6 stipulated that owners of houses within the *collachio* could only rent their houses to members of the religious Order. This idea was practically ignored, however, and a flexible approach to the allocation of land in the early days of Valletta was adopted. In June 1599 a dispute between Oliviero Vasco and one of his neighbours, the high-ranking noble Italian knight *Bali* Fra Pietro La Rocca, Prior of San Stefano, centred on this *collachio* regulation.⁴⁷

By this date La Rocca had acquired two large properties, later known as Casa Rocca Grande and Casa Rocca Piccola, opposite the Vasco house along Strada San Giorgio.⁴⁸ The snag for him was that the much smaller house allocated to the chaplain of the Vasco church lay between them, which prevented La Rocca from connecting his two

45 NAV, Notary Nicola Vincella de Santoro, R481/3, 11 October 1581, ff. 49-50.

46 See Roger de Giorgio, *A City by an Order* (Malta: Progress Press, 1985), 115.

47 NAM, Officium Commissarium Domorum (ODM), *Acta Originalis*, 1599. The regulation cited by Pietro La Rocca to the commission is No. 9 of the ‘*Ordinationi sopra le case*’, dated October 1562 when the Order was still based in Birgu, which stated: ‘*che i Religiosi nostril possano separarsi della compagnia dei secolari et viver insieme sotto la regular honesta secondo l’antica usanza de nostra Religione s’ordina che quando un Religioso vorrà comprar alcuna casa d’alcun secolar p alloggiarsi dentro i detti limiti del collachio la possa havere pagado prima al patrone il prezzo di detta casa secondo che l’havera comprata*’.

48 Pietro La Rocca acquired the Casa Rocca Grande property in 1578, and the Casa Rocca Piccola site in 1597. NAV, Notary Giuseppe Mamo, R336/6, 1 June 1578, ff. 557v-559; and, NAV, Notary Gio. Luca Gauci, R286/7, 7 October 1597, ff. 149-151v.

properties. La Rocca wrote to the *Officium*, requesting the commission to oblige Oliviero Vasco to sell the property to him. He argued that the site lay within the boundaries of the *collachio*, which should give priority to members of the Order. Vasco refused to comply, stating that the *collachio* and its boundaries in Valletta had never been established: *'il collachio non e stabilito ne si sa dove si stendano suoi limiti ne anco si sa qual casa si e dentro o fuor del collachio, nientedimeno sal presente si sta e habita confusamente.'* Moreover, he noted that already in 1580, almost 20 years earlier, he had donated the house in question to the church of Santa Maria Assunta just opposite, for the use of its chaplain. Vasco argued that this was actually line with any regulation restricting secular persons from residing within a *collachio*, if it were the case that a *collachio* existed at all. La Rocca dropped the case and did not manage to get his hands on the chaplain's house, which still belongs to St Catherine's monastery today.

La Rocca begins his petition to the commissioners, written in Italian, describing himself as the *'humile Priore di S^o Stefano'*. Vasco replies, also in Italian, addressing La Rocca throughout as *'molto illustrissimo'* and referring to himself as *'magnifico'*. He highlights that he himself built and donated this church, also providing the living and residence of the chaplain. He points out that the chaplain living in the small house is a *'sacerdote del medesimo ordine Hier.^{no} come appare per la investiture fatta in persona del R^{do} Fra Bernardino M--di detto ordine'*. Vasco attaches a full copy of the lengthy Latin deed of his substantial bequest of 1580, underlining the relevant phrases, suggesting that he was still satisfied with his text of 20 years earlier. As noted above, the 1580 deed attempts to position the Vascos in a prestigious role in relation to the Church as well as the Order of St John, that is, in relation to both religion and power. By this time the Vascos certainly enjoyed a very good status in the social hierarchy. In the early 1590s, Oliviero was a *giurato*, a senior role in Valletta's municipal administration⁴⁹. Yet La Rocca's social rank as a nobleman and senior knight of the Order was undoubtedly higher.

49 NAM, ODM, 1591, ff. 16v-18v, and 1592, ff. 20v-21.

La Rocca had just had another dispute with the Vascos only a couple of months earlier, in April 1599, this time concerning the dividing wall between their properties. Vasco again summoned his notary to document the incident, tasking him with writing an official statement in Latin, with various builders also providing their testimony and version of the story.⁵⁰ The language used here is primarily functional, chronicling events and facts. Richardson notes that a strong culture of literate practices grows over a long period of time, even if the actual texts are being dictated to third parties and edited, not written down personally. Moreover, in the early modern period, being able to read did not necessarily mean being able to write.⁵¹ It is quite possible that Oliviero Vasco was able to both read and write. His personal signature is displayed on several documents in the *Officium Commissarium Domorum* records, signing in his capacity as *giurato*, although this is not sufficient to prove that he was able to write with ease. Yet it is clear that a documentary culture or a ‘culture of writing’ was already well-established in Malta by the late sixteenth century, and had already been developing in the previous centuries. Even if not able to write themselves, individuals who readily ‘use’ written texts in order to settle disputes instead of arguing verbally, still can be considered to participate broadly in a ‘documentary culture’.⁵²

Another trail of Oliviero Vasco’s official documents further illustrates this growing documentary culture. After his brother was killed in the Great Siege of 1565, Oliviero was appointed guardian of Marco’s five minor children, Francesca, Prudentia, Gio. Pietro, Agostino and Giorgio. This was documented in official deeds. By 1579, these children had grown and Oliviero officially gave up the guardianship of three of them, Francesca, Prudentia and Gio. Pietro, noting each one in a separate deed.⁵³ The two girls both married that year, and also

50 NAV, Notary Andrea Albano, R12/14, 3 April 1599, ff. 405v-407.

51 Wheale (1999), 41.

52 Richardson (2011), 4.

53 NAV, Notary Nicola Vincella de Santoro, R481/1, 29 September 1579, ff. 219-223 (Francesca); 9 October 1579, ff. 312v-319v (Prudentia); 15 April 1580, ff. 721-730v (Gio. Pietro).

signed marriage contracts⁵⁴ which was common practice at the time in higher social groups.⁵⁵ Francesca married Bartolomeo Schembri from *casale* Luca (Luqa), and Prudentia, now 20 years old, married Bernardo Muscat from *casale* Curmi. These deeds reveal that, while not poor, from an economic perspective the wider Vasco family did not belong to the wealthiest landed class but formed part of the middle class.

It is perhaps significant that in 1579, that same year, the Vascos also first notarised their intention to irrevocably bequeath their house and church to a foundation rather than, for example, leaving them to their family, including their nieces and nephews. Their first deed was drawn up on 8 August 1579,⁵⁶ just before renouncing the guardianships, and the final deed was signed a year later in October 1580. In her study of the motivations for charity, Cavallo shows how some donations were influenced by tensions in family relationships, for example to circumvent inheritance rights.

Cavallo cites examples of charitable donations used as a socially and morally acceptable way of preventing relatives from obtaining property, perhaps due to family conflicts.⁵⁷ Could family tensions have been one of the motives for the Vascos to set up this foundation and lock up their assets in it? Oliviero's relationship with two of his nephews, Agostino and Giorgio, certainly seems strained. In August 1580, he rented a property in Valletta for them to reside in,⁵⁸ which suggests that they were not to live with Oliviero and Caterina. In 1583 he then instituted a case against them at the *Officium Causarum Delegatorum*, attempting to renounce his guardianship and all obligations towards

54 NAV, Notary Nicola Vincella de Santoro, R481/1, 3 September 1579, ff. 150v-158v (Francesca); 21 October 1579, ff. 292v-305v (Prudentia).

55 See Emmanuel Buttigieg, 'Social Relationships in Mid-Sixteenth Century Malta: An Analysis through Notary Juliano Muscat's Register R376/11'. In Henry Frendo, ed., *Storja: 30th Anniversary Edition 1978-2008* (Malta: Malta University Historical Society, 2008), 47-66.

56 An early version of this deed was drawn up by the same notary, Nicola Vincella de Santoro, on 8 August 1579, ff. 87-106.

57 Cavallo (1995), 181.

58 NAV, Notary Nicola Vincella de Santoro, R481/1, 11 August 1580, ff. 166v-169v.

them.⁵⁹ In his petition, he wrote that Agostino and Giorgio, now 22 and 21 years old, had boarded a ship around three years earlier (just as they came fully of age and also when Oliviero and Caterina tied up their assets in their foundation), and nothing had been heard of them since. Nobody knew where they were, or whether they were alive or dead. Various neighbours were called up as witnesses. In 1599 Oliviero drew up yet another deed confirming that his obligations towards Prudentia had been fulfilled.⁶⁰

The Vascos and their interest in documenting their actions on paper was certainly not an isolated case. Rather than use a wide range of sources, the methodology of this essay has been to explore a selected case study to illustrate a point in some depth, however a more quantitative study could shed further light on the proportion of individuals, with respect to the general population of Malta at this period, who were keen to participate in the expanding ‘culture of writing’ in the late sixteenth century.

59 NAM, OCD, 1583, f. 96.

60 NAV, Notary Andrea Albano, R12/14, 11 March 1599, ff. 351v-355v.