

Rural Life in a Maltese Eighteenth-Century Village

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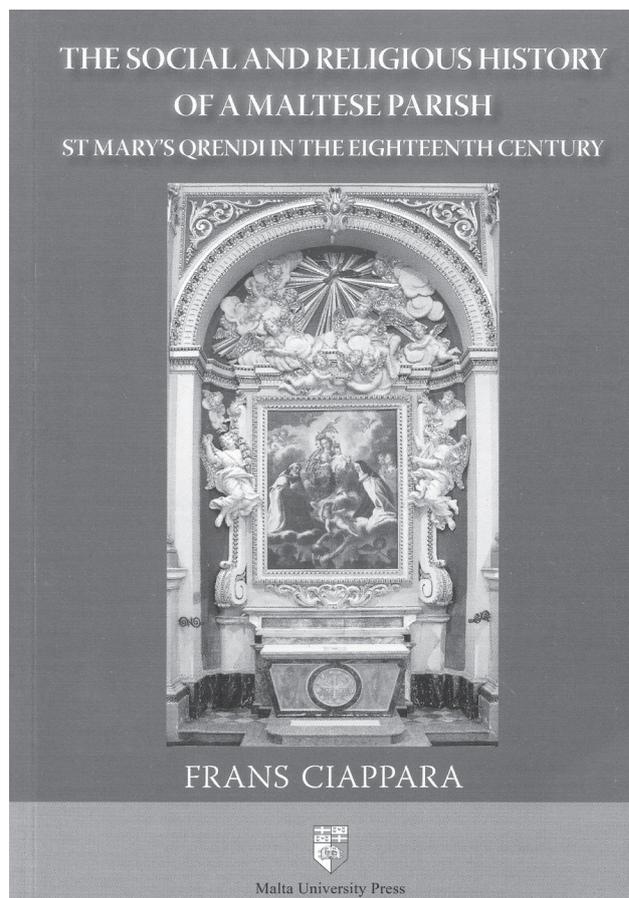
Review of Frans Ciappara, *The Social and Religious History of a Maltese Parish: St Mary's Qrendi in the Eighteenth Century*. Malta University Press, Malta: 2014.

Today the village of Qrendi in the south of Malta has around 2,500 inhabitants, over three times as many as it had in the eighteenth century when it was composed of an almost entirely agricultural community of around 800 persons.

Very few of the eighteenth-century residents of rural Qrendi were literate. They did not leave behind personal memoirs or letters for historians to read. They did not have their portraits painted. We do not have any records of their faces, or of their personal emotions. Their thoughts and actions are easily obscured within the traditional writing of history dominated by the lives and thoughts of the more educated, wealthy and influential classes of society. On the surface, they may seem to have left no traces of their voices at all.

Professor Frans Ciappara has written extensively about social and religious life in the early Modern period, both in Malta and overseas. In his latest historical study, he attempts to recover “the voice of the voiceless” by recreating and exploring the cultural world of the village of Qrendi over a time span of one hundred years, examining the details of its inhabitants, their social and religious practices, family relationships, work, and the topographical setting in which they lived during the eighteenth century.

Why research the minutiae and intricacies of a small rural village? The book begins with a discussion of the relevance of ‘community history’ and its relationship to anthropology and to wider patterns and trends, as it probes into the uniqueness of a specific place at a chosen period. By delving into the mundane details of a single parish community, Ciappara



has succeeded in presenting a rich harvest of information about life in rural Malta some 250 years ago.

The work is partly based on a detailed study of the available parish records registering births, marriages and deaths in the community, which together form a robust picture of families and kinship within the village. We also learn, for example, about the typical age for marriage, and whether spouses were chosen from other villages, as well as the mortality rates of children at this period.

Other important historical documents which shed light on the rural inhabitants of early Modern Qrendi include the *liber status animarum*, a type of census which Ciappara aptly describes as a ‘treasure-trove of historical evidence’ and which provides information about the size and type of households, religious practices, and a range of personal details.

These documents indicate, for example, that extended families living under one roof were actually not as common as may have been believed. The predominant type of household

was made up of the nuclear family, that is, husband and wife with their unmarried children. Widows and widowers did not generally live with their married children or other relatives, but preferred to run their own separate households. Ciappara also draws his narrative about the parishioners of St Mary's church from the archives of the ecclesiastical courts, from records of episcopal visits, and from the documents of the form of Maltese government known as the *Università*. Significant details about the lives of the people of Qrendi are also gleaned from notarial documents, such as personal wills or commercial contracts which provide illuminating details about family relationships, religious networks, and financial status.

The available records indicate that while the inhabitants of Qrendi were relatively poor, they were far from destitute and there was no shortage of cash within the community. As in the rest of Europe during the early Modern period, a number of parishioners left home to live in the towns or to find work. A few of the men served on galleys belonging to the Knights of St John or to corsairs, and travelled around the Mediterranean.

They visited neighbouring Maltese parishes for feasts and on social or religious occasions, or to meet a notary, to attend a court sitting, and to buy or sell goods. People living in towns looked down on the rural communities and called them 'Arabs', while they in turn were called 'donkeys' by some villagers of Qrendi.

Overall, parishioners had a very strong sense of community and devotion to their village (*pajjizhom*). Religion played an important role within the social fabric, bolstered by various religious confraternities which were active in the village and dominated not only religious affairs but also coordinated the everyday life of the parish.

Central government in Malta was perceived as quite remote within the village in comparison to the direct and energetic role played by the church in the lives of its parishioners. Men, women and children of all ages and social status gathered together within the activities and structure of the church. Apart from its function in the rites of baptism and marriage, the church naturally also led preparations for

a good Christian death, the *ars moriendi*, and arranged for the burial of the dead within its walls.

After being established as a parish in 1618, St Mary's church in Qrendi was built in a grand Baroque style to the design of Lorenzo Gafa in the late seventeenth century and was completed in 1712. It was the centre of both the religious and the social life of the community, and the building and furnishing of the church was a source of great pride to the parishioners who sustained it through their financial contributions.

The study includes an extensive and valuable bibliography to which reference is made throughout the text. Four appendices reprint period documents, such as the setting up of the parish in 1618, a petition of 1765 to the pope regarding funds for the parish, and an example of absolution from incest of 1758.

Ciappara states that his aim in this book was largely to re-enter the world of what the historian Christopher March has called "the people whose portraits were never painted, and who spoke to posterity only in disjointed snatches recorded here and there." He has undoubtedly achieved this goal, by using all available written sources to painstakingly uncover the lives of the people of eighteenth-century Qrendi. A captivating story is sensitively revealed, the result of a special and imaginative bond with this small Maltese village and its past.
