

HUNTING AND GAME IN MALTA IN THE SIXTEENTH TO THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES: A HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH*

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The rule of the Order of St John (1530–1798) in Malta coincides with the promulgation of stiff regulations that successive Grand Masters issued to curb snaring and hunting rights. For the ruling knights of Malta and the local gentry, hunting was essentially a sport and a pastime, but the mass of the population, particularly the country folk, perceived hunting differently. For the peasantry, hunting bans meant deprivation from access to a cheap and abundant supply of meat as well as a denial of their legitimate right to use common land. The abrogation of the strict hunting regulations by the British in the early nineteenth-century, was a blessing to the rural population. In time, however, peasants no longer viewed game as a source of protein with the result that hunting ceased to be a necessity. Within decades of British rule, it became a pastime much enjoyed by peasant men who transformed it into the top male rural sport in Malta.

Keywords: hunting bans, common land, peasant resistance, cheap meat, militia reforms, British rule.

An epitaph on a tombstone at the Dominican parish of Porto Salvo in Valletta reads:

To God, the best, the greatest

To Giovanni Vittorio Grech, a Maltese youth, most beloved of his parents and siblings, most zealous of books, who, with the wondrous Art of the Chase, used to lay waste the heavens of its birds (and) the earth of its four-footed creatures.

This exulting conqueror of Earth and Sky, a wondrous prodigy of Nature, who used to restrain, no less, the four-footed creatures in their run, but also, at the same time, the birds in their flight, even their momentum, with precise shots, was prematurely snatched away by the conquering dart of Untimely Death when he had hardly completed his fifteenth birthday.

Leonora, his mother, and Prospero, his brother, most sorrowful, set up (this memorial) to a son and a brother. He died on the 17th of September in the year of Salvation 1617.¹

The epitaph is most significant in that, while we can see with what pride the mother extols her son for being a capable hunter, it also reveals how much the lad valued hunting. At that time hunting was fast becoming the sole right of the privileged social elites, notably the Knights of Malta, and this was done at the expense of the country-folk who looked at hunting as a cheap source for obtaining meat. But this memorial seems to highlight solely the fact that the young Maltese lad from Valletta was, despite his young age, an avid hunter of birds and four-footed creatures, presumably rabbits, and an excellent one at that. The epitaph seems to imply that the lad's untimely death robbed him of the potential to be a man of great worth.

During the rule of the Order of St John, the areas in which the rural poor were forbidden to hunt were on the increase, while hunting was fast becoming the sole right of the privileged social

elites, notably the Knights of Malta, their retinue, and possibly some of the local gentry, the clerics, and other special minority groups like the patentees of the Inquisitor. Indeed, it may be argued that to some extent the Order of St John, with its feudal rights over Malta, even competed with the local gentry, clerics, and landowning elites over appropriation of land reserving large territories for their exclusive use. Thus, an important semantic transition took place, where the ‘public spaces’ known as common land, became areas reserved for the rulers.

All those who were not directly connected with the Order of St John, landowning elites, clerics, and gentry, suffered. But those who suffered the most were the peasants. The process of expropriation of land caused them hardship and so, whenever possible they sought to contest it. However, the expropriation of land was brutal and definitive and remained forcibly so, right until the end of the eighteenth-century when the Order of St John left Malta.

One point that emerges from the succession of laws and regulations that span over more than a two-hundred-year period is that the common people of Malta — urban dwellers and peasants alike — did not seem to have possessed a specific juridical status, defined by law, that conferred on them any specific rights and responsibilities. Thus, irrespective of whether they were town dwellers or peasants, the commoners experienced varied and variable conditions in all social contexts and situations, at all levels of their existence be they at home, and at work; within the neighbourhood or village, or parish; as well as in their interaction with the ruling knights of Malta and the local elites.

This paper attempts to look at the changing role of hunting over time, through a study of the stiff regulations issued by successive grand masters, and other scraps of evidence, that may possibly help to evaluate how the commoners, especially the peasants, interacted with the authorities (Burke 1978: 23–64). The available documentation may help to throw light on how the masses managed to negotiate, or reconcile, the difficult terrain between law and practice, and on how they tried to resolve issues within the limitations set by the state. The evidence allows us to evaluate how the ‘deprived’ peasant masses, who were excluded from the most important public institutions, continually managed to shape the parameters of their own social and legal existence.

In this sense, the epitaph that commemorates the lad, Giovanni Vittorio Grech, suggests that there was a radical shift in the way hunting practices changed over the following centuries, beginning with the time when hunting laws became stricter and harsher. With this in view, it becomes necessary to assess the changing role of hunting activities in Malta within a wider socio-cultural perspective.

Common Land and Its Uses

The geographical position of the Maltese archipelago in the central Mediterranean has left an enormous impact on Malta’s cultural tradition. As an integral part of the Kingdom of Sicily, the Malta Harbour, home to a small relatively heterogeneous community, had access to much Mediterranean trade. On the other hand, the Maltese peasantry were largely stuck to their own customs, and archaic economy for centuries to the extent that they managed to preserve their own proverbs, riddles, surnames, nick-names, place-names, and above all a colloquial Arabo-Berber language (Cassar 2003; Dalli 2002: 37–56; Luttrell 1975; Wettinger 2000, 1985). In striking contrast, Malta’s transformation into the fief of the Knights of Malta in 1530, brought about an entirely different civilization and way of life. Under the Order of St John, Malta became integrated into the shipping routes of the central Mediterranean, and thanks to the development of the Harbour area, even its culture was transformed (Abela 2018).

To speak of the Harbour area is to speak of a conglomeration of four towns. Valletta was the political and economic capital. In the upper part of the city, the Grand Master, the Grand Council and high society lived and exercised their authority. The common people lived mostly in the lower districts and the 'Three Cities' of Birgu [Vittoriosa after 1565], Senglea [or Isola] and Bormla [later also known as Cospicua]. The 'Three Cities' stood on the south bank of the Grand Harbour. In all, the four towns had a population of around 10,000, that is, approximately one-third of Malta's population in 1590. The 'Three Cities' eventually came to form part of the popular district. Together with lower Valletta they were characterised by narrow streets packed with locals, foreigners, sailors and slaves (Cassar 2000: 18).

Valletta dominated the entire economy of Malta. The political influence of the Harbour towns on the countryside, the power of the Grand Master and the highly concentrated nature of trade, all combined and contributed to the vast development of the Harbour area. This growth imposed an order on the area it dominated and established a wealth of administrative and trading connections. By the early seventeenth century, the Harbour zone had not only developed into a very busy area, but it practically handled all of Malta's foreign trade, and had become a cultural centre of some value.

The virtual monopoly of Valletta over the importation of all commodities and the exportation of such products as cotton (the major cash crop), enabled the new capital from very early on, to control all the production and redistribution within the Maltese islands. Valletta was, above all, the central sorting station. Whether bound inland or outward, everything had to filter through the Valletta harbour (Cassar 2000: 19).

But the more technically-efficient the Harbour towns became, the more dependent the country-folk became on the Harbour towns. There developed a big divide between the 'great' and the 'little' tradition such that this peasant-urban dichotomy became manifest even in the way hunting activities were perceived (Redfield 1956).

The drastic changes brought about by the Knights of St John can be appreciated if one gains insight into what life was like for peasants in late medieval Malta. At the time Maltese animal husbandry normally had a safety valve in that, alongside the relatively-independent farm or leasehold, there were extensive usage rights of common pastures [*spatii publici*]. These rights allowed the peasants to keep many more animals than would have otherwise been possible with the resources of one's own farm alone. Apart from grazing rights, peasants were also allowed to obtain stones for building rubble walls. According to Godfrey Wettinger,

In the fifteenth century these areas, then still just about entirely enclosed were considered to be common property open to the reach of a stretch of such common land, and the importance of animal husbandry is well brought out by the records of their strenuous efforts to prevent the appropriation of portions of such land by private individuals (1981: 31).

This was a commonly held view all over medieval Christendom, not just Malta, such that at the start of the Peasant's War in 1525, the German Reformist Martin Luther in reply to the twelve articles of the peasants in Swabia claimed that,

It has been the custom hitherto that no poor man has had the power to be allowed to catch game, wild fowl, or fish in running water; and this seems to us altogether improper and unbrotherly, selfish, and not according to the Word of God. In some places the rulers keep the game to spite us and for our great loss, because the unreasoning beasts wantonly devour that property of ours which God causes to grow for the use of man ... (1997: 160–161).

In the early sixteenth century, these *spati publici* could still be seen in Malta. In fact, in 1536, Jean Quentin d'Autun asserted that, 'the fields here and there are full of stones, but grass springs up from beneath and because of this there is plenty of pasture for sheep' (Vella 1981: 39). Nonetheless, protests directed against the alienation of public land were already documented in 1410. There is evidence that, 'Antoni Desguanez got into trouble in 1458 by his persistent efforts to appropriate and enclose, with royal permission, extensive portions of common land mostly in the north and west of the island' (Wettinger: 1981: 32–33). Fortunately, even where pasturage was strictly regulated, usage of common land was rarely supervised.

But by the late sixteenth century so much common land had been usurped, that in a letter addressed to Pope Clement VIII in June 1595, the newly-elected Grand Master Martino Garzes (1595–1601) lamented over the poverty and food shortages which the population of Malta had been experiencing for many years. He insisted that they should be allowed access to public and common lands which had over time been awarded to private citizens to the detriment of the people (ASV SS Malta, 4, f. 94-v). The following October, food shortages induced Garzes to write again, this time to the Cardinal Secretary of State. He hoped that the Cardinal would plead with the Pope, in private, thus ensuring that none of the well-connected dignitaries in Malta would try to convince His Holiness to ignore his request (ASV SS Malta, 4, f. 127-v). It was not usual for a ruler to make such appeals. But it seems that Grand Master Garzes, unlike most of his predecessors and indeed his successors, was not too keen on hunting. In fact, archive records refer to the hunting pastimes of the elites, and the laws and regulations pertaining to it, but they hardly ever mention the difficulties peasants had to endure as a result. Harsh punishment for poaching must have embittered the masses.

The Knights of St John, hailing from some of the wealthiest and most powerful families of European nobility, hunted large and small animals by following a code of rules under the protection of the patron saint of hunters, St Hubert, Bishop of Liège who had been a hunter before taking holy orders.² The Knights of St John were not the only privileged group with rights to hunt. The local gentry and landowners, the clerical class, and the patentees of the Inquisitor also shared similar privileges — although they were not allowed to hunt in such restricted areas like the *boschetto* in the limits of Rabat, the North of Malta, Gozo, and Comino. Grand Master Pierino Del Ponte (1534–1535), for instance, issued an edict prohibiting the hunting of partridges, hares and rabbits in Malta, Gozo and Comino. Grand Master Vallete, the hero of the Ottoman Siege of 1565, enforced the prohibition of rabbit hunting especially on Comino. Harsh punishments were inflicted on anyone who cut grass from that islet as it served as fodder for the rabbits (NLM Libr. 149, 162; Mifsud: 1918: 117).

It also explains why in the mid-sixteenth-century Grand Master Vallete built his hunting lodge and stables at the Boschetto, limits of Rabat, in the north of Malta, and not far from the area later protected by Lascaris. The Boschetto became an ideal hunting location ever since the later sixteenth century when Grand Master Verdalle (1581–1595) built a fortified summer resort in the area close to Vallete's hunting lodge (Abela 1647: 63). In 1581 Verdalle prohibited hunting in the three-mile radius surrounding Fiddien, Boschetto, Torre Falca, Mtarfa, and the surrounding cliffs. Transgressors were to be fined 20 oncie (50 scudi) (NLM Libr. 149, 153). In fact, the largely deserted north of Malta was especially ideal for conservation purposes as shown by an edict of 13th April 1639 issued by Grand Master Lascaris.

No one should dare to go hunting without the falconer's license in Fiddien as well as the nearby territory of Bingemma, Santi, Torre Falca and S. Nicola, those who contravene risk punishment and are threatened by banishment from Malta (NLM Libr. 149, 65).

Three years later Grand Master Lascaris warned against disturbing rabbits' nests and taking away their young. He also prohibited the collecting of thorns, horse-brush, dried grass, snails, asparagus, and passing through the Boschetto before sunrise. Transgressors had to pay a fine of ten oncie (25 scudi) (NLM Libr. 149). In just over a century after Malta became a fief of the Order of St John, rules and regulations over access to natural resources and hunting, in previously accessible areas, had multiplied to the detriment of the local inhabitants, especially the peasants.

The Ban on Hunting

In a society of classes, as was early modern Malta, ruled by the elitist and chivalric Order of St John (1530–1798), hunting was a sport exclusive to royalty and the aristocracy. Furthermore, it was perceived to be more than a pastime. The elaborate rituals of the hunt and hunting skills that went with it were regarded as the peacetime equivalent of prowess in chivalric wars.

Soon after the Knight Commander Fra Antonio de Butigellis took the regency of Malta, on behalf of the Order of St John, as governor and Captain of Arms he published an edict dated 22nd June 1530, which regulated hunting activities in Malta (Bosio 1602: 84). This was nearly four months before the Order took formal possession of the Maltese islands (Mifsud 1918: 117; Fenech 1992: 128–129). By the middle of the sixteenth century, several Grand Masters issued stiff regulations against illegal hunting. These decrees came to rest on even older customs and local regulations, but there can be no doubt that the Order's government consistently intensified hunting laws. The edicts regulating hunting published under the various Grand Masters were, in substance, not very different from each other. They established closed seasons between December and July (NLM Libr. 291, f. 34), declared that no one could hunt partridges, rabbits, hares, or disturb their nests, and that no one could sell or buy protected species. (Fenech 1992: 128; Mifsud 1918: 116–122; NLM Libr. 149, 65–68, 70, 73, 89, 255; Libr. 641 f. 79; Libr. Ms. 430 (1) f. 108). These sixteenth-century hunting regulations were in line with other regulations issued elsewhere in Renaissance Europe based on the emerging perception of the prerogative and exclusive right of the 'Prince' to rule (Cassar 2000: 11–24). In this view, the ruler had to oversee all matters connected to the welfare of the state, including those concerning game and hunting. Thus, the ruler issued special hunting laws which specified the periods of the year when hunting was allowed, the control of 'pests' and punishments for poachers (Hobusch 1980: 100). In short, the ruler, as law giver, had total control on all hunting activities.

Hunting laws and their enforcement varied in severity, according to the shortage of game, and the Grand Master's interest. Grand Master Vallete, for example, was particularly fond of falconry. The passion for hunting by several grand masters was well known and is often referred to in the correspondence which Inquisitors sent to Rome. Among these one can elicit the hunting activities of grandmasters Clermont Chattes Gessan (1660), and Nicolas Cotoner (1663–1680) in the late seventeenth century.³ It seems evident that the prohibitions and restrictions on hunting were also meant to protect the limited supply of game and to enable the rabbits and birds to breed at certain times. One must bear in mind that, by the standards of the time, the population of Malta in relation to its small area, far exceeded that of any other major Mediterranean island, such as Sicily, Corsica, Cyprus, and Crete.⁴ As a result, demand far exceeded supply.

This may explain why a few weeks before his death on 16th January 1660, Grand Master De Redin (1657–1660) promulgated that anyone caught hunting or selling rabbits would be fined ten onze (equivalent to 25 scudi) or sent to row on the galleys for two years (NLM Libr. 149 f. 68). Grand Master De Clermont de Chattes Gessan, who ruled for just four months, not only ratified De Redin's edict after his election (NLM Libr 149 f. 89: 18th February 1660), but made even stricter rules on his deathbed ensuring that anyone caught hunting with guns, nets, dogs or kept any kind of hunting equipment would be punished with two years on the galleys (NLM Libr. 149, f. 70: 1st June 1660). Later Grand Masters added further decrees particularly to curb the indiscriminate and illegal hunting of rabbits. Grand Master Carafa (1680–1690) prohibited the hunting, selling and buying of rabbits (NLM Libr. 151 f. 106v: 11th September 1681), and so did Grand Master Zondadari (1720–1722) (NLM Libr. 149, 255: 31st May 1720). These stiff regulations were coupled with the centralisation of specific hunting reserves, especially in the largely uninhabited north of Malta, which were restricted for the sole use of the Grand Master, members of the Order, and privileged social groups.

By the eighteenth century, legislation and restrictions on hunting had reached unprecedented levels. Grand Master Pinto (1741–1773) applied stricter hunting prohibitions soon after his election in 1741. Whoever was caught hunting rabbits, hares and partridges without the Falconer's license was sentenced to three years on the galleys or fined twenty onze fine (50 scudi) (NLM Libr. 429(2) f. 143). Similar rules were enacted with increasing severity right through his long reign.⁵ However, given the fact that such penalties were imposed so frequently, one may wonder whether these repeated restrictions were truly and effectively enforced. It is important to keep in mind that most hunting activities took place in the uninhabited northern part of Malta, and the much less inhabited island of Gozo. The northern territories, beyond the old town of Mdina, and the parish of Naxxar, as well as the parishes of Mosta and Gharghur, remained very sparsely populated until the early nineteenth century, as one can deduce by the fact that the northernmost parish of Mellieħa was established as late as 1841 (Bonnici 1994: 88–89).

The situation escalated under Grand Master Ximenes de Texada (1773–1775). An edict issued in January 1774 increased the penalty for the hunting of rabbits, hares and partridges to five years rowing on the galleys. Women and lads were to be flogged and sent for six months in prison or else they had to pay fifty onze (125 scudi) to the Treasury. Furthermore, whoever was caught in possession of such game, or intended to sell it, had to pay twelve onze (30 scudi) (NLM Libr. 429(6)).

A much shrewder successor to Ximenes, Grand Master De Rohan (1775–1797) issued a decree on 29th May 1776 which permitted hunting on privately-owned land but only if it was practiced by those who administered the area (NLM Libr. 429(6) ff. 162, 293). In short, De Rohan's decree was simply meant to appease the landlords, notably the clergy, who had fomented much trouble following the unpopular hunting laws issued by his predecessor. But rules seem to have changed again over time. In August 1791, the patentees of the Inquisition — a privileged class — were expressly allowed to hunt birds of passage and rabbits with muskets, ferrets, dogs and nets outside reserved areas, but were prohibited from hunting hares, partridges and pigeons. However, this hunting permission was revoked some sixteen months later (AIM Civ. C9, f. 44: 3rd August 1791; f. 267: 22nd December 1792).

The imposition of harsh rules against illegal hunting continued until well into the eighteenth century, strongly suggesting that eminent knights were similarly avid hunters. Two distinguished

knights, Fra Marbeuf and Fra Remisching, were such keen hunters that they kept large colonies of rabbits and partridges in Gozo between 1738 and 1742. (Fenech 1992: 23–24). Princely hunting policies were thus shaped by a mixture of several competing concerns namely: the growing scarcity of land due to its increasing profitability; the ever-growing population⁶ and the passion for hunting of subsequent Grand Masters.

One may argue that, given the small area of Malta and the much-restricted space where hunting could be practiced, it should have been a relatively easy matter to police and control the north of Malta and arrest offenders. However, the area where hunting took place consisted mostly of wasteland ridge, that was practically uninhabited, and often inaccessible or difficult to reach (Bowen-Jones, Dewdney & Fisher 1961). It is therefore doubtful whether the employees of the Order's Falconer could apply the law effectively. The concern of farmers to curb the growing amount of game on their lands, coupled with fierce punishments for poaching were standard throughout continental Europe and beyond. So, it would be incorrect to assume that it was a uniquely Maltese phenomenon. It is difficult to come across one peasant grievance list which neglected to emphatically demand hunting rights and the rights to graze on the *spati publici*.

Pierre Goubert, a historian renowned for his study on early modern French peasantry, points out that although rabbit was, 'an important element in the diet of the poor' (1986: 88), people seldom bred rabbits outside the towns as can be deduced by the fact that there were no hutches or domesticated rabbits in the seventeenth-century countryside, nor probably in the eighteenth. Goubert argues that there was no point in feeding rodents that swarmed all over the woods and fields. Furthermore, to them the restriction on hunting was 'yet another seigneurial privilege'. However, there is proof that snares were used universally. Goubert concludes that 'wild rabbits must have gone some way towards supplying much-needed animal protein' (1986: 88). The French kings made occasional concessions that allowed French peasants to hunt for rabbit but by the time of the French Revolution in 1789, dissatisfied with solitary concessions from the Crown, the peasants 'overturned the statutes containing game laws' (Toussant-Samat 1992: 85). Game, namely rabbits, was indiscriminately slaughtered after the passing of new French laws on hunting. From then on landowners and farmers had the right to kill game in the territories or fields, using nets and other devices. (Toussant-Samat: 81–82).

The Elite and Peasant Perception on Game

The abundance of game in Malta and its role as a source of protein was far from unique to the Maltese islands. In fact, it induced Fernand Braudel to assert that in early modern Europe, 'game was normally for peasants and nobles throughout the continent' (1981: i, 197).

In 1647, Gian Francesco Abela explained that the Maltese islands had abundant game and specified that apart from the birds of passage there was a large quantity of partridges, ducks, quails, pigeons, hares and rabbits, which [rabbits] 'abound in very large quantities' [... *conigli, che ne sono senza numero*] (Abela, 1647: 134). Abela belonged to the landowning gentry of Malta and was even a member of the Order. He must have perceived hunting the abundant game as an exclusive right of the privileged social group to which he belonged and from which the lower classes, and particularly the peasants, were excluded.

On the other hand, there were the Maltese rural inhabitants who considered small-scale hunting activities, and whatever nature had to offer, including dry thistle and snails, but particularly game, as nobody's property. Thus, the peasants felt entitled to partake of the natural resources surrounding their homes. Probably the country folk may even have regarded absentee

landlords and knights as intruders who ‘stole’ the game from the local people, the more so as they felt that they, largely against their will, were feeding the animals from their crops. As one contemporary commentator points out, even though they owned a large quantity of domestic animals, the Maltese peasants seem to have relied on game abounding in the Maltese islands as a cheap source of protein.⁷

Thus, the peasants, as farmers, did not complain when the gentry hunted game because rabbits, partridges, and similar animals, were often considered as pests that ravaged their fields. Of course, the gentry were tolerated so far as they did not cause any damage to the agricultural produce. This explains why the farmers looked with contempt at the Maltese notable, Signor Giovanni Antonio Perdicomati Bologna who, in 1685, was reported to the Inquisitor for shooting at birds on fruit trees thus greatly damaging the trees (AIM Civ. 185, ff. 244–245). Evidently the protesters cared more for the trees, and their fruit, than for the birds! Indeed, birds were probably seen as a menace and a direct competitor with man as they nipped the buds and pecked at the fruit itself. It explains why in January 1596 Andrea Zammit and Lippo di Jorlando had purposely gone to the *ridumi della magdalena* [Madliena, limits of Gharghur] to chase rabbits from the fields of the Inquisition officer Martino Vella (AIM Crim 14A, f. 487v).

Farmers were convinced that game had to be kept strictly under control as is clearly evinced in the eighteenth-century dialogue between a farmer and a hunter (*cacciatore*) described by Gian Pietro Francesco Agius De Soldanis in his second edition of *Della Lingua Punica*.⁸ In the dialogue the hunter, who goes rabbit hunting tells the farmer that another hunter had just caught many rabbits in the area (over fifty in fact!). He then wonders whether there were any more rabbits left. The farmer reassures him and replies, ‘Will this kind ever perish! It has ruined all the crops.’ Aware of the difficulties farmers were facing at the time, Agius De Soldanis’ farmer airs his views further by stating that around a thousand rabbits were killed daily. Finally, the farmer states that he would be pleased if by chance the hunter was to pass by, after a hunting spree and present him with a rabbit (NLM Libr. 144, f. 194v). In this passage rabbits were seen as direct competitors ‘with man for the earth’s resources’. Therefore, every effort should to be made to kill all those animals like birds, snails, rabbits, and even wild plants that were competing with them for food.

As elsewhere in Europe, hunting animals that posed a threat to crops or livestock, was probably the least contested issue in the eighteenth century. Common people were normally allowed, at times even encouraged, to kill pests which they were eager to do as they in turn consumed their prey (Thomas 1984: 274–275). Indeed, the edict issued by Grand Master Ximenes de Texada (1773–1776) prohibiting rabbit hunting and snaring made things particularly hard for the peasant population (NLM Libr. 429(6) ff. 16–17; Libr. 1146(2), 217: 14 February 1773). It is therefore not surprising that the edict was badly received by the peasants who feared that their crops would be ravished by the rabbits (Fava 1978: 43–44; Panzavecchia 1835: 46). Peasant complaints arose due to the excessive wildlife population, but also because game, particularly rabbits, provided a cheap and abundant supply of meat. Hunting prohibitions barred the peasants from practicing this ‘right’.

But, while hunting for certain species was very strictly prohibited, the peasants were encouraged to hunt down specific birds — namely crows because they were considered as pests that destroyed crops and fruit. In 1681 a decree of the Town Council (Università) issued with the blessing of Grand Master Gregorio Carafa (1680–1690) encouraged those who captured crows to take them either at the Town Council at Mdina or in Valletta. They were presumably given a

reward for their efforts (NLM Libr. 149, 49–50: 26th June 1681). An edict of June 1773, by Grand Master Ximenes specifies that those who presented crow feet to the Mdina Town Council were to receive a *grano*, the smallest coin in the Maltese currency, for each foot and those who brought crow eggs were to receive a similar sum (NLM Libr. 355 doc. 10: 7th June 1773). Thus, the Grand Master who had created so much fuss over the snaring and hunting of rabbits had encouraged his subjects to capture crows! A similar edict was even issued later in 1785 under Grand Master De Rohan (NLM Libr. 429 f. 29: 20th May 1785).

Peasants into Soldiers

Maltese peasants were not alone in protesting against hunting regulations and evidence suggests that even the Maltese elite opposed hunting regulations at least until the early twentieth century (Fenech 1992: 130). Trapping and hunting with the aid of nets, ferrets, and hunting dogs seems to have been standard in earlier times. From the sixteenth century onwards, hunting with harquebusiers, and later muskets, was possible but rather exclusive to the elites since — at least until the mid-seventeenth century — guns were not easily accessible to most peasants. Thus, hunting with a gun appears to have gathered momentum only very slowly. However, despite limited accessibility to fire-arms the Grand Master appointed a knight who served as Captain in the main village communities whose job it was to train peasant men for coastal guard duties. A report from Malta addressed to Pope Gregory XV (1621–1623) claimed that men over the age of eighteen were expected to own a harquebus, or at least a pole arm (a spear, pike, or halberd) (BAV Barb. Lat 5325 f. 45). Nonetheless, the country militia was rather disorganised and needed a serious overhaul to become truly effective.

Matters changed out of pure necessity. Early in 1645, news reached Europe that a huge Ottoman armada was being fitted in Constantinople and the Christian powers in the Mediterranean were convinced that it was meant to assault Malta. The island duly mobilised and steeled itself to meet the onslaught, but the Ottoman fleet made straight for Candia (Crete) still under Venetian control (Cutajar & Cassar 1986: 114). At this moment of potential danger, Grand Master Lascaris Castellar (1636–1657) made a serious attempt to improve the defence system and the efficiency of the militia. In 1646 Lascaris established the Lascaris Foundation meant to ensure that Malta was well-prepared for any eventual siege.⁸ On Easter Monday of 1647 a militia roll was held throughout Malta, in which the village and town captains had to compile the list of men under their command, indicating all able-bodied men, specifying their names, age, and whether they owned a musket, (or could otherwise afford to buy a musket), harquebus, spontoon or sword. The musketeers and harquebusiers of the Order scattered in the villages were singled out. Furthermore, a list was compiled of all those who owned a mare and could potentially form part of the cavalry. The very poor peasants who lived a hand to mouth existence were likewise registered.¹⁰

However, the radical change appears to have come about, a decade later, during the brief reign of the Aragonese Grand Master Martin De Redin (1657–1660) with a call to transform peasants into soldiers. De Redin, previously Viceroy of Sicily, was elected Grand Master 17th August 1657. De Redin soon started to air his concern about the lack of coastal defences in the countryside, and his preoccupation of possible enemy landings in the more exposed areas of Malta and Gozo.¹¹

De Redin informed the Venerable Council of the Order of St John that he was prepared to build between twelve to fourteen towers at his own expense and suggested the introduction of a

new system of coastal guard duties. Prior to De Redin, 240 Maltese peasants manned sixty lookout posts each night, in groups of four, after a day's toil in the fields. This was deemed unsatisfactory. The men were 'the poorest and most miserable of the island' and were not the best choice to guard the coasts. Instead, the Grand Master proposed to establish permanent guards who would be paid by the Town Council. Each tower was to support a gunner and three soldiers all with a monthly salary. The proposal was meant to relieve the peasantry from night guard duty with a reliable, salaried militia (ASV SS Malta, 13, f. 62: 30th March 1658).

The Venerable Council approved De Redin's proposal on 30th March 1658, and the latter created a Territorial Army manned by the Maltese peasantry who were armed with a musket and trained to shoot.¹² More importantly the De Redin reforms made muskets more readily available to the peasants. In short, the reforms of Grand Master De Redin, created a trained peasant militia for coast guard duties that had access to muskets.

However, a look at the population figures for 1658, which luckily exist, should help us evaluate better the impact of De Redin's reforms. The island population at the time reached a total of 49,591 inhabitants including 3,923 residents that lived in Gozo. This figure goes up to 50,073 if 482 friars and nuns are included. Twelve of these friars — six Franciscan Minors and six Augustinians — lived in Gozo. The population of Valletta, excluding members of the Order reached a total of 9,219 inhabitants, and a further 9,584 townfolk lived in the Three Cities of Birgu, Senglea and Cospicua. The rest of the population, consisting of 30,788 inhabitants, lived in the Maltese countryside and Gozo (Census for 1658: NLM Univ. 2 ff. 165–166). There are no indications of the size of the adult male and female population, nor is it possible to calculate a dependency ratio (which indicates those under fifteen years of age and those aged sixty-five and over). We may perhaps assume that adult male country-folk aged between fifteen and sixty-five were those who sought to practice hunting. Leaving out women, children and elderly men we may roughly calculate that around 10,000 men had access to hunting activities. If that was the case, then a large proportion of male inhabitants had direct access to hunting in the mid-seventeenth century. The continuous growth of population coupled with the availability of hunting equipment must have put increased pressure on the available stock of game in a very small, densely-populated island.

From then on, the militiamen could carry guns, meaning that on the side, they could hunt at will. The new law may have indirectly helped to transform hunting methods among the Maltese peasantry and, moreover made hunting much more accessible to the poorest among their ranks, despite the incessant spate of regulations, by De Redin himself, and a line of grand masters who succeeded him, until the end of the eighteenth century. Increased access to, and training in, firearms and the expansion of the rural population had a drastic impact on the rural areas and wildlife which, became even worse in the eighteenth century. This may explain why, unlike the Grand Masters, when the British came to Malta in 1800, they allowed hunting rules to fall in abeyance.¹³ The new rulers seem to have realised that hunting could serve as a free-of-charge target practice by the Maltese peasants, making them more capable at defending Malta from any possible invasion. Of course, the peasants were more than happy to indulge in what had become, their favourite pastime. Thus, in a decree dated 30th January 1801, a mere few months after the capitulation of the French, the British authorities granted five privileges to those who joined the militia. One of these allowed volunteers to carry a musket for hunting purposes without having to apply for a permit (Fenech 1992: 129–130).

Indeed, in 1838 George Percy Badger, a British traveller to Malta, claimed that it had become standard for peasant hunters to learn hunting techniques at a young age. He also stated that the main pastime of young Maltese male peasants seemed to have been that of shooting birds (Badger 1838: 306). In fact, it had become a tradition among peasant communities and was passed from one generation to the next. Furthermore, it came to serve as an integral part of manly peasant camaraderie based on history, mutual support, and shared values.

Conclusion

During the rule of the aristocratic Order of St John, hunting, as elsewhere in Europe and the Mediterranean, was the major sporting activity of the nobility and the wealthy elites. Consequently, in their view, game had to be protected solely for them to enjoy their ‘sport’ — a view which generated much resentment between the rulers and the ruled. For the peasants, however, it was neither legal nor illegal to take advantage of the resources provided by Mother Nature. It was simply a ‘natural and legitimate’ right. It appears that there reigned a general belief that birds, wild rabbits, and other freely-available wildlife, as plants and snails, were there for all and sundry regardless of the restrictions made by the authorities.

In the case of Malta, hunting appears to have continued to retain its aristocratic character, at least formally, until the end of the eighteenth century. Until that time peasants as farmers claimed that hunters caused extensive damage to their crops, while the abundance of wild animals destroyed their produce. The claim suggests that hunting was widely perceived primarily as a sport for the elites, even though the peasants themselves hunted specific animals, like wild rabbits, turtle doves and other wildly available game which would today be considered as a cheap source of protein.

At the same time, hunting was often associated with a man’s worth, irrespective of whether the man in question was rich and powerful, or poor and vulnerable. It seems therefore that the sport was, as it is often the case even today, routinely linked with manliness both at a historical level and in popular culture. Thus, it might be argued that what originally was perceived as a competition by wild birds and rabbits ‘with man for the earth’s resources’ (Thomas 1984: 274–275) had in time, been transformed into a major peasant pastime. Indeed, hunting which is usually claimed to be a quintessential masculine activity (Marks 1991) is often seen as a pastime through which men negotiate their manhood through technologies that mediate the meanings of the activity (Hirschman 2003; Schroeder & Zwick 2004). The gun becomes an aspect of the extended self by giving users the ability to kill, regardless of their physical appearance (Belk 1988). Therefore, the gun, and other hunting equipment, helped to instil feelings of self-worth. When all is said and done, the epitaph at the beginning of this paper, speaks of the deceased lad’s valour and worth in terms which could be perfectly understood by hunters then and now.

There exist several cases which may provide interesting insights into perceptions of hunting activities taken from other contemporary societies beyond the Mediterranean shores. A study of hunters in Norway conducted by L. M. Bye (2003), examines rural hunters who intertwine ideas of masculinity and rural identity in opposition to outside urban hunters. In this case, young men are initiated into the local community of men through elk hunting. Bye examines how these local hunters reconstruct their notions of rural masculine identity in opposition to urban invaders by taking pride in their own skill, patience, and stewardship of the land. Hunting helps men develop a masculinity that affirms his rural connections. Bye concludes that hunting is thus deeply intertwined with rural family traditions and results in easily achieved close male social bonds.

In the case of Malta hunting appears to have continued to retain its aristocratic character at least until the end of the eighteenth century. Until then peasant farmers claimed that hunters caused extensive damage to their crops, while the abundance of wild animals destroyed their produce. Hunting remained essentially a sport for the elites, while at same time it was a cheap source of protein for the peasants.

It appears that the British conscious of potential peasant resistance and at the same time wishing to encourage the peasants to join the militia not only permitted them to hunt freely, soon after they established themselves in Malta, but they even did away with the idea of a closed season which previously existed. In the end it may be said that the British helped to popularise hunting on a larger scale. By doing so, the British colonial rulers not only made themselves more popular among the peasants but they were also helping peasants train in the use of firearms should the need to resist any foreign invaders arise. In the end however, these changes may have put even more pressure on the existing stock of game, threatening at least some species with extinction.¹⁴

Archival Sources

NLM: National Library, Malta

AIM: Archives of the Inquisition, Cathedral Archives, Malta

ASV: Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Vatican City

BAV Barb. Lat: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana – Barberini Latino, Vatican City

NLM. AOM (Archives of the Order) vol. 260.

NLM Libr. Mss 144, 149, 151, 291, 355, 372, 429(2), 429(3), 429(6), 430(1), 641, 1146(2), 1220.

NLM Univ. (Università volumes) vol. 2.

AIM. Crim. (Criminal Proceedings) vol. 14A.

AIM. Civil Acts vols. C9, 185.

ASV SS vols. 4, 13, 15, 24.

BAV Barb. Lat vol. 5325.

Notes

*I would like to thank audiences who commented on this study in lecture form in Berlin, Brussels, Luxemburg, Malta and Venice.

1. NLM Libr. 372, f. 134v – Antichi epitafi nella Parrocchia di Porto Salvo [Valletta]. [Text kindly brought to my attention and translated from the original Latin by Mr Victor Bonnici.]
2. The legend says that he devoted himself to the religious life after his encounter with a stag, bearing between his horns a luminous image of Jesus on the Cross. Saint Hubert is honoured among sport-hunters as the originator of ethical hunting behaviour.
3. Annet de Clermont Chattes Gessan had plans to spend a few days in April at his villa of Sant'Antonio 'to hunt and perform other recreational activities'. (ASV SS Malta, 15, f. 58: 10th March 1660). This must have been the only hunting spree during his grandmastership as Chattes Gessan died on 2nd June 1660. (ASV SS Malta, 15, f. 146: 7th June 1660). Grand Master Nicolas Cotoner was keen to take a few days break at Sant'Antonio to enjoy his favourite pastime of hunting for hares. (ASV SS Malta, vol. 24, f. 14-v: 21st January 1668 and f.182: 24nd November 1668).
4. In 1590, the population of Malta reached 30,000 inhabitants and more than trebled by 1800. According to the Italian thinker Giovanni Botero, writing in 1595, the population of Malta consisted of around 20,000 inhabitants, yet the much larger island of Corsica did not exceed 75,000 souls, that of nearby

- Sicily was just over a million; Crete had around 20,000 souls, while Cyprus had around 160,000 inhabitants. (Botero 1595: 121, 114, 137, 147, 159).
5. See for example NLM Libr. 429(3) f. 18 edicts of 30th December 1745, 2nd January 1747, 30th December 1747, 9th January 1749, 29th December 1749; and f. 132 edicts of 19th July 1752, 16th July 1753, 13th July 1754.
 6. The population rose from 50,073 in 1658 (NLM Univ 2, 165–166) to 75,320 by 1740, (Brincat 1991: 97, 99) and nearly 100,000 by the end of the eighteenth-century.
 7. ...*nel 1590 [i maltesi] giunsero al numero di 27.000 la maggior parte delli quali per essere allora gente rustica, ed incolta non si cibava delle vitellazze, ma di altre immonde bestiami, delle quali l'Isola abbondavano...* (NLM Libr. 1220, 190).
 8. The second amplified edition of the *Della Lingua Punica*, first published in Rome (1750) is preserved in manuscript form at the National Library of Malta entitled, Libr. 144. The dialogue provides an insight on how rabbit hunting was perceived by Maltese peasants at large.
 9. Grand Master Lascaris imported no less than 8,000 salme of millet as well as saltpetre, sulphur and charcoal to produce gunpowder, bought a large quantity of muskets and musketoons (blunderbusses?). The remaining sum intended to serve for the maintenance of the fortifications and payment to the men serving with the galley-squadron. The money that was left unspent was later used to finance a seventh galley (Dal Pozzo 1715: ii, 142–143). Kindly brought to my attention by Mr Mervick Spiteri.
 10. The militia list compiled by the village and town captains on 22nd April 1647 was discovered among the miscellaneous documents of the Notarial Archives in Valletta, and kindly brought to my attention, by Mr Liam Gauci.
 11. Earlier Grand Masters had similar concerns and a few coastal towers had been erected in strategic positions during the rule of Grand Masters Garzes (1595–1601); Wignacourt (1601–1622); and Lascaris Castellar (1636–1657).
 12. Work on the towers commenced immediately and in haste. Within two months the Mellieħa tower had already been built and a total of thirteen towers were completed by 6th July of the following year. (NLM AOM 260, ff. 31v, 37, 63).
 13. The British perhaps conscious of the turmoil created by their French predecessors (1798–1800) when these tried to change the rules of the stagnant political and social climate, tried their best to keep the status quo in matters that did not disrupt British imperial interests.
 14. Over time, hunting may have been transformed into an important recreational activity for many men in rural Malta. Possibly it represents a backdrop from which to view the social development of masculinity within families and among the community of adult men. Since 1962 successive governments have found it difficult to introduce modern conservation concepts — such as abolishing spring hunting and trapping — due to strong resistance among country-people who still consider the privilege to hunt a traditional right.

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