

# POLYDACTYLISM IN FOLKLORE

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There have recently been some write-ups and comments in a local periodical about past incidence of polydactylism in Malta, and about its depiction in art. However, this article is more about polydactylism in Maltese folklore, local beliefs, and cases I have come to know about.

Admittedly, polydactylism is a very rare phenomenon and sparsely written about. Whenever mentioned, it is in an undertone; practically treated as taboo. Surely this phenomenon has occurred from time to time in Malta, and persons having five fingers and a thumb on each hand, and six toes on each foot have been depicted in art and written about in medical journals, with relative scientific comments and observations.

Polydactylism has been known in Malta since Neolithic times. In Dr. Paul Cassar's authoritative work "Medical History of Malta" (1964) p.5, it is stated that a statuette has been found with five fingers and a thumb. Some art critics have looked upon the depiction of polydactylism in art as the artist's mistake or whim; it is neither case. One little known depiction of polydactylism is a hardly noticeable detail in the 18<sup>th</sup> century mural in the refectory of the Old Seminary in Floriana. Here too, critics have suggested that the eunuch with five fingers and a thumb could be an error by the artist. Surely it is not! Personally I must admit I was more interested in the old folkloristic and culinary details painted in the magnificent murals, and could hardly notice that peculiarity. This phenomenon is known to have occurred also in neighbouring Sicily where it is held in superstitious horror. I was once reading on Sicilian folklore and found that this abnormality is associated with misfortune, dread and bad luck. In Malta, somehow it is held in similar apprehension, although more philosophically considered to be a freak of nature (*skerz tan-natura*) in man. As to its portrayal in art, artists must have either heard or known about it at some time or another, or have personally encountered this unusual incidence.

### **Polydactylism folklore in Malta**

It is indeed a very rare peculiarity, and generally believed by many, to be a freak transmission of a genetical trait of that "antediluvian race of giants" mentioned in the book of Genesis in the Bible and the Apocrypha. It is believed to be a trait of the giants that inhabited the earth in bygone times. Once I heard my father talking about one such case found some years back in Bormla, and that the smaller extra fingers were surgically removed in infancy to make the person normal! In Cospicua the individual was nicknamed "*Il-Buswab*" and referred to as "*raġel buswab*".

### **Other cases I know of.**

My friend Capt. Joseph M. Wismayer, in his work "The Fleet of the Order of Saint John", mentions the case in the 18<sup>th</sup> century of the Algerian Bey of Algiers who had seven fingers on each hand and seven toes on each foot; he was appropriately named "*Buswaba*" by his Algerian friends!

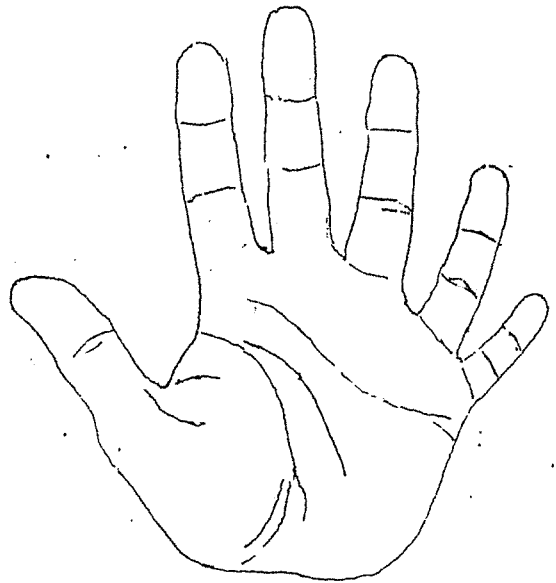
Polydactylism is also met with in Saint John's co-Cathedral in Valletta. On the marble memorial slab on the tomb of Chev. Charles Glandeves (about the middle of the nave), the angel on the right is shown quite clearly with six toes on his right foot. His left foot and both his hands are obscured artificially. Here the artist who designed the memorial could indeed have some hidden message, and one could suspect that Chev. Glandeves could have been a polydactyl knight!

In the early 70s I saw a photograph in an American magazine, of a coloured boy about six years old, in the state of Mississippi, U.S.A., with strong African features, who had five fingers and a thumb on each hand and six toes on each foot. The photograph showed this polydactyl kid, playing happily, all smiles, on a home-made "go-cart", similar to equally home-made carts children played with in pre-war Malta. When I was living in Detroit - Michigan I was told, in a hush hush tone, by some Maltese immigrants, that they remembered a case of polydactylism, a boy born to Maltese parents; these persons could probably be still alive today.

As has already been mentioned, in local folklore polydactylism is treated with some apprehension. A young artist friend of mine once told me that he used to count his baby son's fingers every evening to make sure that he had ten; I suppose he was so

worried and apprehensive that his son could be a polydactyl! Very likely he must have heard of this oddity of nature!

While it seems that polydactylism is a very rare worldwide phenomenon it has been known in Malta since Neolithic times. It has also occurred in neighbouring Sicily, in North Africa and North America, but in Malta we have a folkloristic explanation for polydactylism.



*Drawing of left hand based on a photograph in an Italian periodical, April 2001.*

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### **Kitbiet ghal "L-Imnara"**

Dawn iridu jkunu bażati fuq riċerka jew esperjenzi personali tal-kittieb, u jkollhom dejjem konnessjoni mal-folklor lokali. Kull kitba ghandha tasal ghand l-editur,

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