

Guest Editorial

On 19 and 20 October 2012, the Department of History of the University of Malta organised a symposium in Rabat, Gozo, entitled 'A Wonderful Future Beckons: Young Gozitan Historians'. The term 'young' in the symposium title was used in the sense of 'emerging' and the whole notion underlying this event, originally conceived by Victor Mallia-Milanes, was to provide an opportunity for alumni of the Department of History to put forward their work to a wider audience. The accent, in this first event of its kind, was on those alumni hailing from or having some link to Gozo. Many of the papers presented were the result of MA dissertations (and in some instances doctoral research and beyond) carried out by students of the Department of History. They bear witness to the diligence and enthusiasm of these researchers, as well as being reflective of the wide breadth and depth of the research being carried out by members of the Department of History. In particular, there is a solid representation of work produced by students who followed the Department of History's taught masters programmes, one in Mediterranean Historical Studies and the other in Hospitaller Studies. The event itself was greatly assisted by the kind co-operation of the Ministry for Gozo which provided a congenial venue with all necessary facilities at its building on St Francis Square. The positive response to this symposium has made the Department aware that there is a demand and an interest in further similar events. Naturally, conferences come and go and what remains is the written record. For this reason, we are very grateful to the Malta Historical Society for agreeing to this special, guest edited issue of *Melita Historica*, whereby the papers presented in Gozo will be able to reach a wider and interested readership. It is indeed a welcome and positive sign of co-operation between the Department of History and the Malta Historical Society. We hope that the readers of *Melita Historica* will enjoy reading this issue just as much as we enjoyed putting it together; while there is a focus on the history of Gozo, the papers assembled here range far and wide and point to venues of further research that still await the historians' attention.

Emanuel Buttigieg – Victor Mallia-Milanes – Simon Mercieca
Guest Editors

Introduction

Emanuel Buttigieg¹

In 1654, the Roman Inquisition investigated the Hospitaller Governor of Gozo; his name was Frà Georgio Beringho and he was possibly Polish.² The Neapolitan priest Don Joannes Antonio described the Governor of Gozo sitting in his hall, surrounded by his own 'court', consisting of the preacher Father Feriolo, the doctor Pietro Paolo Bonnici, the notary Domenico Conte, the priest Father Archangelo Saliba and others. The preacher Father Feriolo was talking about the Gospels, when the Governor described how he had heard, on various occasions, Lutheran sermons in his country. This disturbed those around the Governor; moreover, the Governor ate meat on prohibited days. It also transpired that the Governor's parents had been heretics, but that they had reconciled themselves with the Catholic Church.³ This case-study of the Governor of Gozo shows how even this island, often seen as embodying the essence of isolation and insulation, was – through the Hospitallers – connected to wider structures and currents of thought. Such case studies remind us of the 'significance of anecdote', for '[t]hese apparently trivial details tell us

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² It should be noted that the exact identity of the Governor of Gozo in the early 1650s is not easy to determine. According to both G.P.F. Agius de Soldanis, *Gozo Ancient and Modern, Religious and Profane*, Malta 1999, 146, and to J. Galea and R.M. Cassar, *Malta's timeline: A handbook of Maltese chronology*, Malta 1989, 144, the name of the Governor was Isidoro de Arguiz y Antillon. According to Agius de Soldanis, *Gozo*, 146, a German Knight called Giorgio Berenclau de Bohemia was Governor in 1651 and 1652, but Galea and Cassar give a different name.

³ Cathedral Archives of Mdina, Malta (C.A.M.), Archives of the Inquisition of Malta (A.I.M.), Criminal Proceedings (C.P.), vol.171 Case 204, no pagination (n.p.), 16 April 1654.

more than any formal description about the life of Mediterranean man'.⁴ Micro and macro historical approaches complement each other, as Maria Fusaro points out even in the case of Fernand Braudel, despite general assumptions to the contrary.⁵ In effect, 'apparently trivial details' become the building blocks from which to observe the wider picture and delve into patterns of life (and disruptions to these).

In his book *Islands of History*, the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins focused on three islands in the South Pacific – Hawaii, Fiji and New Zealand – to analyse how their histories intersected with European history and with what results. In this conceptually rich work, Sahlins emphasized how the people of the South Pacific – despite the established view among anthropologists – possessed a history of their own. He was concerned not only to vindicate this, but also to illustrate how Western scholarship was 'insular' when it neglected to think beyond established dichotomies such as the relation between past and present. An important insight that Sahlins provides is that isolation is almost never as complete as tends to be imagined for particular societies. Take for instance, early modern Maltese rural settlements and the island of Gozo, so often quickly relegated to a state of unchanging isolation. Yet, a variety of forms of intersection between external factors and indigenous elements did in effect take place and were important in shaping human experience.⁶ In fact, these two levels of interaction can be seen in operation in many of the papers in the present volume.

Karla Mallette, in a paper dealing with Muslim Lucera in Southern Italy, commenced her discussion with an overview of the term 'insular' as found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (in short, OED) and the term 'isolare' as found in the *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* (in short, *dizionario*). She found that both words – ultimately derived from the word 'island' – acquired a negative and largely political connotation

⁴ F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II*, 2 Vols. Berkeley, CA 1995, 758; 901-3.

⁵ M. Fusaro, 'After Braudel: A Reassessment of Mediterranean history between the Northern Invasion and the caravane maritime', *Trade and cultural exchange in the early modern Mediterranean: Braudel's maritime legacy*, eds. M. Fusaro, C. Heywood and M-S. Omri, London and New York, 2010, 8-9.

⁶ cf. M. Sahlins, *Islands of History*, Chicago and London 1987, viii-ix.

during the course of the nineteenth century. Prior to that, they did not carry any particularly negative or positive association.⁷ The OED lists extensive entries for 'island' and its derivatives 'insulation', 'isolation', 'insularity', and 'insular'.⁸ The emphasis in each case is on being cut off and on a negative separateness; in turn, islanders are seen to have 'the characteristic traits of the inhabitants of an island'. Geography, it seems, can make one peculiar. The *dizionario* also contains extensive entries for 'isola' (island) and its derivatives 'isolamento' (isolation), 'isolare' (to isolate) and 'isolato' (isolated).⁹ Here isolation can be positive; the entry for *isolare* states that through isolation one can increase defensive efficiency and even give increased prominence to a location.¹⁰ On the other hand, various entries highlight the negativity of isolation, including its tendency to be linked with solitude.¹¹ Mallette warns not to extend too easily such understandings of island-isolation to Mediterranean islands during the Middle Ages: '[o]n the contrary the affliction of Mediterranean islands tended to be the opposite: an inability to protect themselves from a too promiscuous connectivity.'¹²

In a similar vein, Charles Dalli argues that 'insulation', a term derived from the Italian for 'island', has become a short-hand to signify isolation; the small central Mediterranean islands of the late Middle Ages offer insights into the plight of small communities which had to adapt their structures of life in an effort to survive in the midst of giants.¹³ The rhythms of islands like Malta and Gozo were, even in medieval times, at the heart of an intensive regional connectivity, linked to 'neighbouring

⁷ K. Mallette, 'Insularity: A literary history of Muslim Lucera', in *A Faithful Sea: The religious cultures of the Mediterranean, 1200-1700*, eds. A.A. Husain and K.E. Fleming, Oxford 2007, 27-9.

⁸ Terms and quotes from the *Oxford English Dictionary* consulted at www.oed.com [6 January 2011].

⁹ S. Battaglia, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, Turin 1961, 578-82.

¹⁰ Battaglia, 580, '*Separare un oggetto, un luogo, un edificio dall'ambiente o dallo spazio circostante, impedendo i contatti, i collegamenti, le comunicazioni, delimitandone precisamente i confine e i limiti, abbattendo quanto vi sta intorno, sia per ragioni di difesa o di sicurezza, sia per conferirgli maggiore risalto.*'

¹¹ Battaglia, 579-82.

¹² Mallette, 29.

¹³ C. Dalli, 'Medieval island societies: Reassessing insulation in a central Mediterranean context', *Al-Masaq – Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean*, 10, 1998, 80.

lands in a complex and intimate way, unfolding across a vast regional canvas marked by common patterns of activity, and supported by institutions which permit such an interaction across different boundaries to take place.¹⁴ Medieval Malta was a *civitas* – one of many – within the Kingdom of Sicily. According to Victor Mallia-Milanes, the advent of the Hospitallers in 1530 dramatically altered this status so that by 1798 Malta was an ‘independent’ sovereign state where people had ‘ample opportunity of transcending the restraints of insular limits’.¹⁵ Furthermore, Frans Ciappara argues that ‘[s]tubborn persistency and receptiveness, not insularity, are the marks of the Maltese throughout their history.’¹⁶

Lying some 90 km south of Sicily, the Maltese islands have an area of just 316km².¹⁷ In *The Mediterranean*, Fernand Braudel laid out an analysis of Mediterranean navigation in which the predominant form of sailing was *costeggiare*: ships moving along the shoreline.¹⁸ He also showed how ships travelling from the Levant to the Atlantic, generally passed through the Straits of Messina.¹⁹ In this equation, Malta lay effectively off the beaten track.²⁰ Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, in their *Corrupting Sea*, consider this to be an oversimplification. They argue that islands – like Malta – lie in fact at the heart of the medium of interdependence since they have what they call all-round connectivity.²¹ The geography of the Maltese islands is a combination of insulation and smallness; their history is a combination of isolation and intersections.

¹⁴ C. Dalli, ‘The sea in medieval Maltese history’, *The maritime history of Malta*, eds. C. Cini and J. Borg, Malta 2011, 62-3.

¹⁵ V. Mallia-Milanes, ‘Was early modern Malta an ‘isolated world’?’, *Peregrinations*, Malta 2000.

¹⁶ F. Ciappara, ‘De Soldanis and the Maltese pre-Enlightenment’, *Journal of Maltese Studies*, 27, 2010, 39.

¹⁷ On the location of the Maltese islands see <http://www.doi.gov.mt/en/islands/location.asp> [15 February 2011]

¹⁸ Braudel, 103.

¹⁹ Braudel, 116.

²⁰ D. Cutajar, D. and C. Cassar, ‘Malta’s role in Mediterranean affairs 1530-1699’, in *Malta: Studies of its heritage and history*, Malta 1986, 105-40:105.

²¹ P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A study of Mediterranean History*. Oxford 2000, 225.

Isolation is almost always a matter of degree: the sea isolated Malta but was also its medium of constant connectivity, a barrier but also a link. Hence, when writing the history of Malta, Gozo and their people, one ought to stand intellectually in such a way as to look outwards to the sea, as well as inland from the sea. This is a point made by those inspired by the so-called 'new thalassology', or study of the sea.²² Importantly, the study of the sea should not neglect to attend to 'the sandy [and I would add rocky] shores where land meets sea, enabling maritime research to be networked explicitly with its hinterland'.²³



The year 2013 marked the 500th anniversary of Niccolò Machiavelli's writing of one of the most debated texts of modern times, *Il Principe*, published posthumously in 1532. Various activities were held in Italy to mark the occasion, including an exhibition at the Vittoriano in Rome. In Malta, possibly because 2013 was an election year, this anniversary was hardly noticed: a poignant observation given that the 'surprising' and much-discussed result of this election should provide much food for thought to the art of political science to which *The Prince* ultimately belongs. Stefan Said's paper on Machiavelli's *The Prince* seeks to discern the classical sources that influenced his writing, particularly those derived from historical writings. Although this is not strictly on Malta's history, it tackles this work of Renaissance philosophical political writing in terms of the implications of history for political strategies. It also highlights the complexities of human nature, especially in relation to questions about the exercise of office, authority and power. Such notions have a universal applicability to them which make them relevant in any work of history. As Said points out, in *The Prince* Machiavelli repeatedly

²² K. Wigen, 'Oceans of history', *American Historical Review*, 111:3, 2006, 717. P. Horden and N. Purcell, 'The Mediterranean and 'the New Thalassology'', *American Historical Review*, 111:3, 2006, 722-40. H. Driessen, 'Seascapes and Mediterranean crossings', *Journal of Global History*, 3, 2008, 446.

²³ D. Landry, 'Rewriting the sea from the desert shore: Equine and equestrian perspectives on a new maritime history', *Trade and cultural exchange in the early modern Mediterranean: Braudel's maritime legacy*, eds. M. Fusaro, C. Heywood and M-S. Omri, London and New York, 2010, 253-4.

asserts that present generations need to learn from the past; this has been a core issue of debate about the nature of the historical discipline at any moment in time, but particularly so today in a context of global politics, economics, culture and indeed crises.

Being part of these global processes, Maltese history is intimately related to the Mediterranean and its littoral. The Maltese islands' links to the Mediterranean and wider world pre-dated the arrival of the Hospitallers in 1530, but this episode accelerated, intensified and diversified such interaction. The influence of the immediacy of Malta's Mediterranean setting is particularly evident in the papers by Maria Abela, Simone Azzopardi and Charles Daniel Saliba. Abela's discussion of Hospitaller island management and defence hinges on the way that the vicissitudes of the late medieval and early modern Mediterranean shaped their approach to Rhodes and Malta and their respective dependencies. Both in Rhodes and in Malta, the Hospitallers managed an 'island order-state' which required to be defended against formidable enemies. Fast-forward to Malta of the 1930s – a Mediterranean British colony on the verge of the Second World War – and Azzopardi guides us into that space where British Imperialist and Italian Fascist aspirations for dominance in the Mediterranean met and clashed, with significant results for Malta. Closer to us in time, Saliba's contribution on skyjacking highlights how Middle Eastern politics and the Israel-Palestine conflict made the twentieth-century Mediterranean, with Malta at its centre, the backdrop to a disproportionate number of aircraft hijackings. Interestingly, Saliba shows how skyjacking had begun as an easy way for individuals or a group to escape oppression, but then turned into something darker: hostage-taking for ransom or to force the release of other terrorists from prisons, as well as publicity for hijackers' causes. Given Malta's own bitter experiences of hijackings, Saliba's observation that the prevention of such terrorist attacks must not be limited to physical defence, but that governments must also consider the broader politico-strategic aspects, has particular resonance. Malta's Mediterranean world has always impinged on it and its people; most recently and most controversially, with the rise of irregular migration from North Africa to southern Europe. A holistic approach to these challenges, which includes the long-term perspective of history, is called for.

A number of papers in this volume are concerned with the Hospitaller phase of the Maltese islands. Among the various insights provided by Abela are those into the role of the Governor of Gozo, which, given the limited information available, are particularly useful. She also throws light on Gozitan involvement in maritime activities. Another dimension of the Order of St John – one not often studied – is that of Hospitaller historiography, or in other words, the efforts by the Order itself to record its own past and deeds. This aspect is addressed in the contribution by Paul George Pisani who sheds light on a little known historian of the Order, the Abbot Luca Cenni. This new 'Historia' of the Order ultimately remained unfinished and was shelved away. Pisani is now 'dusting it' to bring this work to the attention of a wide readership for the first time. In particular, this paper provides fascinating insights into the procedures which the Order observed when it sought to employ a historian and sheds new light on the figure of Cenni himself.

Two further papers in the present volume deal with the hospitaller dimension of the Order of St John, its ultimate reason for being for more than 900 years. Monique J. Grech explains the ways in which the Order dealt with the horrific and repetitive threat of the plague. A range of measures were employed to prevent and to combat plague; some were simple, while others were complex, ranging from the isolation of individuals, vessels and houses, to the fumigation of letters and money, the use of sea water and the application of lime. Ultimately, quarantine and separation were the best means to combat a poorly-understood phenomenon. The theme of Hospitaller health care is further developed by Chris Galea in his case-study of medical care on early modern Gozo. A certain 'distinctiveness' emerges here: while the Order was willing to administer and control medical services on Gozo, it remained reluctant to engage itself directly in the provision of infrastructural projects aimed at taking care of the local population. One question that deserves analysis is that concerning the ways in which the medical institutions of the smaller island were administered; as emerges in Galea's paper, Grand Master and Bishop regularly clashed on this matter.

Galea also informs us that at the dawn of the eighteenth century, sick Gozitans faced the discomfort of an eighteen-mile voyage by boat from Gozo to the Holy Infirmary in Valletta. Today, the crossing

between Mġarr and Ċirkewwa takes approximately twenty-five minutes or less; the contrast between these two situations could not be starker. Transportation and communication links between Gozo and Malta are in fact at the heart of Amelia Debrincat's paper. Tracing issues of contact between the two islands in a very broad manner from the 1930s to 2000, Debrincat highlights the questions that need to be taken into account in the on-going debate about Gozo's physical connectivity. How does one strike a balance between improving access and safeguarding a particular environment and character? She reminds us of the discussions held from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s about the possibility of having a causeway linking Gozo, Comino and Malta. Such a project was ultimately seen as unfeasible. Here again, the insights to be had from the long-term perspective of the historical discipline are crucial in informing current discussions about bridges, tunnels and ferries. Incidentally, while the causeway project of forty years ago was studied by Japanese experts, the bridge option being considered today is in the hands of Chinese experts, a clear indication of how politico-economic weight on the global stage has shifted and how this has reverberations even in the channel between Malta and Gozo.²⁴

Four further papers deal with colonial and contemporary times. Michael Refalo's discussion of house and home in the late nineteenth century is important for anyone wanting to understand the long-term development of a particular, 'modern' mentality in relation to property development. It offers a fascinating and new insight into housing conditions in late-nineteenth century Malta, including the genesis of modern large-scale property speculation. Linked to this, Refalo traces the gradual emergence of a property-owning middle class, with its particular values, tastes, ideas, notions, as well as material culture, from books to sewing machines. Another paper which similarly looks at the British period afresh by going beyond a traditional nationalist narrative is that of Azzopardi. She asks us to rethink many of the accepted notions about the 1934-9 period of Crown Colony rule, following the collapse of the 1921 self-government constitution. Azzopardi traces the nuances of a short

²⁴ Preliminary analysis. Assessment of road tunnel options between Malta and Gozo, Southampton, 2012. K. Sansone, 'Chinese company to study Malta-Gozo bridge option', *Times of Malta*, 14 June 2013.

but eventful set of years characterized by a renewed drive on the part of the imperial authorities to foster a sense of loyalty among the Maltese. This included a tour by Governor Bonham-Carter of Maltese towns and villages, revealing the continued central role of the parish priests, even from an imperialist point-of-view. This contribution reminds us that to talk of the 'Maltese' as one monolithic group is extremely limiting and glosses over the variety and complexity that arise from geography, gender, social and economic status, education and so on. The past and its inhabitants are multi-faceted rather than monochromatic.

Paul Simon Portelli's contribution on the Gozo Civic Committee/Council takes us to the closing years of the British colonial experience, looking at developments from the 'periphery to the centre' rather than the other – more common – way round. He charts how the creation of this institution was the result of popular sentiment and key individuals coming together in a particular context. In 1959, Sir John Imrie proposed a Municipal Council for Gozo, which would be part of a wider plan to have such local government in Malta, which in turn would act as a training ground for Maltese politicians prior to their moving to national politics. Variations on this kind of vision can be found in previous settings (such as the 1930s of Bonham-Carter and his constitution, discussed by Azzopardi) and indeed it has significant parallels today where since the 1990s, local councils have regularly acted as a training ground for politicians before moving to national politics. A poignant point which emerges from Portelli's contribution is that during the 1961 election for the Gozo Civic Council, ecclesiastics were allowed to stand as candidates.

The Tabone family played a prominent role in the Gozo Civic Council story and the next paper – by Simon Mercieca – focuses on a member of this family, Ċensu Tabone, by using an ancestral research analysis approach. Internal migratory movements in the Maltese islands tended to be from the rural areas (including Gozo) to the harbour towns; here, however, Mercieca traces a rare (but still significant) case of movement from Malta to Gozo. It highlights how the police corps could act as a source of social and geographical mobility, a subject which probably merits a full investigation in itself. There is also a focus on language and the vernacular in terms of the variations and similarities across Malta and Gozo. This contribution offers a whole range of insights, from the role of

women as pivots in family strategies, to social life and entertainment in the dynamic harbour town of Cospicua, to the ways the colonial government operated, including how and why officials were transferred from Malta to Gozo. Ultimately, we are presented with an intimate case-study about family coping and management strategies over a number of generations.



It has long been observed – and there is no denying – that the inception of the Hospitaller presence in Malta initiated a long transition that deeply transformed the character of the islands and their people.²⁵ It seems as if Braudel must have had Malta in mind when he wrote that an ‘accidental change of ruler or of fortune may bring to the island’s shores an entirely different civilization and way of life’, thereby transforming that island’s character.²⁶ This transformation of character continued with the British colonial experience and still continues, as the country nears 50 years of Independence. Many of the papers in the present volume chart aspects of this long story from a variety of angles; it was, to paraphrase Sahlins, a story of cultural exchange that was ‘externally induced yet indigenously orchestrated.’²⁷

²⁵ A. Williams, ‘Sacra Militia, the Order of St John. Crusade, corsairing and trade in Rhodes and Malta, 1460-1631’, *Trade and cultural exchange in the early modern Mediterranean: Braudel’s maritime legacy*, eds. M. Fusaro, C. Heywood and M-S. Omri, London and New York, 2010, 139-56.

²⁶ Braudel, 150. See also E. Bradford, *Mediterranean: Portrait of a Sea*, Malta 1989, 432-2; Mallia-Milanes.

²⁷ Sahlins, viii-ix.