The land, the sea and the eight-pointed cross: economy and material life in mid-16th century Malta

Emanuel Buttigieg

Introduction - sources and context

While extensive use has been made of notarial acts for the reconstruction of late Medieval aspects of life, their use for the Early Modern period has so far been limited. The themes to be discussed in this article transpire from the notarial deeds of Notary Juliano Muscat for the years 1545 and 1546. Notary Muscat was a highly respected and well-connected man in society. His terms of reference stated that he was allowed to practice his notarial profession throughout the lands held by the Knights Hospitallers and his clientele included such prominent persons as the Reverend Domenico Cubelles, Bishop of Malta, and the Noble Nicola Camilleri, Mayor of Mdina.

The choice of such a primary source lies in the significance of notaries as links in the chain of everyday life. It was their profession which gave a certain stability to society in that the keeping of written records allowed for a more sedentary way of life for businessmen and others. Having formed such an intimate and integral part of Mediterranean Medieval and Early Modern societies, the records left by notaries are crucial to the reconstruction of these same societies. These therefore allow us to widen our understanding of the Medieval and Early Modern economy, so that we can better grasp how sophisticated were the systems of exchange in operation.

Although mid-sixteenth-century Malta was not placed on any of the major commercial sea routes, its commercial transactions were enough to sustain the rise and prosperity of a class of merchants, in Birgu in particular, but also in Mdina and elsewhere. At this time, nothing secured or threatened socio-political stability so frequently as the operations of market arrangements for the buying and selling of grain stuffs and the sale of bread. The bulk of trade in the acts of Notary Muscat was thus concerned with cereals. Although in Figure 1 the trade in cereals takes up only a 10% segment, Table 1 shows that its total monetary value was of about 1,226 uncie 11 tareni—a phenomenal sum, way ahead of the total monetary value of cumin, cotton, textiles, and animals put together.

On the other hand, while the supply of cereals formed the bulk of the import sector of the economy, cumin formed the core of the export sector. The discussion will try to assess, in a given place at a given time, the function that was being fulfilled by the production of cumin and, also of cotton. Tied to this will be a discussion of textiles and their perceived value. Despite the centrality which the provisioning of basic foodstuffs played in trade as a whole, and in the acts of Notary Muscat in particular, almost a quarter of all the commercial transactions carried out involved the selling or buying of textiles, indeed in a lot of cases, of high quality items. All this has to be seen within the wider interaction of the land and the sea as economic sectors that were fast changing under the new political scenario created by the arrival of the Knights of St John in Malta.

The trade in cereals

According to Braudel, the annual consumption per head of wheat and other cereals in the sixteenth-century Mediterranean was of the order of two

2 Nav, Notarial Archives, Nav, Notarial Archives, R 376/11, ff. 524-527v, (23 ii 1545).
3 Nav, Notarial Archives, R 376/11, ff. 84v-843v, (6 vii 1545).
4 Nav, Notarial Archives, R 376/11, ff. 549v-550v, (2 iii 1545).
5 C. Violante, Atti Privati e Storia Medievale, Problemi di Metodo, [Fonti e Studi del Corpus membranarum italicarum], (Rome, 1982). Note Violante's emphasis on the private nature of notarial records in the very title of his work.
6 P. Camporesi, Bread of Dreams - Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Europe (Great Britain, 1996), 13.
Figure 1
Profile of the 86 commercial transactions in the Acts of Notary Juliano Muscat, R376/11, 1545.

Table 1
Total monetary value of goods traded as extrapolated from the Acts of Notary Juliano Muscat, R376/11, 1545.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goods Traded</th>
<th>Number of Transactions</th>
<th>Total Value of Traded Goods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cumin</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>79.15 uncie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.29.10 uncie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>73.18.13 uncie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animals</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>79.1 uncie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cereals bought by private individuals.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.11 uncie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cereals bought by the Universitas.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>c. 1,218 uncie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cereals (total bought by both private individuals and the Universitas).</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>c. 1,226.11 uncie</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 The three acts in which the Universitas appears buying cereals are NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 301v, (8.ii.1545); NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 652v-654v, (10.iv.1545); NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 701v-702v, (22.iv.1545). The monetary value given here has to be approximate because in the last act mentioned, the monetary value was not stated in the act but calculated by the present author.
(present day) quintals. Wettinger estimates that by 1530 the two islands were having to import some 9,000 salme of wheat annually from Sicily. Epstein has calculated that in Sicily grain exports as a proportion of domestic output reached a peak of 16% to 17% between 1530 and 1550. Blouet quotes Bosio as stating that in the years preceding the Great Siege, the Island produced 20,000 to 25,000 salme of wheat, which was sufficient to support the inhabitants for about eight months of the year. These are the parameters within which the discussion will now move.

The term ‘cereals’ is here being used to denote wheat and barley. These two crops played a crucial role in Mediterranean nutritional systems. In the acts under review, there were two levels to this trade. The first and the predominant level, was concerned with the importation of cereals by the Universitas from Licata in Sicily; the second and minor level, concerned a certain amount of internal buying and selling in cereals.

According to Tilly, there existed an intimate relationship between state-making, the maintenance of public order and the control of the food supply. The provisioning of cereals absorbed such a large part of routine governmental work that its study tells us a good deal about the vicissitudes of government in general. In Malta this relationship between the State and the supply of food is clearly evinced in the workings of the Universitas and the increasing involvement of the Hospitaler government itself.

The overlapping of the Mdina Universitas and the Order in the matter of the importation of cereals comes out in the acts of Notary Muscat. Table 1 shows unequivocally that Notary Muscat was the notary of the Universitas especially where the provisioning of cereals was concerned. On 8 February 1545, the Universitas handed over to the Honourable Juliano Vella of suburbio the sum of 233 uncie 2 tareni to go to Licata to buy 368 salme of wheat (frumentii). Vella was to hire the Honourable Leonardo de Falson’s grippio known as ‘The Saviour’ (lo salvatore) to fetch the grain with it.

A significant shift then occurred in the way the Universitas made arrangements for the importation of cereals. Instead of making use of private agents like Juliano Vella and Leonardo de Falson to carry out its business, it started making use of the facilities, services and protection of the fleet of the Order of St John. Thus, on 10 April 1545, the Jurats Antonio Inguanes, Salvo Cumbo and Ivano Cumbo were given the sum of 426 uncie and charged to go to Licata on board the Santa Maria, a navis seu barche sacre religionis santi Joannes hierosolimitani. It was specified that the cargo had to be delivered at Birgu. Twelve days later, the Universitas appointed Petro de Falson and Petro Casia to go to Licata on board the Patronigiata Perandrea to fetch 1,800 salme of grain. They also had to get a rather vague 125 salme de vaccio Plenori.

If, according to Braudel, the provisioning of cereals from beyond a 20 to 30 km radius was hazardous, Malta’s importation of cereals from 60 km away was indeed a risky business. That the Universitas should seek the protection of a formidable fleet like that of the Order to carry out its cereal trade and that the Order should be more than willing to reach out a helping hand seems only natural when one considers the many pirates which constantly threatened the vital Malta-Sicily communications.

Despite the risks involved in such ventures, the sending of a vessel to fetch cereals from Sicily afforded an occasion for private individuals to invest and expect a good return. Some, such as the Noble Simone Bartalo, would invest as much as 156 uncie 27 tareni; others, such as Josepho Xeberras, would

9 G. Wettinger, 'Agriculture in Malta in the Late Middle Ages', In M. Bahgat (ed.), Proceedings of History Week, 1981 (Malta, 1982), 14.
14 C. Cassar, Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta (Malta, 2000), 29-62. K. Gambin & N. Buttigieg, Storfa tal-Kultura ta ’1-Rel j’Malta (Malta, 2003), 111-
15 NAV, NIM, R376/11, f. 50iv, (8.ii.1545).
16 NAV, NIM, R376/11, ff. 653v-654v, (10.iv.1545).
17 NAV, NIM, R376/11, ff. 701v-702, (22.iv.1545).
invest as little as 6 uncie 10 tareni. Even the bishop, through the Vicar-General the Reverend Josepho Manduca invested 3 uncie 24 tareni.¹⁹

**Cotton and cumin**

Island-societies generally contain some very productive niches, which have sometimes been highly renowned.²⁰ In Malta's case, its two productive niches were cotton and cumin. Depending on the way they were managed, these cash-crops that were grown to be exported could either threaten the equilibrium of the island's economy or ensure the necessary returns for the island's survival.²¹ Sixteenth-century Malta hovered clumsily between these two poles.

Although cotton has generally been regarded as the primary produce of Medieval and Early Modern Malta, the acts under review contained few references to it. For every act dealing with cotton, there were three dealing with cumin, and always of the bitter kind. According to Wettinger notaries between 1467 and 1501 made more frequent mention of cotton as against cumin.²² On the other hand, the evidence derived from the acts of Notary Muscat and the acts of Notary Nicolò de Agatiis for the years 1538 – 1540²³ make more mention of cumin as against cotton, suggesting a possible – if only temporary – reversal of the domineering position of cotton in the Maltese economy of the 1540s. Further analysis of contemporaneous notarial acts should give a clearer picture.

In fifteenth-century Sicily, Maltese cotton was first bought in Syracuse and then sold elsewhere, particularly in Catalonia.²⁴ The evidence for the mid-sixteenth century derived from the acts of Notary Muscat presents a much more timid picture. All the seven transactions involving cotton were meant for local consumption and not for export. It was bought either raw or as yam. Francesco Spiteri of casal naxaro (Naxxar) bought 2 cantari of raw cotton (cuttoni in cocchio) from Demetrio Bortelli of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seller</th>
<th>Provenance</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berto Bartolo</td>
<td>lie</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.6 uncie</td>
<td>f. 717'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marino Bortelli</td>
<td>zejtun</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.16 uncie</td>
<td>f. 685'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berto Burg</td>
<td>gregorij</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 uncia</td>
<td>f. 679'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgio Burg</td>
<td>pascualino</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.24 uncie</td>
<td>ff. 703'-704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonio Caruana</td>
<td>zebbug</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 uncie;</td>
<td>ff. 637'-638;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea Cumbo</td>
<td>crendi</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 uncia</td>
<td>f. 694'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paolo Farrugia</td>
<td>gregorij</td>
<td>4 cantari</td>
<td>1.18 uncie</td>
<td>f. 681'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone Fava</td>
<td>zebbug</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 uncie</td>
<td>f. 652'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bartolomeo and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone Haius</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonio Manguini</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomaso Pachi</td>
<td>sigelwi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19 NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 501v, (8.ii.1545).
20 Harden & Purcell, 224.
22 Wettinger, 'Agriculture . . .', 14.
same casale for 1 uncia 21 tareni. On the other hand, Gratiano Dalli of casal xiluch (Hal Xluej) bought a certain quantity of cotton yarn (cottoni filati) from Paolo Bugeia of casal rendi (Qrendi) for 1 uncia 14 tareni.\textsuperscript{26}

Whereas the cotton harvest was circulating locally, all the cumin mentioned in the acts under study was exported. The cumin harvest of Malta was highly praised by Abela according to whom "... ne cavano gl’Isolani molto guadagno e beneficio".\textsuperscript{27} The procedure involved was to have the purchaser who was going to export the cumin to bind his suppliers to have the produce delivered at Birgu, usually on the occasion of the feast of St John the Baptist. Thus, Notary Muscat and his associates in a societates that bought cumin for export\textsuperscript{28} and soft cloth,\textsuperscript{29} bought from Matheo Vella of casal balezen, 3 cantari of bitter cumin for 1 uncia 12 tareni. The cumin had to be delivered at Birgu.\textsuperscript{30} Similarly, the Noble Matheo de Cali bought from Brandano Pachi of casal bisbut, 2 cantari of bitter cumin for 1 uncia 6 tareni, in moneta aurea et argentea, to be delivered at Birgu.\textsuperscript{31}

Obviously, in order for a trading system to work there must be merchants. Unlike the general trend of merchants showing little specialisation in order to spread their risks on a wider base, the Noble Nicolo Pellegrino was a merchant who specialised in cumin. He was the sedentary type of merchant who managed his business from a distance, through notaries and letters. As Table 2 shows, Nicolo Pellegrino’s suppliers came from the central area of Malta, and especially from casal zebbug. In particular, Andrea Cumbo of casal zebbug supplied Nicolo Pellegrino twice. As was the norm, every supplier was bound to deliver his produce to Birgu on the day of the feast of St John the Baptist. Tradesmen like the Noble Nicolo Pellegrino were the protagonists of Malta’s expanding trade and prosperity as the islands moved out of their relative Medieval isolation under the auspices of the Knights of St John.

The significance of textiles

In the acts of Notary Muscat there was extensive selling and buying of textiles – indeed a 24% share of the whole business transactions. This trade concerned both expensive and refined luxury items, such as unius curdoni argentae decorati costing 6 uncie 15 tareni which the Noble Mario Inguanes bought from the Noble Natale Cassar,\textsuperscript{32} as well as more mundane everyday articles, such as 2 canne of black material for blankets costing 4 uncie 6 tareni.\textsuperscript{33} The situation was very straightforward. Poor people had to do with coarse homespun as the everyday working garb, made from the least expensive of local resources. Indeed, well into the eighteenth century clothes of the poorer classes were carefully handed down from parent to offspring.\textsuperscript{34}

By contrast, the fashion of the better-off people was subject to incessant change and costume everywhere was a persistent reminder of social status.\textsuperscript{35} In fact, there was a certain sophistication in the tastes of the upper classes. Men had a passion for berets,\textsuperscript{36} while women loved silk\textsuperscript{37} and embroidery. There was also an obsession with black cloth. According to Braudel in the sixteenth century the upper class people adopted the black cloth costume inspired by the Spaniards. It was a sign of the political preponderance of the Catholic King’s ‘world-wide’ empire.\textsuperscript{38} This might explain the substantial quantities of black cloth that were encountered in the acts under review. Such a situation contrasts sharply with the situation in the mid-fifteenth century when “not a hand’s span of black cloth was available in Malta”.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{25} NAV, NIM, R376/11, ff. 681v-682, (15.iv.1545).
\textsuperscript{26} NAV, NIM, R376/11, ff. 552v-553, (4.iii.1545).
\textsuperscript{28} NAV, NIM, R376/11, f. 682v, (15.iv.1545).
\textsuperscript{29} NAV, NIM, R376/11, f. 588v, (15.iii.1545).
\textsuperscript{30} NAV, NIM, R376/11, f. 682v, (15.iv.1545).
\textsuperscript{31} NAV, NIM, R376/11, f. 689v-690, (17.iv.1545).
\textsuperscript{32} NAV, NIM, R376/11, f. 722v, (29.iv.1545).
\textsuperscript{33} NAV, NIM, R376/11, f. 698, (17.iv.1545).
\textsuperscript{35} Braudel, \textit{The Mediterranean}, 228.
\textsuperscript{36} NAV, NIM, R376/11, ff. 631v-632, (23.iii.1545); NAV, NIM, R376/11, f. 633v, (26.iii.1545); NAV, NIM, R376/11, f. 638v, (31.iii.1545).
\textsuperscript{37} NAV, NIM, R376/11, f. 618, (19.iii.1545); NAV, NIM, R376/11, f. 629, (23.iii.1545).
\textsuperscript{38} Braudel, \textit{Capitalism ...,} 232.
Table 3


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>una cultra bianca</em></td>
<td>one white blanket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>uno mataraczo</em></td>
<td>one mattress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>unu paro di tinsola di tila bianca</em></td>
<td>a pair of white linen sheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>una farsata dicta farde di lana pintata</em></td>
<td>coloured wool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>duj tuvagli di pararj</em></td>
<td>two tablecloths for embellishment – <em>pararj</em> is a word of Sicilian origin, its modern Italian rendering is <em>abbellirsi</em> (to embellish)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>quattro tuvagli pichiuli di pararj</em></td>
<td>four small tablecloths for embellishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>duj tuvagli grandi cum manita tel Porce</em></td>
<td>two large tablecloths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>duj mindilj</em></td>
<td><em>mindilj</em> is a word of Arabic origins, its modern Maltese rendering is <em>mendil</em> – a piece of cloth generally thin and white in colour, and traditionally used for a number of purposes – as a tablecloth or as a large handkerchief to carry bread in it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>trij chiumaczi di tila bianca</em></td>
<td>three white pillows – <em>chiumaczi</em> is a word of Sicilian origin, its modern Italian rendering is <em>guanciale</em> or <em>piumaccio</em>, a small pillow filled with wool or feathers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When Blouet was writing his dissertation, he complained that there was a general lack of source material relating to textiles in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One must remark that this was before notarial acts were tapped as a source for historical research and dowry lists and wills are a major documentary source for local cloth production and consumption because they list large quantities of linen shirts, corsets, handkerchiefs, napkins, towels, sheets, cushion and mattress covers, perhaps spun and woven by the bride herself. The dowry of Ventura Manguin was the most extensive one and is worth quoting in its entirety in Table 3.

An item of particular interest that recurs in these acts is cloth imported from England, referred to as *panni de londres*, to which there are three references. The Noble Nicola Antonio de Noto of Mdina owed the Noble Antonio Barthalo 4 *uncle* 24 *tarenti* 17 *grani* for 2 *canne* of black cloth and 5 *palme* of *panni de londres*. Similarly, in the other two cases, it was a resident of Mdina that was buying this London cloth. The presence of such material in Malta confirms Braudel’s assertion that the total volume of exchange was small and the prices modest, but questions his belief that the distance travelled by merchandise was short. It is also an early indication of the gradual

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40 Blouet, 265.
41 V. Nisco, *Dizionario Siciliano-Italiano* (Catania, 1883), 604.
44 NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 587v, (13.iii.1545).
45 NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 689v, (17.iv.1545); R376/11, ff. 765v–766, (21.v.1545).
decline of the Mediterranean as it was slowly to be eclipsed by north-western Europe. Significantly, the years 1500 to 1550 saw English shortcloth exports triple.\(^{47}\)

### Shipping and corsairing

The sea then played a fundamental part in an island's economy and communications with the outside world, so that trade and corsairing were two complementary ventures. Corsairing was legitimate war, authorised either by a formal declaration of war or by letters of marque.\(^{48}\) It was a very economically rewarding activity\(^{49}\) and many corsairs also acted as businessmen, alternating between privateering and ordinary trade. In 1429 the corsaro had to be suspended due to the loss of people it was causing. The arrival of the Order of St John in Malta reactivated corsairing activities from Malta which once again contributed to the economy.\(^{50}\) The state of shipping and corsairing in the mid-sixteenth century can be assessed through the following two case-studies.

The Honourable Thomaso Xerri and the Noble Matheo de Cali set up a *commenda*-type of partnership between them. This meant that profits and risks were shared by the parties as in a partnership, but otherwise the relation between the parties resembled that of lender and borrower.\(^{51}\) Thomaso Xerri invested the sum of 29 uncia 9 tareni 10 grani in a trip with a *fista* to Licata. The money was subdivided as follows: 4 uncia for the trip itself, 1 uncia 25 tareni 10 grani for 30 casci siculi, 1 tareno 17 grani for a *singulo paio*, and 23 uncie for 32 cantari of biscuits. All the merchandise had to be delivered at Birgu. The following year on 14 July 1546 the *commenda* came to an end after the two parties had settled their accounts.\(^{52}\)

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Corsairing was such a profitable business that even the setback of losing a vessel in *Partibus barbarie* did not discourage the Noble Antonio Marmara and Nicola Gatana from setting up a new frigate. Nicola Gatana captained the original frigate, the Xilidona, at the time when it was lost. Nonetheless, Antonio Marmara trusted Nicola enough to allow him to captain the new frigate — *ad cursum ad Partes barbarie*. Their venture seems to be a last opportunity for them not to go bankrupt: they were out to take enough booty (*buttinu*) to pay the crew (*ala genti dila dicta fragata*), to pay for the expenses of the Xilidona (*pagar tuci li spisi facti in li corpi et armamento tante dila Prima fragata*) and the rest of the spoils to be split between them. The sleeping partner, Antonio, bound Nicola to deliver his spoils at Birgu and not at Tripoli. This might indicate a tendency among corsairs to cheat their sedentary partners by going to Tripoli first, selling some of the booty and then keeping the profits for themselves. Aware of the risks which those who sailed the seas faced, before departing Nicola Gatana nominated the same Noble Antonio Marmara as his procurator in his absence.

Conclusion — the land and the sea

It is to be noted that by and large, Malta had a monetised economy, not very dependent on bartering. Since in Malta the economy of town and country were so bound up together, money as a unit of exchange was a necessity. The economy of mid-16th century Malta shows a system of division of labour between town and countryside, where both peasants and townsfolk played the parts of producers-vendors and consumers-purchasers, respectively. The economy hovered between two poles represented by Mdina and Birgu: while Mdina lured the rents from the land, Birgu lured the produce to be exported. Agriculture claimed the lion's share of Malta's economic structure. Like any other agrarian society this meant a constant battle with both the elements of nature — soil sterility, drought, pestilence, and famine (*sterilitatis, siccitatis, pesti, famis*) and the agency of men — pirates (*classis piratae*) and war (*ignis bellorum*). The island therefore had to expend huge sums of money in order to secure its food supplies from Sicily. At the same time, it developed an export sector made up, at this point in time, primarily of cumin and of corsairing activities, which not only paid for its foodstuffs but also for luxury items, such as *panni de londres*. The question of adequate food supplies became increasingly tied with the proviso of good government which in turn brought about an increased overlapping of the interests and activities of the *Universitas* and the Knights of *St John*.

People like the cumin merchant the Noble Nicolo Pellegrino, the shipper the Noble Matheo de Cali and the corsairs, the Noble Antonio Marmara and Nicola Gatana, were enterprising individuals who utilised complex trading techniques and prospered from trade rather than from the land. They were the predecessors of the great merchants' houses that would develop after 1565.

The author

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54 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 776v-777v, (1.vi.1545).
55 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 778-779, (5.v.i.1545).
60 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 619-620v, (19 iii.1545).