Persons of reference: Maltese and Sicilian scholars and their importance for the Grand Tour

THOMAS FRELLER

The 'age of discovery' and the economic expansion of the central European states destabilised the static medieval concept of the world and the 'authorities' on which its scholastic teaching relied (Lohmeier 1979: 3-8). The old order crumbled in the face of the innumerable new discoveries to which it could not accommodate. The scientific societies of the seventeenth century played a central role in transforming the notion of '*curiositas*' into a positive concept. For example members of the Royal Society in London referred to those who were in sympathy with their aims as '*curiosi*', whereas the German scientific society called itself the *Academia naturae curiosorum*. The Royal Society and its European counterparts patronised travellers, encouraging them to make observations while travelling, to make contacts and to publish accounts after their return. More and more it was the primacy of experience rather than reliance on traditional authorities which made every educated man`s account of his travels, if based on his honest observations, of unique importance.

It was an ambitious, very kaleidoscopic approach which most authors aimed to achieve, an encyclopaedic view which would do justice to the fact that all information had become equally important. This was also the principle of the writers of travelogues and compilers in the 17th century when touching the islands of Sicily and Malta. It is only logical that in this concept contacts with foreign scholars and men of letters became a must. Another important issue was the visit of foreign collections or museums (*Kunstkammern*) or cabinets of curiosities. In fact it was this sort of cabinet which echoed best the kaleidoscope principle of Baroque *Weltanschauung*. These cabinets consisted of a vast range of objects and artefacts collected and exhibited not just for their rarity or value, but on the basis of their ability to astound the observer. On a philosophical level the *Kunstkammer* appears to represent the intermediary stage between the loss of one order and the establishment of another (Scheicher 1979; Schlosser 1908). Maybe the most famous of these examples was the *Museo Kircheriano* in Rome. It was set up by the encyclopaedic

scholar Athanasius Kircher. The Jesuit Kircher was no stranger to Sicily and Malta. He had visited the islands in 1637 and 1638 and on these occasions had collected many items which later formed part of his museum (Zammit-Ciantar 1991). Also the cabinets and museums in Palermo, Catania, Syracuse and Malta, established by Giuseppe Gioeni, Ignazio Vincenzo Paternò, Principe di Biscari, Cesare Gaetani della Torre, Gabriele Lancelotto, Principe di Torremuzza, Carlo Antonio Barbaro, Saverio Landolina Nava or Giovanni Francesco Abela, displayed a wide range of objects.

The eighteenth century saw the breaking down of these cabinets into smaller collections grouped according to thematic categories – objects of art, archaeology, botany and anthropology all formed separate collections and were separately housed. Those objects whose sole function had been to amaze the visitor to the 'Kunstkammer' (e.g. deformations) were transferred into the storage rooms of the museums and were forgotten. These are very much the categories which were at work in the traveller`s observation. We will come back to this when we discuss some specific examples. That these new classifications and structures were not followed by many Sicilian and Maltese collectors and connoisseurs in the 18th century provoked a lot of criticism by English, French or German travellers, who interpreted this as a symbol of the intellectual backwardness of the local societies. The same development can be seen in the travel literature of the age – the encyclopaedic approach gave way to the specific enquiry, or the individual interest of the traveller himself and travelogues were compartmentalized according to the purpose they fulfilled.

The value placed on empirical knowledge, personal enquiry and observation had given the traveller a central role from the 16th century onwards. The initial lack of focus in these 'scientific' enquiries, which had not yet been channelled in specific directions, led to an attempt to make observations as comprehensive as possible. It was this general lack of focus and specialisation which permitted the owner of a *Kunstkammer* or cabinet of curiosities to feel that he was participating in scientific activities. Contrary to the 18th century in the 17th century the attitude to science was still dominated by religion, by the idea that unravelling the mysteries of the physical world man was fulfilling a divine mission. For the classification of such mysteries the traveller assumed a central role and he was encouraged to make 'encyclopaedic observations'.

Before discussing some examples of these approaches a few more words might be dedicated to the question why scholars and connoisseurs should undertake a risky voyage down to the Southern End of Italy and set over to Sicily and Malta (Cf. Freller 1998; Freller 2002; Tuzet 1988). Sicily - with a few exceptions - up to

the late 18th century was not investigated by the traditional Grand Tour. This changed drastically after 1770 when the revived interest in the classical Greek and Roman period made *Magna Graecia* and Sicily two attractive aims for European travellers. The implications of this change were felt in various aspects of historical science, art, literature and philosophy. To put it in the correct sequence, already in the centuries and decades before the genesis of the 'Classical Tour' artists, writers, scientists, noblemen and connoisseurs undertook a *giro* to Italy and very often visited some locations where ancient temples and shrines could be seen. The real fascination in these objects, however, started not before in the 18th century philosophy and ideology had created new tools to interpret classical history anew. Europe had discovered again the spirit of its Mediterranean and especially Roman and Greek roots. The ways and methods to approach this movement were multifaceted. As regards the European approach to Malta, things were different. Malta had already attracted European attention in the 16th century when the Order of St. John converted the island into a Christian bulwark against the Ottoman expansion. As a consequence a number of European scholars had been attracted to the island to study its language, history and culture. In the course of these travels the ports and towns of the East Coast of Sicily, Messina, Catania and Syracuse, also became the focus of attention.

The beginning

The main start to connect Malta and, therewith also to a certain extent Sicily, with the central European *comunitas litteraria* was made in the times of Humanism in the 16th and early 17th century. Thomas Bartholin (1644), André Thevet (1549 and 1551), Barthélemy Herbelot (1655), Bartholomeus Gurgewitz (1588), Burchardus Niderstedt (1654), Michel Chaillou (1680), Ehrenfried Walter von Tschirnhaus (1678), Johann Septimus (1578), Hieronymus Megiser (1588), Georg Walter ('Gualterus') (1624), Hans Poulsen Resen (later bishop of Sjaelland) (1590), Philipp Cluver (1617), Athanasius Kircher (1637), Lukas Holstenius (1617 and 1637), Mathieu de Chazelles (1693) and Balthasar de Monconys (1646) are but a few of the scholars and scientists of considerable renown who visited Malta and Sicily in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Most of them had established multifaceted contacts with local scholars and connoisseurs. But there were also Sicilians and Maltese, such as Leonardo Abela, Paolo Boccone, Domenico and Carlo Magri, or Giovanni Francesco Buonamico, who had carved their names into European awareness.

What creates some headaches is the scarcity of documents unearthed until now. In the sixteenth century there are hardly any documents on relevant scholarly exchange. One of the few examples are the 1549 and 1551 visits by the French scholar André Thevet, the author of the impressive *Cosmographie de Levant*

(1556) and *Cosmographie Universelle* (1575) who had been helped by the erudite prior of Capua, Strozzi, in his research of Malta and Sicily and their history. Indeed many early works on Malta and Sicily could only have been written through the help of others, namely knights and erudite Maltese and Sicilians. In the seventeenth century, however, the network of the international *comunitas litteraria*, namely the scientific societies and academies started to provide visiting scholars with contacts. When the young classical scholar from Augsburg, Georg Walter ('Gualtherus'), visited Sicily and Malta in 1624 to collect, classify, and decipher Greek and Roman inscriptions, his main contact and reference was the erudite vice-chancellor of the Order of St. John, Giovanni Francesco Abela, a scholar and historian himself and author of the important *Descrittione di Malta* (1647). Abela guided Walter around some caves at Marsa and showed him his 'museum'. (Gualtherus 1625: 51)

Abela was also the contact for the Jesuit scholars Athanasius Kircher and Lukas Holstenius who visited Malta for a couple of months in the summer of 1637, and also for a group of learned British travellers who toured the island with him in November and December 1648. The events are described in a highly-interesting but unfortunately anonymous diary entitled *Travells thorough France, Italy, Naples, Sicily, Malta*, now preserved in the Folger Shakespeare Library. The British visitors even visited Abela's villa and museum at Marsa 'up the haven, where are many antiquitys worth seeing, and [Abela] is extreame civil to strangers; he shewed us a gyants tooth described in his book, Scarabaei annulus; all souldiers wore such; a medale of the Grand Master Valetta, upon occasion of the victory; a medaile of Dido, on the one side Carthage built by her' (Anonymous 1987: 120 ff.).

Between late May 1637 and early February 1638 the above-mentioned Athanasius Kircher not only acted as confessor to the young Viscount of Hesse-Darmstadt who had just enrolled in the Order in Malta, but taught mathematics to young knights, compiled his physical treatise 'Specula Melitensis' allegedly written by the historian Salvatore Imbroll, and wrote a short account of his visit to the troglodytes of Ghar il-Kbir, which was later published in his *Mundus subterraneus*. Kircher also – and this is not well known – composed his book *Iter exaticum coeleste* in Malta (Hein, Mader 1997). In 1644 Abela was contacted by the great anatomist and natural scientist Thomas Bartholin who visited Malta on his educational tour through Europe. But Bartholin was not only interested in anatomy and human bones. In various contributions to the *Epistolae Medicinales* (1663) and *Historiarum Anatomicarum et Medicarum rariora* (1654-61), he referred to his visit and his activities on the island. A few years before his death Abela welcomed another eminent scholar, the Holstenian councillor, Latinist, and historian Burchardus Niderstedt who was sent to Malta by the Herrenmeister of the Protestant branch of the

Order of St. John in Brandenburg-Prussia, Johann Moritz of Nassau-Siegen, to collect material for a new description of Malta. Niderstedt knew Italy from a *giro* in 1650 when he had been a student at Padua and might have even visited Malta. In Malta in 1654 he was helped a lot by Abela, '*Excellentissimo viro, Vice-Cancellario'*, as he described him. In 1660 the Hildesheim-born scholar finally published his popular *Malta vetus et nova*. In Malta Niderstedt also got information from the aged Christian von Osterhausen, the author of several books on the history and statutes of the Order.

However, Abela was not the only learned contact. In December 1646, the French scholar Balthasar de Monconys met a local expert in Arabic language and culture who had also lent him an Arabic grammar (Monconys 1697: 171 ff.). The Sicilian botanist Paolo Boccone had visited Malta and Gozo several times in the 1660s but he still needed the help of the physician Narduccio Murmuro, then living in Gozo, who collected the *Cynomorium Coccineum* and several other plants and sent them over to him in Palermo. In the 1690s in a long letter Boccone informed John Hoskins, then president of the Royal Society, on the qualities of the *Cynomorium Coccineum* of Gozo (Boccone 1674). In 1739 the Scottish compiler John Campbell edited the account of an anonymous British merchant who had spent some time in Malta in the 1660s. We are not told where this gentleman lodged in Valletta but his landlord, a certain Mr Perez, proved very helpful, and he brought the British traveller in contact with a 'Sicilian Physician whose name was Sprotti' who served as a kind of *cicerone* to the 'curiosities of the Island', namely the summer palaces of the grand masters, Mdina, Rabat and St Paul's Grotto, and the fortresses of the Order (Campbell 1739: 170 ff.).

There are no documents which prove that the above mentioned Thomas Bartholin's greatest pupil, Nikolaus Steno, actually visited Sicily and Malta, but it seems that the 'father of modern geology' has been on the islands in 1668. Steno had actually corresponded with the Maltese *uomo universale*, Giovan Francesco Buonamico, on the problem of the *glossopetrae*. Buonamico had become involved in the controversy about the origin of the *glossopetrae* or so called snakes tongues, when he was asked about the matter by Paolo Boccone, the botanist and naturalist of the grand duke of Tuscany. Boccone in the spring and summer of 1668 spent some time in Malta and Gozo carrying out some research on local flora and fauna. Before coming over, Boccone had been asked by his friend from Messina, the naturalist and painter Agostino Scilla, to gather as much information on Maltese fossils as possible. Buonamico wrote a long treatise on the origin of the Maltese *glossopetrae* and sent it to Scilla who responded by a counterthesis, *La vana speculazione disingannata dal senso, lettera risponsiva circa i corpi marini, che petrificati si trovano in varii luoghi terrestri*' (1670), and insisted that these *glossopetrae* were

nothing but fossilized sharks' teeth. Scilla's book had at least three Latin re-editions in the next decades. In fact from the 1660s onwards the Maltese 'St Paul's tongues' or *glossopetrae* became a standard subject of description and discussion by all sorts of visitors to Malta.

Linguists and bibliophiles

The eighteenth century was the high period of the culture of letter-writing. Without modern means of travelling and communication, letters were the only way for scholars and scientists to stay in contact with one other and remain updated with the latest news and information. The Comte de Caylus corresponded with the erudite knight of Malta Félicien de Monts de Savasse his entire life. Both the encyclopaedic Gozitan scholar Canon Gio Pietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis and the Maltese Count Gian Antonio Ciantar kept a multifaceted correspondence with several scholars in Italy, France, and Germany (Soldanis 1999; Archive of the Order of Malta (Valletta) MS 145, 146). In the late 1760s Karl von Zinzendorff sojourned in Malta and wrote:, '*Der gelehrte Ritter Compagnoni führte mich zum Grafen von Ciantar Verfasser verschiedener gelehrter Werke, worunter jenes von der Anlandung des Heiligen Paulus zu Maltha das merkwürdigste ist. Er hatte des Abela Malta illustrata verbessert und vermehrt; da er aber das Manuskript nach Venedig zum Druck schickte, ging es unterwegs verloren. Ich fand ihn daher beschäftigt, es wieder herzustellen. Weil er seitdem blind geworden ist, so diktiert er es einem Kopisten in die Feder, und beweist hierdurch die ungewöhnliche Stärke seines Gedächtnisses*' (Zinzendorff 1785: 218). On the same day he visited Agius de Soldanis, '*Ein Mann der auch durch andere gelehrte Schriften besonders durch seinen Discurso apologetico intorno il naufragio di S. Paolo seiner Nation Ehre macht*' (Zinzendorff 1785: 221). Soldanis then was member of at least four Italian academies and in 1763 had been appointed first Librarian of what is now known as the National Library of Malta (Cf. Cassar Pullicino 1996). Soldanis stood in good contact with Giovanni Lami, Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Florence, famous antiquary and man of letters. Thanks to his help Soldanis could achieve the publication of his treatise on the famous Maltese *glossopietre* and the *Annone Cartaginese* (1757). Thanks to the publication of his *Della Lingua Punica* (1750), Soldanis` name became quite well known by foreign linguists and historians. In February 1750 he left Malta for a visit to Rome in the company of James Caulfield, first Earl of Charlemont, who before had visited Italy, the Greek islands, Constantinople, the Levant and Egypt (Soldanis 1750: 67).

Another interesting contact was established with Anthony Askew, a doctor and classical scholar. In 1747 and 1748 Askew toured the continent and Italy and became a good friend of Paolo Maria Paciaudi. Paciaudi was a corresponding member of the *Accademia Francese delle Iscrizioni e Belle Arti*, later he became

librarian of the Duke of Parma. In Malta he is well known for his *Memorie de` Gran Maestri del Sovrano Ordine Gerosolimitano* (1780). In 1748 he was in Naples and was occupied in archaeological research and the preparation for the publication of *Alcune Singolari e Strane Medaglie*. In the same year Soldanis had sent a Greek inscription found in Malta to Paciaudi for his views. On September 28th 1748, Paciaudi wrote to Soldanis informing him that Askew and Paciaudi agreed that it was just an impressive imitation (N(ational) L(ibrary) M(alta) Libr. MS, 146, ii, f. 241.). Shortly after, in the summer of 1749, Soldanis served as *cicerone* in Gozo for the English traveller Thomas Blackburn (NLM. Libr. MS. 146, ii, ff. 243r-244r.).

Information delivered by Agius de Soldanis found its way into the works of Jean Jacques Barthélemy, the Florentine scholars Stefano Borgia, the dissertations of the famous French linguist De Guignes, and many others. No wonder erudite travellers like Johann Hermann von Riedesel (1767), Lord Charlemont and the painter Dalton (1750), the Count of Zinzendorff (end of the 1760s), and the Abbé Fontenay (1758) were all interested in contacting Agius de Soldanis personally when visiting Malta. The person of Soldanis brings us to the highly interesting and very multifaceted international discussion about the allegedly Punic basis of the Maltese language. This discussion had also its effect on questions of national identity and politics. Its deep impact is certainly unthinkable without the contacts of travelling scholars. The original Maltese language had interested European historiographers, linguists, scholars and amateurs since the sixteenth century. In the spring of 1588 the Swabian *Ordinarius Historiographicus* Hieronymus Megiser had visited Malta and had collected Maltese words and phrases. He finally published parts of this list in 1603 in his *Thesaurus Polyglottus vel Dictionarium Multilingue* and in 1606 in his well-known *Propugnaculum Europae*. Megiser believed that the actual Maltese idiom contained fragments of Punic (Freller 1999: 205 ff.). In fact, starting with Quintin's *Insulae Melitae Descriptio* (1536) up to the mid-eighteenth century, most of the authors and travellers who contributed to a greater or lesser degree to the Maltese language had maintained that Maltese was directly rooted in the old Punic language. According to the sixteenth century Italian poet and historian Tommaso Porcacchi, the Maltese live '*alla Siciliana, e parlando lingua più tosto Carthaginese, che altro*' (Porcacchi 1572: 44). To support this claim Quintin and Porcacchi refer to the play *Poenulus* by T. Maccius Plautus, where some Punic words were quoted which were supposedly similar to Maltese. The question of the Maltese language, at least since the eighteenth century, went far beyond the topics of linguistics. The second half of the century was not only the period when scientific and cultural circles of Europe developed a strong interest in the history of Greek and Roman classics, it also witnessed a growing interest in oriental and Arabic culture and heritage. This approach and interest was, on one

hand, aesthetic and visual. On the other hand it also led to in depth studies of Arabic linguistics and history. The centres for these studies were the universities of France and Germany. Soon, in connection with this development, the Maltese language and its history also started being investigated.

In the eighteenth century more works, including word lists and references to the grammatical structure of Maltese, reflected an increasing interest in the investigation of the roots and history of this language. The professor of Greek and oriental languages at the university of Giessen (Hesse, Germany), Johannes Heinrich Majus, never visited Malta and the main source of his *Specimen Linguae Punicae in hodierna Melitensium superstitis* (1718) was material submitted to him by the Maltese Jesuit Ribier de Gattis. Especially through its second edition published in Leyden in 1725, Majus' work was widely known by oriental and classical scholars and interested amateurs. One of the chapters in Majus' *Specimen Linguae Punicae* reads '*Veterum Melitensium lingua eadem quae Punica*' (chapter 12, 'The language of the old Maltese is the same as the Punic one'). Majus concluded that 'modern' Maltese still contained some remains (*rudera*) of old Punic (Cf. Mangion 1992: 33 ff.; Cremona 1938). The next major work which dealt with Maltese was *Della Lingua Punica presentamente usata da maltesi* (1750) by Agius de Soldanis. In 1757 de Soldanis also published *Annone Cartaginese*. Soldanis`s works propagated two central ideas: that Maltese derives directly from the original Punic Language and that it may be of help to the study of the Etruscan language. Soldanis`s works and activities show strong influence of G. B. Vico and L. A. Muratori and other pioneers of folklore studies in Italy. Of course this 'Punic theory' would only have been possible through a uninterrupted occupation of the islands from the Punic era to early modern times – which was not the case. But in the times of Soldanis this historical point had been hardly researched. How carefully Soldanis' work was read is documented in the popular description of Malta published in several numbers of *Il Magazzino Italiano di Istruzione, e di Piacere* published between March and May 1752. Its anonymous author faithfully follows Soldanis regarding the Punic roots of Maltese. In 1756 M. Boncemy, *Historiographe ancien pensionnaire de l`Academie des Belles Lettres* and member of the *Academie Royale des Inscriptions*, had read Soldanis` book and desired to have him received as *Academicien des Belles Lettres* (NLM, Libr. MS. 146, f. 213r.). Throughout the eighteenth century the Punic history of Malta and the Punic language were standard topics in travelogues and travel diaries about the island. In fact there developed two schools: one followed the thoughts and interpretations of Soldanis while the other considered Maltese as just another corrupted dialect of the Arabic or Berber languages. Punic Malta is also discussed in detail in some unexpected sources, such as the well-known British scholar Jacob Bryant's *Observations and Inquiries relating to various parts of Ancient History* (1767) quoted by many travellers when visiting

the Pauline shrines in Malta in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It even found its way into Russian publications on Malta like Gregory Krayevski's *Kratkoye Tipograficheskoye, Istoricheskoye i Politicheskoye Opisaniye Ostrova Malt*i (1800/01).

In the second half of the eighteenth century the works of Majus and Soldanis were all of a sudden discredited and started attracting heavy criticism. What were the reasons for this? A deeper and more extensive study of the Oriental idioms and their interrelations led to the opinions of Majus and Soldanis becoming more and more refuted. After 1770 the question of the roots of the Maltese language became the object of a hot international debate between amateurs and experts. Scholars and travellers who dwelt upon this subject included such important personalities as the great French orientalist Silvestre de Sacy, the Danish philologist Friedrich Münter, the German Oriental scholars and professors Johann Joachim Bellermann and Wilhelm Gesenius, and the librarian Johann Christoph Adelung. The development of this discussion is interesting not only from the scientific aspect. It very soon became involved with matters of national identity and the nascent nationalism. As in contemporary Italy, where scholars and artists like Piranesi favoured the theory of a greater direct Etruscan influence on Roman culture, against the common belief of Greek dominance, it became convenient for a new generation of Maltese scholars and men of letters – foremost the Maltese Oriental scholar Mikiel Anton Vassalli – to stress a supposed root of Maltese in the then fascinating and still mysterious ancient Punic language. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Punic language had not been still fully deciphered and it was attracting major interest throughout Europe. In fact interest in the Punic history and language was boosted through excavations made in Malta. Visitors to Sicily and Malta at the end of the eighteenth century, as Münter, Roland de la Platière, Torre di Rezzonico, Saint-Priest, and authors like Kayser, hardly ever fail to refer to the Punic heritage in their travelogues and writings.

How widespread the interest in this subject was is shown, for example, in the writings of the Swedish traveller Jacob Jonas Bjoernsthal. In the winter of 1770/71, Bjoernsthal was sailing from Toulon to Civitavecchia when he realized that there were both Arabs and Maltese on board the ship and stimulated by curiosity, investigated the connection between the two languages. He was surprised how easily the Maltese could communicate with the Arabs. The Swedish traveller knew about the *Annone Cartaginese* and *Della lingua punica* and asked the Maltese merchants to write some words in their native language. Bjoernsthal strongly disagreed with the theory of Majus and Soldanis: 'It is surprising that a native from Malta does not know which type of language he speaks. The Punic theory is nothing but a dream' (Bijörnsthal 1777: i, 216 ff.). This episode also reflects – although negatively – to

what extent Soldanis' *Della lingua punica* was known to scholars and amateurs alike in the second half of the eighteenth century. In fact this work was to play a major part in the revelation of the Arabic forgeries of the Maltese Abbate Giuseppe Vella, who had claimed to have found and translated long-lost Arabic manuscripts dealing with the history of Sicily under the Arabs and Normans. In 1786 the French scholar de Guignes had pointed out the similarity between Vella's 'medieval' Arabic documents and the Maltese language. De Guignes did this by using Soldanis' *Della lingua punica* (Freller 2001: chapter v).

The second half of the eighteenth century witnessed an increasing general interest in the historical and ethnological roots of countries and the character and identity of their peoples. In Malta, too, people developed a strong desire in getting to know their own national roots, identity, and culture, independently of the Order of St John. Subjects like science, culture, and language provided the platform for these new interests. This discussion on the language soon became interwoven with matters of national identity and developing nationalism. Maltese scholars and men of letters – especially Soldanis and Vassalli – found it convenient to stress that Maltese was rooted in the still mysterious ancient Punic language. Many foreigners too supported the view that there was still a considerable amount of Punic rudiments in Maltese. Very often this new approach was accompanied by a critical approach to the government of the Order which was now in obvious decline and struggling to maintain its *raison d'être*. The main proponent of the romantically-inspired but also politically-motivated Punic theory was Vassalli.

In the 1790s Vassalli wrote two Maltese grammars, one in Latin and another in Italian. He also carried out the systematic compilation of a Maltese-Italian-Latin dictionary. Scholars like him were influenced by the Enlightenment which had a static concept of language. Vassalli idealized rural speech and understood it in an abstract way as the 'true' language. In his works Vassalli appealed to the people of Malta ('*alla Nazione Maltese*') to learn their own language, cultivate it, and use it as a means of self-education. Not only Vassalli was pro-French, but there were many Maltese men of letters who sided with the French and the ideas of the French encyclopaedists and liberals. One was the anonymous Maltese author of the *Recherches Historiques et Politiques sur Malte* (1798). Malta was, to him, not only his '*patrie*' but a nation. He admires '*le citoyen Vassallo*' for his work on the Maltese language. The anonymous author presents Maltese as a key to the interpretation of Punic. In the 1790s Mikiel Anton Vassalli`s linguistic studies also found some echo in the circles of the European scholars. For example the Dutch politician and scholar Johann Meerman sojourned in Malta in March and April 1792 and wrote: 'A certain abbot (sic), who has recently published a grammar of this language in Latin, asserts that it is a Phoenico-Punic language, and one of the oldest

human languages, related to Chaldaen' (Strickland (ed.) 2005: 134). Several learned and open-minded contemporary visitors fully realized the political impact and background of Vassalli's publications. Charles Sonnini de Manoncourt, who visited Malta in 1777 but published his reworked travelogue only in 1800, wrote that 'Antonio Vassalli, a learned Maltese, has lately vindicated his nation from the charge of having no tongue of its own, having demonstrated that the Maltese may vie with the most copious of the living languages' (Sonnini 1800: 55). In the early nineteenth century, historians like Louis de Boisgelin still believed what de Soldanis and Vassalli had written on the roots of the Maltese language. Many learned visitors, like Alfred Reumont in November 1832, knew Vassalli's works.

The harsh criticism of the 'amateur' linguist Bjoernsthal against the Maltese-Punic theory, was made more scientific by the German linguist and librarian of the library of the archduke of Saxony in Dresden, Johann Christoph Adelung. In his *Mithridates oder allgemeine Sprachenkunde*, he indicates Arabic as the main foundation of Maltese. The other vocabulary was obtained from Italian and French. Similar observations were made by the French professor of the Oriental languages, Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy. The final blow against this conviction came when the German scholar Wilhelm Gesenius pointed out the weak points of the Punic-Maltese theory. A professor of theology at the university of Halle, Gesenius was a leading expert in Hebraic and the fragments of Punic which had been unearthed. In 1810 he published his treatise *Versuch ueber die maltesische Sprache* which was rated as a counter-thesis to Vassalli`s works. Gesenius first stressed that the Punic language was still too superficially known to provide a solid base for any comparison with modern Maltese. Furthermore, most contemporary scholars were not able to distinguish between old Hebrew and Punic. Secondly, he pointed out that a survival of the idiom spoken in Malta before the Arab occupation in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, was more than unlikely. He correctly realized the similarity between the Arabic dialect spoken in the Maghreb and Maltese. Gesenius was led to this conclusion after consulting the first publication about the Maghrebian dialect, namely, Franz von Dombay's *Grammatica linguae mauro-arabicae*. Through this prevailing scholarly activity and increasing knowledge in oriental linguistics and culture, the dynamism and development of such studies favoured a proper interpretation on the origins of the Maltese language and its importance within the historic frame. It may have been this type of scholarly criticism about the Punic theory which led Vassalli to rethink his conclusions. In his *Grammatica* (1827) and his *Motti, Aforismi e Proverbii Maltesi* (1828), he abandoned his former point of view.

The natural sciences

The main person of reference for any traveller to Sicily interested in natural history in the late 18th century was Cavaliere Giuseppe Gioeni. Gioeni was a

Knight of Malta but resided then mostly in Catania in the residence of his family. In the 1770s and 1780s he and the well known French geologist Deodat de Dolomieu had carried out intensive research on geology and mineralogy. Even when in the late 1780s Dolomieu left Malta and the Order of St. John their contact never ceased. In fact the correspondence between the two scholars is a mine of information about the latest scientific developments and political news (Cf. Lacroix (ed.) 1921: xix, 92, 234 ff., 245 ff., 242 ff.). In the 1780s, in his villa in Catania, Gioeni had established an extensive cabinet for minerals and natural curiosities. It soon attracted the interest of foreigners. In the 1770s, 1780s and 1790s the mineralogist from Livland, Johann Michael von Borch, the Swiss nobleman Carl Ulysses von Salis Marschlin, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Count Friedrich Leopold von Stolberg, the French painters Jean Houel and Dominique Vivant Denon, keenly tried to contact Gioeni and praised his well ordered and organised collection of minerals, shells and objects of the natural sciences. Giuseppe Gioeni then held the post of '*Prolettore*' of the University of Catania, for a long time the only university in Sicily. The Danish traveller Friedrich Münter in 1786 has left an excellent description of Gioeni and his cabinet. The future Protestant bishop of Seeland and professor for theology and ancient history described Gioeni as a 'worthy natural scientist' (Münter 1790: 420). Three years later Gioeni was praised by the mineralogist and secretary to the court of Weimar, Voigt, 'not only as an excellent scientist but also a most kind, polite, and helpful character' (Tuzet 1988: 370). Deodat de Dolomieu would have surely agreed with such a description. In some of his treatises on Mount Etna and on minerals, he describes Gioeni's collections. Some decades later Johann Caspar Fehr still recalled Gioeni's famous cabinet, although when the traveller visited his heirs in 1819 they had just begun selling the items of Gioeni's collection (Fehr 1835: 50 ff.). Johann Heinrich Bartels who met Goeni in 1786 described him as an 'excellent man, ambitious, then very much occupied to find new species of shells, and refurbishing his collection' (Bartels 1789-1792: ii, 457 ff.). Gioeni not only was a point of reference for the travelling scientist but also sometimes served as *cicerone* for the 'average' Grand Tourist. In February 1791 the British traveller Brian Hill stated that '*questa sera siamo stati col Cavalier Joenai (sic) a visitare la città, abbiamo visti gli antichi bagni*' (Hill 1974: 59 ff.).

Many eighteenth-century visitors interested themselves in mineralogy, fossils, and natural history although they were not real experts in the matter. Thorough experts in the natural sciences and natural history were, however, Count Johann Michael von Borch from Livland – author of *Lithographie Sicilienne* (1777) and *Lithologie et minéralogie Sicilienne* (1778) – and Charles Sigisbert Sonnini de Manoncourt. Sonnini passed information about the fauna and flora of Malta to his friend, the scientist Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, in several letters. From the

Count von Borch we get to know that in the late 1770s the most acclaimed Maltese doctor was not Michel'Angelo Grima, who had worked in Germany and was the author of several medical treatises, but a certain Dr Zammit, 'very well-versed in chemistry and botany' (Borch 1783: i, 170 ff.). Zammit lived in Mdina and a couple of years earlier had made a name for himself by building a rich botanical garden near Fort St Elmo. Christoph Albrecht Kayser wrote in 1799 that this garden, however, fell into ruins after Zammit's death (Kayser 1799-1800: ii, 84). Zammit was not the only doctor and natural scientist Count Johann Michael von Borch sought to contact during his December 1776 visit. Borch was one day invited by Grand Cross Camille de Rohan to witness an experiment conducted by the Abbé Grimaldi who had invented a special mixture to staunch bleeding. The experiment, which was carried out on a goat, did not however, work, for the goat died the following day (Borch 1783: i, 175 ff.). It is not known if the Count von Borch had personal contacts with Deodat de Dolomieu, but in his travelogue and publications on aspects of natural science, he praised the French scientist's treatises on the natural history and climate of Malta. In the 1780s Dolomieu had become one of the best known natural scientists of his times. His publications and papers on volcanoes, mineralogy, fossils, and climate, like the *Voyage aux Iles de Lipari* (1783), *Bemerkungen über die Ponza-Inseln* (1789), and *Essai sur la Température du Climat de Malthe* (1781/83), were widely read and often quoted even by amateurs. In 1790, following a clash with his arch-enemy Balī Loras and with Grand Master Rohan, Dolomieu had turned his back on Malta. Before he had been much sought by visitors interested in Sicily's and Malta`s geology (Lacroix (ed.) 1921: xviii ff., 91 ff.; Borch 1783: i, 177; Münter 1937: ii, 137 ff.; Münter 1944: i, 224-231). Recalling his meetings with Dolomieu in Malta in May 1777, Sonnini de Manoncourt called him a man, 'whom the sciences number among their most illustrious and dearest partisans'. In the 1770s Dolomieu had bought a house ('Maison Buda') with a small garden in Valletta, where he not only set up an observatory but filled it with specimens of volcanoes, rare plants, fossils, artefacts, Punic, Greek, and Roman coins and a great many specialized books. This house was frequently visited by travellers. Together with his Freemason-friend Commander Bosredon-Rancijat, Dolomieu toured Sicily and Italy. In Rome in 1788 Dolomieu met Goethe who had just returned from Sicily and his aborted visit to Malta. Another member of the Order who occupied himself with questions of natural science and was regularly contacted by travellers was the Chevalier Andelard and his paper on the climate in Malta published in the 'Mercure de France' in August 1777 was often quoted. Dolomieu's and Gioeni's closest friend and Masonic colleague was the knight of Malta, Philippe de Fay. After Dolomieu had left Malta for good, Fay was contacted by many visitors about volcanoes and mineralogy.

Archaeology and ancient history

For any learned traveller to Sicily in the second half of the 18th century, a visit to the museum of Ignazio Vincenzo Paternò, Principe di Biscari in Catania was a must. Münter, Borch, Goethe, Swinburne, Zinzendorff, Bartels, Houel, Denon and many others describe such a visit. Biscari`s impressive collection then not only preserved ancient artefacts (coins, medals, vases and statues) but also Sicilian arms, dresses, and jewels and had an attached cabinet with objects of the natural sciences (instruments, technical tools and minerals), amongst them many rocks and lava specimens from the Etna. It was this vast frame which made some specialists like Dolomieu and Münter complain about the lack of system in the collection of Biscari (Tuzet 1988: 367). The prince himself had made a name of international reputation when in the 1770s and 1780s he published some well received treatises and books on Sicily's ancient history and classical heritage, amongst them the well known *Viaggio per tutte le antichità della Sicilia* (1781). How far the prince of Biscari`s involvement in freemasonry played a role in the interest of so many foreigners to meet him, is difficult to answer. What is sure, is that many of the scholars and connoisseurs who in the 1770s and 1780s paid a visit to his museum belonged to the mushrooming freemason lodges in France, England, Scandinavia or Germany. The beginning was made with Johann Hermann von Riedesel in spring 1767. The freemason Riedesel originally intended to tour *Magna Graecia*, Sicily and Malta together with his mentor Johann Joachim Winckelmann but shortly before the departure the latter pulled out. Riedesel is full of praise for the 'worthy and truly venerable Prince Biscari, the principal and richest citizen of Catania…' (Riedesel 1773: 88 ff.). The German baron states that, 'The museum of Prince Biscari is one of the most complete and beautiful in Italy, and perhaps (without exaggeration) in the world. It contains busts, statues, basso relievos, bronzes, etc. His cabinet of curiosities relating to natural history is very complete; he has likewise a very curious collection of various mechanical instruments' (Riedesel 1773: 97 ff.). Riedesel`s travelogue gives a long list of the items then kept in the museum. But there were also the human, not to say freemason qualities of the prince which need to be stressed. The prince was 'a man who uses the advantage of his family to the benefit of mankind (…) His company is agreeable and instructive, and serious without dryness, he decides by his arguments, while he only seems to give his opinion. (…) I made an eight days stay with them [Biscari and his wife] and in that time became their zealous and true admirer' (Riedesel 1773: 102). Deodat de Dolomieu, a member of the Parisian *Loge des Neuf Soeurs* comments on the collection of Biscari in a letter to Lalande dated 9th June 1782: '*La collection des médailles du Prince de Biscari est une des plus nombreuses qu`il y ait en Italie. (…) Les amateurs d`antiquités vantent aussi beaucoup sa collection de marbres et statues antiques, inscriptions, bas-reliefs, bronzes etc.*' (Lacroix (ed.) 1921: 92). In 1778 another freemason, Henry Swinburne, had visited Catania and the Prince of Biscari and informs his readers: 'His [Biscari`s] museum contains many precious articles.

His cabinet of cameos and intaglios is a rich one, and his cretas and vases are curious. I spent some days with him very agreeably' (Swinburne 1885: 194). One year before Jean Houel, author of the famous *Voyage pittoresque des îles de Sicile, de Malte et de Lipari* and like Dolomieu member of the *Loge des Neuf Soeurs*, had paid a visit to Biscari. Another freemason and scholar who has a lot to say about the prince and his collection is the Danish traveller Friedrich Münter. He sojourned in Catania in December 1785 and in his travel notes, his later published travelogue as well as in his letters he refers to the 'Museo Biscari, housed in an edifice which the prince built behind the façade of his palace; its galleries and rooms run around squarish courtyards'. The prince was long dead when travellers like Brian Hill or Johann Caspar Fehr still commented on his famous museum (Hill 1974: 59 ff..; Fehr 1835: 291).

But there were also other collectors who had established a good name in the circles of the connoisseurs and foreign scholars. During his examination of the classical heritage of Sicily in 1776 and 1777, Johann Michael von Borch especially praised the support he got from the Sicilian knight Cesare Gaetani della Torre, 'a knowledgeable man of most gentle manners who enjoys especially guiding the travellers to the archaeological remains of the island' (Borch 1783: i, 122; Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek 1785: 203). Just one year later the Dutch traveller Willem H. van Nieuwerkerke carried with him a letter from the British ambassador and connoisseur Sir William Hamilton for 'Count Gaetani, a man of great merit, an erudite antiquarian known for his translation of Theocritus into Italian' (Strickland (ed.) 2005: 50). But in the end Nieuwerkerke and his travel group – amongst them the Swiss painter Louis Ducros – when in Syracuse in June 1778, did not make it to the palace of Cesare Gaetani. Another traveller who actually visited Gaetani was the French painter Jean Houel in spring 1777. In one of his letters home he praised '*mon respectable ami le Conte Gaetani de la Torre*' (Houel, travel journal, cahier 5, March 24, 1777). In the 1770s and 1780s Count Gaetani della Torre, translator of *Anacreonte*, an archaeologist and poet, and his palace in Syracuse became a much desired aim to visit for travellers on the Grand Tour. Already in 1767 when the Baron of Riedesel arrived in Syracuse he knew 'Count Gaetani, a very learned man, well versed in the history of his native city, and perfectly well acquainted with the Greek language….' (Riedesel 1773: 79). The future mayor of Hamburg, Heinrich Bartels, who was in Syracuse in 1786 refers to Gaetani`s publications and activities in great detail (Bartels 1789-1792: iii, 265 ff.). Of course also Dolomieu in his letters makes mention of the work and achievements of his former brethren in the Order of St. John (Lacroix (ed.): 242 ff.). Besides Gaetani there was the learned Count Saverio Landolina Nava in Syracuse who held an important role in the international network of the *comunitas litteraria* and who attracted visitors. Landolina was the nephew of the Prince of Biscari and like Gioeni, a knight of

Malta. Only a very few then knew that he also was an active freemason and member of the Freemason lodge of Syracuse. Much more was known about his vast interest in Sicilian folklore, history, the natural sciences and linguistics. In the 1780s he set up a rich collection of antiquities and developed a keen interest in the production of Papyrus. About this subject he communicated extensively with Christian Gottlob Heyne, professor of Old Greek at the University of Göttingen (Tuzet 1988: 370 ff.). He also had an extensive letter exchange with Münter (Münter 1944: ii, 1-9; Münter 1937: ii, 73), Bartels (Bartels 1789-1792: iii, 52 ff.) or Thomas Christian Tychsen (Freller 2001: chapter 5). Because of his contacts with Tychsen in 1792 he published his *Gli Antichi Monumenti di Siracusa* in Hamburg. Landolina was visited by Stolberg, Denon, Meerman, Washington Irving and many others (Cf. Tuzet 1988: 370 ff.).

Based on the concept of humanism the visits of and contacts with foreign scholars formed an important aspect of touring foreign countries. When, between the 16th and 18th century the islands of Malta and Sicily were integrated into the canon of the European educational tour, the local scholars also became important points of reference for travelling members of the *res publica litteraria* as well as for the 'ordinary' cavalier on his educational tour. The contacts with the local scholars formed the perception of Malta and Sicily, its culture and history, in a most decisive way. In this very brief and fragmentary paper it was intended to indicate to what an important extent the contact with the Sicilian and Maltese scholars contributed to the European awareness, interpretation and classification of important aspects of Sicilian and Maltese culture, as for example the archaeological heritage of these regions, their language or geology.

Bibliography

AGIUS DE SOLDANIS, G.P.F. 1750. *Della Lingua Punica presentamente usata da maltesi*. Rome: Generoso Salomoni.

1999. *Gozo Ancient and Modern: Religious and Profane.* Malta: Media Centre Publications.

Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek lxiii (1785). Kiel : C.E. Bohn: 200-210.

Anonymous 1987. *Travels through France and Italy (1647-1649).* Luigi Monga (ed.). Geneva, (= Biblioteca del viaggio in Italia. Testi 25).

BARTELS, J.H. 1789-92. *Briefe über Kalabrien und Sizilien.* 3 Volumes. Göttingen.

BIJÖRNSTHAL, J.J. 1777. *Briefe auf Reisen durch Frankreich, Italien, die Schweiz, Deutschland, Holland, England und einen Theil der Morgenländer* i. Rostock-Leipzig.

BISCARI, Principe d, I.V.P. 1781. *Viaggio per tutte le antichità della Sicilia.* Na-

ples.

BOCCONE, P. 1674. *Icones & Descriptiones rariorum plantarum Siciliae, Melitae, Galliae & Italiae*. Oxford.

BORCH, J.M. von. 1783. *Briefe über Sicilien und Malta.* 2 volumes. Bern.

CAMPBELL, J. (ed.). 1739. *The Travels and Adventures of Edward Brown, Formerly a Merchant in London.* London.

CASSAR-PULLICINO, J. 1996. *Gio Pietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis: 1712-1770, Commemoration by the Malta Historical Society*. Malta.

CREMONA, A.1938. *Vassalli and his times: A biography*. Malta.

FEHR, J.C. 1835. *Die Insel Sicilien mit ihren umliegenden Eilanden.* St Gallen.

FRELLER, T. 2002. *'Epitome of Europe' Das Bild Maltas und des Johanniterordens in der frühneuzeitlichen Reiseliteratur*. Frankfurt: P. Lang.

2001. *The rise and fall of Abate Vella: A story of forgery and deceit.* Malta.

1999. 'Rusticorum Melitensium sermo fertur esse semi-Punicus?' Some notes on an international 18th century discussion. *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* cil, 2: 205-220.

1998. *The Cavaliers`Tour and Malta in 1663.* Malta.

GUALTHERUS, G. 1625. *Siciliae et objacentium insularum et Bruttorium antiqua tabulae.* Messina.

HEIN, O. & MADER, R. 1997. *Athanasius Kircher und Malta.* Wiesbaden.

HILL, B. 1974. *Curiosità di un viaggio in Calabria e in Sicilia nel 1791*. Rosanna Albani Berlingieri (Ed.). Reggio Calabria.

HOÜEL, Jean, 'travel journal', Fondation Custodia, Paris, Inv. No. 1998–A 441, cahier 5.

KAYSER, A.C. 1799-1800. *Neuestes Gemählde von dem Johanniter oder Maltheser Ritterorden und seinen Besitzungen Maltha, Gozo und Comino* 3 volumes. Leipzig-Ronneburg.

LACROIX, A. (ed.). 1921. *Deodat Dolomieu: Sa Vie Aventureuse - Sa Captivité - Ses Œuvres- Sa Correspondance* 2 volumes. Paris: Librairie académique, Perrin & cie., libraires-éditeurs.

LOHMEIER, D. 1979. Von Nutzbarkeit der fremden Reysen'. Rechtfertigungen des Reisens im Zeitalter der Entdeckungen. *Trierer Beiträge* 3: 3-8.

MAJUS, J.H. 1718. *Specimen Linguae Punicae in hodierna Melitensium superstitis.* Marburg.

MANGION, G. 1992. *Studi italo-maltesi.* Valletta: Said International.

MONCONYS, B. de 1697. *Journal des voyages.* Lyon.

MÜNTER, F. 1944. *Aus dem Briefwechsel Friedrich Münters. Europäische Beziehungen eines dänischen Gelehrten 1780-1830*. Ojvind Andreasen (Ed.). 3 volumes. Copenhagen-Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot.

1937. *Aus den Tagebüchern Friedrich Münters. Wander- und Lehrjahre eines dänischen Gelehrten*. Ojvind Andreasen (Ed.). 3 volumes. Copenhagen-

Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot.

1790. *Nachrichten von Neapel und Sicilien, auf einer Reise in den Jahren 1785 und 1786.* Copenhagen.

PACIAUDI, P.M. 1780. *Memorie de` Gran Maestri del Sovrano Ordine Gerosolimitano* 2 volumes. Parma.

1748. *Alcune Singolari e Strane Medaglie.* Naples.

PORCACCHI, T. 1572. *L`isola più famose del mondo.* Venice.

RIEDESEL, J.H. von. 1773. *Travels through Sicily and that part of Italy formerly called Magna Graecia.* London.

SCHEICHER, E. 1979. *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Habsburger.* Vienna.

SCHLOSSSER, J. von. 1908. *Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance.* Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann.

SCILLA, D. 1670. *La vana speculazione disingannata dall senso, lettere risponsiva circa i corpi marini, che petrificati si trovano in varii luoghi terrestri.* Naples.

SONNINI DE MANAONCOURT, C.S. 1800. *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt, undertaken by Order of the Old Government of France.* London.

STRICKLAND, A. (ed.). 2005. *Malta from The Hague in the 18th Century: Two Dutch Travel Journals by H. W. van Nieuwerkerke and Johan Meerman (1778, 1792).* The Hague: Jongbloed.

SWINBURNE, H. 1885. *The Courts of Europe at the close of the last Century.* 2 volumes. London.

TUZET, H. 1988. *Viaggiatori stranieri in Sicilia nel XVIII secolo.* Palermo.

ZAMMIT-CIANTAR, J. 1991. Athanasius Kircher in Malta. *Studi Magrebini* 23: 23-64.

ZINZERDORF, KARL von. 1785. Beschluț einer Reise von Rom nach Sicil ien, Maltha und Neapel. *Der Teutsche Merkur:* 213-223.