

THE HISTORY OF MALTA, 1500-1798

SOME OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCH AND WRITING (1)

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Of the various land areas in the Mediterranean Sea the island of Malta is one which lacks a comprehensive and altogether adequate account of its past. Although possessing a historical development of extraordinary character and interest with a vast collection of sources and literature available, there is still no thorough and systematic presentation of the record from Neolithic beginnings onward to the present time. Except for textbooks and other elementary accounts primarily intended for pedagogical purposes, the detailed and authoritative history of Malta remains to be written (2).

Before such a task can profitably be undertaken, however, there are many gaps in our historical knowledge of this area which need to be filled. The purpose of this brief paper is to suggest some significant topics in the period 1500-1798 which deserve further investigation, for the accumulation of monographic studies will greatly facilitate the work of preparing a comprehensive and detailed account of the history of the Maltese archipelago.

The field of economic history offers many opportunities for research. More needs to be known about the commercial and economic affairs of Malta from the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth (3). How important was Malta in regard to trade with the ports of Southern Europe, Northern Africa, and the Near East? What were the principal routes of trade used and the chief articles of commerce exchanged? When did this commercial activity reach its peak, and why did it subsequently decline? The history of agriculture in Malta and Gozo is virtually an unexplored field. No one seems to have examined the correlation between the population of the Maltese islands and the production of food. Histories of separate industries such as ship building are lacking. Nor is there a definitive work on merchandising. The holding of fairs and the building of roads and of ships are further topics related to the marketing of goods. Also the history of slavery in this area and the relationship of the Knights of St. John with the slave trade deserve investigation. What were the conditions of labor and of the working classes in general? In fact a comprehensive objective economic history of the period based upon monographic materials would be a welcome addition to our knowledge of the subject.

Scholarly biographies of outstanding personalities need to be written. Some of the Grand Masters of the Order of St. John provide here a convenient

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- (1) I am grateful for having had the opportunity to discuss various aspects of this paper with Mr. E. R. Leopardi of the Royal Malta Library.
 - (2) One of the most recent sketches of the history of Malta is the slender volume by Jacques Godechot, *Histoire de Malte* (Paris, 1952).
 - (3) Some aspects of Maltese commercial relations with France are discussed by Jacques Godechot in his article "La France et Malte au XVIIIe siècle," *Revue historique*, Vol. CCVI (July-September, 1951), 67-79.

starting point, but there are also many other administrative, ecclesiastical, and naval figures who deserve treatment (4). The preparation of an extensive biographical reference work of prominent figures in Maltese history would be a project very much worth while. Serious consideration might well be given to a plan for a collaborative work comparable to the *Dictionary of National Biography* which has proven so useful to students of English history.

In the vast domain of cultural history a study of historians of Malta would be of value, particularly in analyzing their choice of themes, their organization of material, and their special point of view. A book on Maltese historiography surveying the changing conceptions of history and of the various fashions of writing it could be an interesting and important contribution to this aspect of scholarship (5). Educational establishments are likewise promising subjects for research. Unfortunately there is still no published scholarly account of the long and distinguished history of the Royal University of Malta and its manifold activities. A number of religious orders have been most active in educational work in Malta and Gozo, yet how many have been the subject of special publications? Besides education various areas remain to be worked in the history of science and technology, the practice of medicine, and the development of literature, the printing press, and the book trade. Although a recent and well-illustrated monograph provides a comprehensive account of the architecture of Malta (6), the other arts still await a detailed treatment.

The military and naval exploits of the Knights of St. John have naturally captured the attention of numerous authors. But further studies should be made of espionage and of various auxiliary services, such as engineering and sanitation. Topics connected with the administrative organization of the navy, the recruitment of seamen, the use of Maltese and foreigners not Knights in the naval service of the Order, and the life on the galleys have not been exhausted. (7). The numerous ship logs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries preserved in the Royal Malta Library deserve careful examination by the qualified researcher. More detailed investigations concerning the vigorous maritime activities of the Knights of St. John might profitably be pursued, especially in regard to their collaboration with other naval powers in the Mediterranean area against a common enemy, the Turk. A diplomatic history of the sea war between the Ottoman Empire and other Mediterranean states during the six-

(4) Elizabeth Schermerhorn's *Malta of the Knights* (London, 1929), which contains some interesting material on various Grand Masters of the Order of St. John, belongs mainly in the category of romantic history.

(5) Some useful approaches on Maltese historiography are provided in the following articles: Raphael Bonnici Cali, "Gian Francesco Abela: the father of Maltese historians and antiquarians," *Scientia*, Vol. XIX, No. 2 (April-June, 1953), 71-89; E. R. Leopardi, "Abela's work throughout three centuries," in *ibid.*, Vol. XXI, No. 4 (October-December, 1955), 155-161; J. Cassar Pullicino, "G. F. Abela and the Maltese language," in *ibid.*, pp. 162-168; Pompeo Falcone, "Il valore documentario della storia dell'Ordine Gerosolimitano di Giacomo Bosio," *Archivio storico di Malta*, Vol. X, Fasc. II (1939), 93-135.

(6) J. Quentin Hughes, *The building of Malta during the period of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, 1530-1793* (London, 1956).

(7) A few letters pertinent to Maltese naval affairs were printed by Gavin B. Henderson, "Some letters from the archives of the Knights of St. John, preserved at Valletta, Malta," *The Mariner's Mirror*, Vol. XXXII (1946), 96-104.

teenth and seventeenth centuries would be a formidable undertaking involving multiple archival research, yet such a study would not only greatly enlarge our understanding of the whole system of the European balance of power during this period but also would clarify the special role of the Knights of St. John in the defence of the sea lanes of Western Europe (8).

There is a need for giving greater attention to the reports of foreign travellers to Malta. The observations of English visitors have been examined in some detail, but there are no adequate accounts concerning French, Spanish, Italian, and German travellers to Malta prior to 1798, despite the fact that this earlier period was one of informed and even enthusiastic *tourisme*. An annotated critical bibliography on this subject would be most useful to researchers in this field.

The political relations of the Knights of St. John with European rulers during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries remain largely unexplored. Mr. Joseph Galea of the Royal Malta Library has published an instructive article on Henry VIII and the Order of St. John (9). Similar studies could be made in regard to the diplomatic relations of the Order with Philip II and Philip III of Spain, Charles II of England, Louis XIV and Louis XV of France, Frederick II the Great of Prussia, and Catherine II of Russia. The role of Malta in the great international conflicts of the eighteenth century has not been fully investigated. To what extent was Malta considered in the negotiations preceding the conclusion of the famous treaties of Utrecht (1713), Aix-la-Chapelle (1748), and Paris (1763)?

Much source material on the political activities of the Order of St. John needs to be examined, classified, and evaluated. For example, an immense amount of correspondence between the Grand Master and various secular rulers of minor states in the Germanies and in the Italian peninsula (10) awaits scrutiny in the Royal Malta Library by some patient researcher. Another subject in which the archives in Valetta have special importance is the French Revolution. During that turbulent period officials in the numerous commanderies of the Order in France attentively watched the course of events in Paris, and they reported to Malta the reactions in their own districts to the stirring events of the day. As an illustration one may examine in the archives in Valetta the official reports of the six "Receveurs" of the Order in France directed to the Treasury at Malta. These reports, covering the years 1790-1793, come from Nantes, Marseilles, Lyons, Poitiers, Toulouse, and Paris, and are of first rate importance to scholars concerned with the early years of the French Revolu-

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- (8) The importance of this topic is pointed out in the magisterial work of Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949), pp. 791-798 and *passim*. See also Dorothy M. Vaughan, *Europe and the Turk: a pattern of alliance, 1350-1700* (Liverpool, 1954), chap. III: "The Ottoman Empire and the European balance of power."
- (9) Joseph Galea, "Henry VIII and the Order of St. John," *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, Third series, Vol. XII (1949), 59-69.
- (10) For suggestions relating to Italian history see Ettore Rossi, "L'archivio dei Cavalieri di S. Giovanni a Malta e sua importanza per gli studi storici in Italia," *Bulletin of the international committee of historical sciences*, Vol. IV, part 2, No. 15 (June, 1932), 193-199.

tion (11). This interesting material, however, has been but inadequately utilized by historians. (12)

Comparatively little research has been done in the records of the Maltese law courts. Much useful information may be gleaned from a careful perusal of wills, contracts, bills of sale, and other legal instruments. An examination of the wills of the Grand Masters and other high administrative officers could provide material for an instructive book. Such studies will give fresh light on much that is vague and dim, especially on the way in which the people of past centuries really lived and worked.

For at least some phases of Malta's history published works are inadequate. For example, Carlo S. Zabarella's *Lo Assedio di Malta, 1565* (Turin, 1902), although the most detailed account of the great Turkish siege in the sixteenth century, was written without the benefit of any Turkish sources. R. Valentini's *I Cavalieri di S. Giovanni da Rodi a Malta* (Valetta, 1935) neglected documentary materials in the Vatican archives, and Jaime Salva's *La orden de Malta y las acciones navales espanolas contra Turcos y Berberiscos en los siglos XVI y XVII* (Madrid, 1944) failed to make use of relevant documents in the Royal Malta Library. Clearly such deficiencies detract from the value of these books, and thus the opportunity is provided for later investigators to write accounts based on a more complete examination of the available evidence.

Scholars interested in editing source materials in European history will find ample data in the Royal Malta Library. Historical investigations would greatly benefit if the *Libri conciliorum*, the registers of the Chapters General, the registers of the Chancery, and the surviving correspondence to and from the Grand Masters were to be carefully edited and published. Such an augmentation of available source materials would not only give researchers a more detailed and accurate picture of the entire administrative organization of the Knights of St. John but would also illuminate many phases of their international position in the European state system.

One of the newer developments in the writing of history is the use of aids offered by related fields and disciplines, such as anthropology, economics, geography, psychology, and sociology. These different social disciplines supply additional data and a certain background without which the historical treatment of some problems is almost impossible (13). Proper utilization of these new disciplines would broaden greatly our understanding of the course of events in the Mediterranean. As an illustration one may point out that the

(11) These reports are available in Archives of the Order, Royal Malta Library, Valletta, MSS. 1623-1628.

(12) Indicative of some material available in French archives on this subject are two articles by G. Saumade: "Les biens de l'Ordre de Malte: la vente d'un domaine de la Commanderie de Montpellier (1793)", *La révolution française*, New series, Vol. I, No. 4 (1935), 356-372, and "La Révolution française et l'Ordre international de Malte (1789-1796)." in *ibid.*, Vol. III, No. 11 (1937), 245-273). Frederick W. Ryan, *The House of the Temple: a study of Malta and its Knights in the French Revolution* (London, 1930), has made only limited use of the material available in the Royal Malta Library.

(13) See the observations of Louis R. Gottschalk, *Understanding history: a primer of historical method to life and learning.* (New York, 1951) Chap. II: "The relation of historical method to life and learning."

historical geography of Malta deserves fuller treatment than it has yet received. An Oxford historian has wisely observed that the wheel of time is interlocked at every turn with the wheel of space and that there is no fact in history that is not better drawn against its geographical background (14). The application of this principle in the writing of Maltese history would greatly enlarge our comprehension of some crucial events in the past.

Various aspects of the social history of Malta likewise deserve more adequate consideration. We need to know much more about the life and institutions of the Maltese people at the opening of the sixteenth century before the arrival of the Knights of St. John. The study of population changes in the Maltese islands would be both significant and interesting. This topic would necessarily include a treatment of the growing size, proportion, and influence of the urban population. Closely associated with this subject would be a consideration of manners and customs, particularly those of the common people, including family relationships, public morals, entertainments, religious observances, and reform movements. Thus older historical accounts need to be reworked along the lines of new trends and emphases (15). Modern historical research with its keener examination of the sources, its greater sympathetic imagination, its new kinds of interest and different points of view has extracted additional evidence and provided more detailed information from old sources which earlier historians might well have thought were exhausted.

Finally there is an indubitable need for an up-to-date bibliography on the Order of St. John. The older works of Hellwald (16) and Rossi (17) are now inadequate and not always easy of access. A detailed bibliography of books and articles on the Order published since 1925 would be invaluable and might indeed be a first step toward answering some of the present unanswered questions about Malta under the rule of the Knights.

Thus the fertile field is there awaiting only painstaking activities of researchers who can garner a harvest commensurate with Malta's rightful place in the world's store of knowledge. To students of European history the story of this important Mediterranean island possesses attraction not only for its intrinsic worth but also because of its numerous and sometimes unexpected connections with the European mainland and the northern shores of Africa. Only some of the phases of Malta's long and varied history have received sufficient attention, and the suggestions which have been outlined above are by no means intended to be exhaustive. The existence in Malta of a rich and inadequately explored collection of manuscript sources should be an inspiration to students who realize how significant is the historical record of an area too little known, understood, or appreciated by the wide world beyond its borders.

- (14) J. M. Thompson, *An historical geography of Europe, 800-1789* (Oxford, 1929), preface V.
- (15) J. Cassar Pullicino in his scholarly article "Malta in 1575: social aspects of an apostolic visit," *Melita Historica*, Vol. II, No. 1 (1956), 19-41, presents important data on Maltese social history in the sixteenth century by carefully analyzing the report of the Apostolic Visitor, Mgr. Pietro Duzina. There is a great need for further articles of this type.
- (16) Ferdinand Heller von Hellwald, *Bibliographie méthodique de l'Ordre souv. de St. Jean de Jérusalem* (Rome, 1885).
- (17) Ettore Rossi, *Aggiunta alla bibliographie méthodique de l'Ordre souverain de St. Jean de Jérusalem di Ferdinand de Hellwald* (Rome, 1924).