

SOCIAL ASPECTS OF SIGĠIEWI: 1530-1798

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Abstract - This paper presents an overview of developments in the life of the village of Sigġiewi - a typical Maltese village - during the Knights' period with special emphasis on how the villagers' life is affected. It places these developments in the context of the principal events that moulded the islands' history – the arrival of the Order, the Great Siege, visitations of plague, improved economic conditions – and how these left their mark and were reflected in village life.

Introduction

The year 1530, a convenient reference point in Maltese history, marks the dawn of a new era. The acceptance of these islands by the Knights Hospitaller as their home and base of operations was an event of momentous consequence for both the Order itself and for these islands, although this statement could only be made with hindsight as its full impact was only dimly viewed and guessed at the time. It marked the beginning of the end of the seminally important medieval period during which the socio-cultural roots of the Maltese identity, embedded in an Islamic-turned-Christian substrate, with its consequent idiosyncrasies of a Semitic-Latin blend were firmly established to leave their imprint on all that happened later. That year also marked a new orientation in the political and economic spheres that was to subvert radically all medieval patterns and achievements. These new forces penetrated and percolated through the Maltese way of life in all its aspects so that by 1798, the year the Order was ousted from these shores, Maltese society had been transformed almost beyond recognition. Demographically, Malta changed from a population that had stagnated, hovering around the 10,000 mark for centuries, to a dynamic one that grew to ten times that size in less than three centuries. Even more significant, during the Middle Ages, the 10,000 or so population was rather evenly distributed throughout the *campagna* in small hamlets loosely dependent on a dozen rural centres including three walled and fortified precincts. This distribution was a necessary corollary of the highly agricultural nature of the Maltese economic system. The Order of St John, once it had overcome its initial misgivings and resolved to stay come what may, began pumping into these islands enormous sums of money drawing on its lush root-system of commanderies spread throughout the entire depth and breadth of Europe. This newly found bonanza generated employment that could only partially be satisfied by the local population so that immigration of various kinds of labourers, craftsmen and artists from work-starved neighbouring countries around the Mediterranean littoral was induced to settle in unprecedented proportions, stimulating thereby a steep gradient of the demographic profile that represented a highly cosmopolitan society. Furthermore, the sea-faring

Hospitallers naturally basing all their activities around Malta's excellent deep harbours constrained this area, which had hitherto been under-exploited if not neglected altogether, to become an inescapable point of gravitation for the rest of the island's population so that by 1798 the harbour-centred conurbation had come to consist of no less than 37 per cent of the entire population. The rest had by that time re-organised itself into strongly nucleated rural centres, in most cases coinciding with the medieval parish hubs, spelling in the process the extinction of most of the smaller dependent minor villages and hamlets. These economic pressures, particularly the heavy influx of European immigration, in turn left its mark and, indeed, transformed the very fabric of Maltese society, its language, its tastes, its customs, its art and architecture, in fine its entire way of life. The changes that Siġġiewi underwent during this period can only be understood against the backdrop of this wider scenario.

The village limits

From the Middle Ages Siġġiewi inherited a dual organisational structure induced by Malta's civil and ecclesiastical realities. These two structures very often overlapped but did not always do so entirely. The ecclesiastical organisation was older and, hence, influenced the lay sphere of activity. The Maltese Church appears to have been well organised by the early decades of the fourteenth century whereas the *Università* or local municipal government only emerged during the second half of that century. Thus, for example, the nomenclature adopted by the latter for the subdivisions of the island was that of *parrocchie* and *cappelle* which reflects a pre-existing organisation at that level. The year 1530 found Malta partitioned into the ten parishes of Mdina-Rabat, Naxxar, Birkirkara, Qormi, Birgu, St. Caterina (Żejtun), Birmiftuh, Żurrieq, Siġġiewi and Żebbuġ - in that order. This order is practically invariably respected in all contemporary documentation and must reflect some assumed and generally accepted order of precedence, probably based on antiquity of establishment. (The parish of Mellieha had, by this time, long been absorbed by Naxxar as far as its civil rights and responsibilities were concerned although, as late as 1575, it was still being, very unrealistically, considered as a viable reality in ecclesiastical circles; this, however, should not concern us here.) The territory of Siġġiewi was delimited on all sides by natural geographic boundaries. The sea-coast on its south, the deep cleavage of Wied Maghlaq marking its frontier with the parish of Żurrieq which extended as far as Qrendi, another deep valley - Wied il-Baqqija - to its north-east separating it from Rahal Żebbuġ and the Tal-Gholja cliffs on the west set it apart from the territory of Mdina-Rabat that dominates above the plateau.

A highly interesting court-case of 1550 illustrates how these natural boundaries were the accepted limits by the lay administration but that they did not quite tally with ecclesiastical boundaries, thereby creating a source of conflict and tension. The bone of contention was, in this case, the small Church of Santa Marija tal-

Gholja (referred to at the time as Tal-Kemmuna)¹, claimed by a certain Ventura Xerri, née Tonna, to have been built by her forebears in c. 1470 and which she claimed lay within the jurisdictional confines of Mdina to the financial detriment of the Parish Priest of Siġġiewi, Dun Andrea Axiaq, who was contesting her claims. Each of the contestants brought several witnesses in support of their assertions before the Bishop's Court.² All of Xerri's witnesses were municipal appointees and they all agreed that:

The city's parish boundaries extended southwards right to the hill-tops, that is, along the race-course road as far as the cross, and thence below the Bishop's estate as far as Ziguchi's [de Czichocho] vineyards and from there in the direction of the vineyard of the late noble Pero Bonello as far as In-Nixxieġha [Noxea] and from In-Nixxieġha it circumvents the cliffs and wasteland [ridumi et xari] and the lands situated on top of the hill called Tal-Kemmuna [Gemune] in the district of Il-Madliena and as far as L-Imtaħleb [Montechilibo].

The Parish Priest, on the contrary insisted that the Church's jurisdictional limits did not tally with these. His witnesses asserted that the Churches of Santa Marija tal-Kemmuna, San Lawrenz tal-Kemmuna and even the one of San Ġorġ ta' Dejr l-Imghallaq at Fawwara below Ġebel Ċiantar had for long - certainly since the days of Dun Andrea's predecessor Dun Amator Zammit - pertained to Siġġiewi. The court, in fact, decided in favour of the Parish Priest. The concept of *parrocchia* in the ecclesiastical sense was obviously not coterminous with the meaning adopted by Xerri's lay witnesses. Be that as it may, apart from this primary point made by this lawsuit, the detailed proceedings yield highly interesting and relevant insights into the subject in hand. The description of Mdina's eastern frontier extended directly south from some cross (no longer standing) on the Mnarja race-course (*palju*) track - perhaps the start or finish of the course. It headed towards Siġġiewi village below Tal-Virtù, skirting the Bishop's estate (Wied ta' l-Isqof) on its west as far as the Ziguci family vineyard in the Tabrija district³, with present-day Buskett to its west as far In-Nixxieġha (Noxea) which must be Il-Għajn il-Kbira at Girgenti, whence it climbed up to Tal-Gholja, veering west as far as the Maddalena Church on Dingli Cliffs and beyond to Mtahleb. What is even more pertinent to Siġġiewi is that the Fawwara district including the troglodytic church of San Ġorġ ta' Dejr l-Imghallaq, relics of which are still extant in the cliff-face below Ġebel Ċiantar, and the two churches on Tal-Gholja pertained to the parish. To this day the Santa Marija church still functions and was only recently visited officially during the Pastoral Visitation of Archbishop Mercieca⁴, whereas the San Lawrenz church is now incorporated within the complex of private buildings at Tal-Gholja and still discernible as having once been a church. At all these churches the Siġġiewi Parish Priest used to officiate at Vespers and say Mass on the titular feast-day.

Dependent hamlets

Within this territory there were to be found in medieval times a number of small villages and hamlets, a number of which had, by 1530, been abandoned and were then only remembered by the *Raħal* place-name they had passed on to that locality. These included Raħal Masur, Raħal Qdieri, Raħal Xluq, Raħal Ramija, Raħal Tabuni, Raħal Niklusi and Raħal Ghakrux.⁵ Of these, Raħal Qdieri and Raħal Kbir survived well into the Knights' period. Raħal Ramija is recorded by Gian Francesco Abela in 1647 as *Casalotto Ramia* as part of *Terra Siggeuy*⁶ and has now been absorbed by Siġġiewi itself as it expanded during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is not recorded in fifteenth-century documentation but the later place names Guidit illandar in contrata Haramie (1557), Il Bur tal Harramie (1561)⁷ and Terreno nuncupato Il Habel Harramie in contrata Il Gueleg (1648)⁸ suggest that the hamlet flourished during the sixteenth-century; these names, together with present-day Sqaq il-Harramija in the village, perpetuate its memory. On the other hand, Hal Xluq still thrives, miraculously, as a small independent outlying hamlet off the Qrendi road, whereas Hal Qdieri will be shown (*infra*) to have been still functioning for most of the sixteenth century.

Siġġiewi and its environs are perhaps one of the most authentic and best preserved characteristic Maltese rural structures consisting of a major rural centre, bearing a non-*Raħal* name - Siġġiewi - surrounded by a number of satellite small communities in little hamlets of a few farmsteads huddled together bearing *Raħal* place-names, usually of the personal type. Thus, among the Siġġiewi hamlets, Niklusi is clearly a personal name (Nicoloso)⁹, Tabuni survives to this day as a common surname, Xiloc was a rare sixteenth-century surname,¹⁰ and Ramia was a thirteenth-century surname.¹¹ The other names are too old to admit a meaningful interpretation. Raħal Tabuni still had inhabitants in the early sixteenth century and Hal Kbir had quite a handful of inhabitants in the late seventeenth century.¹²

The Semitic prefix *Raħal* (semantically equivalent to the Romance *Casale*) during the sixteenth century came to be contracted to Hal, a fad that was never in fashion before or later. Thus Casal Paola that came later was and is invariably referred to as Raħal Ġdid - not Hal Ġdid - and no Gozo settlement that sprouted after 1600 ever carried a Raħal prefix. The fact that the only record of Harramija assumes that form - Hal Ramija not Raħal Ramija - confirms the suspicion that it was a sixteenth-century and not an earlier creation. Thus, by 1530, Siġġiewi had as still active dependent hamlets Hal Xluq, Hal Ramija, Hal Qdieri and Hal Kbir. This last one was located in the Tal-Providenza area whereas Hal Qdieri, that still figures on today's maps as Halq Dieri, lay further north close to the Tabrija estate.

Relation to the *Università*

This *parrocchia* or *cappella* (that is, district subject to a *cappellano* or *parroco*) thus constituted was in turn subject to the Mdina *Università* at which it was

represented by means of a number, usually one or two, elected *contestabuli*. By 1530, this set-up had been functioning for more than a century. The Mdina jurats had seen to the defense of the island and the organisation of a system of coastal watches by night, it ensured the provisioning of the island with corn, supplementing the local produce with duty-free Sicilian wheat, the organisation of basic services including a hospital at Rabat and salaried medical posts based in Mdina as well as the running of a municipal school that provided the rudiments of education. Maltese interests abroad were safeguarded by means of consuls appointed in key Sicilian cities.

On the other hand, the village representatives were both the voice of the village in Council conveying local complaints that needed to be seen to by a central authority, but were also an effective means of getting through to the village *bedouini* important messages, which were not always palatable, such as the need to contribute free assistance in the maintenance of the Mdina walls, the collection of taxes, the regulation of prices, the control of hawkers' weights and measures, and the all-important smooth-running of the night watch.

The *Baiulia* document illustrates more than one aspect of how the village organisation worked hand in hand with the central municipal government. One of the witnesses, Luca Pachi of Sigġiewi, recalls how, following the banishment of the 300-strong Jewish community from these islands in 1492,¹³ the *Università* was very preoccupied about the depletion of the city's population and consequent weakening of its defences. To offset this liability a number of villagers, among whom was Pachi himself, were forced to start living in Mdina. The relative list of heads of families survives at the National Library.¹⁴ Pachi asserts that this order did not go down well at all with the villagers who found ways and means of flouting it. They were regularly checked by the authorities only to relapse and go back to the villages. By 1550, when Pachi was giving evidence, the order had become a dead letter but it was to be enforced again a decade later when fears of an impending invasion began looming large and gaining substance.¹⁵ Another aspect that emerges from this document was an illustration of how the office of the *Baiulia* itself worked. One of the functions, if not the only one, of this office was the assessment of damages - *dammagi* - to fields wrought by animals such as sheep straying from a grazing flock. In such cases, the *baiulo* or jurat responsible appointed one of two experts or arbiters to assess the damage so that appropriate redress could be meted out to the harmed party; it appears from these proceedings that a second expert was appointed by the village. Thus Sigġiewi, like the other *cappelle*, had its *judices baiulie*, the names of three of whom are known for the period 1530-1550. These were Luca Pachi himself, Bartholomeo Mamo and Nicola Gatt who replaced Mamo when he resigned.¹⁶

Nor were the *dammagi* arbiters the only village-appointed experts. Towards the end of July or during August of each year, when the cumin crop was ripe for harvest, the *Università* summoned village representatives in council to elect experts who were *au courant* with the way the cumin market was going in order to fix the prices of the

product for that year. Two varieties of cumin were cultivated, the sweet cumin or aniseed (*cymini dulci*) and the bitter kind (*cymini agri*) which, after cotton, was the main cash crop that brought in important revenues from export.¹⁷ Thus in 1533, representing Siġġiewi in Council on that occasion were Petru Pachi, Paulu Cafori (Gafà) and Lanza Vella;¹⁸ in the following year only Gregorio Gatt appeared for the village.¹⁹

The water supply

Siġġiewi's affairs recur regularly during *Università* proceedings. There was always some squabble between neighbours that needed to be sorted out by the jurats. The conservation of that precious commodity called water was often the bone of contention particularly when some greedy villager deprived his neighbours of it by diverting free-flowing rain-water courses to his own cistern to the exclusion of others'. If attention is restricted to the first two decades of the Order's rule, then several similar incidents are detected as cropping up in council. Thus *Mastro Matteo Xebiras* sought to protect the water supply to his *jardinu* in *Casali Cuderi* by having a *bando* or proclamation by the town-crier, published on 15 December 1536, whereby interested parties had 24 hours to lodge any complaint they might have had against the way Xebiras was acquiring his rain-water.²⁰ He was, in fact, protecting himself against what happened some months later to Jacobo Pachi who had a prohibitory injunction issued against him for appropriating for his exclusive use rain-water running past his field called Neydret at Siġġiewi to the detriment of his neighbour Franciscu Pachi.²¹ A similar injunction was issued to Antoni de Armanya forbidding him to shunt water running down Tabrija Valley to irrigate his *chanta*, or nursery, annexed to horticultural land belonging to the late Bernardo Vital, to the detriment of the villagers.²² A similar incident in 1544 concerned Bartholomeu Mamo and his cistern in Siġġiewi,²³ whereas litigation between Joanni Pachi and Antoni Pachi also concerning the free-running of a rain-water course at Siġġiewi had to be resolved at Mdina.

The *Università* was concerned not only about the equitable distribution of water but also about its good quality. In 1536 a *bando* was issued at the request of the people of Casali Xiloc, on whose behalf appeared Bartholomeo Gatt, whereby it was prohibited to water animals at the public well or cistern called Bir Habrun in the same hamlet.²⁴ Eight years later the drawing of water from the same well was rationed to four pails per day with a reminder that animals could not be watered there.²⁵ Free-flowing water too needed to be protected from contamination by polluting agents. It appears that the custom of washing clothes at public fountains was common and that, in the absence of modern bleaching powders, clothes washers had resort to lime as a whitener. The practice of *washing [clothes] with lime in the Tabrija stream* was prohibited in 1550,²⁶ as was the habit of *washing cloth at the fountain in the Bishop's horticultural land*.²⁷ The retting of flax - *abonarj linu* - within two miles of the city and within the distance of an arrow's flight - *una balistrata* - from the nearest garden was similarly forbidden.²⁸

Private and common property

There were a number of tiffs between Siġġiewi neighbours which likewise ended up in court at Mdina but which were not concerned with water distribution but rather were property disputes. Villagers showed a very keen sense of ownership, both regarding what pertained to them solely as well as to what was common property; they defended these rights tooth and nail. What appears to have been a rather extreme case was when, in November 1537 Julianu Zimech contested the actions of Marcu Gatt concerning land in the district of Ta' Rwiegh near Hal Qdieri. Zimech accused Gatt that he had sown corn - *segetes* - not only on his own land but extending the sowing onto a public footpath, thereby staking a claim to public property. The jurats did not take the matter at all lightly and intervened by determining the correct limits of Gatt's property and ensured that public land remained intact.²⁹ Only a couple of months later, Dionysiu Vella took Masiu Gatt to task for a similar offence in connexion with land in the Siġġiewi district of San Ġwann, insisting that Gatt should produce his papers of emphyteutical title from the *dohana* to ensure that his agricultural activity was all in order.³⁰ It appears that the already-mentioned Julian Zimech was quite a thorn in his neighbours' side. He was a great stickler for rules and no infringement by others escaped his beady eye although he seems to have been quite lax where his own interests were concerned. In January 1539 it was the turn of Georgi Pachi to have a prohibitory injunction issued against Zimech for excavating not only on his own land but extended the digging onto the public thoroughfare close to Pachi's house.³¹ The feud continued when a month later it was Zimech's turn to take revenge on Pachi and his collaborators Marcu Langro, Manfridu Grima and Nicolao Pachi who had themselves indulged in excavations close to, or possibly in the same place, where Zimech (now referred to as Julian Sevye) had been digging and was stopped.³² That Julian Zimech and Julian Sevye were one and the same person transpires from another source.³³

The bone of contention of yet another quarrel between Siġġiewi neighbours Bertu Camilleri and Lenzu de Brancato was a wall of a field called Thal Chofor in the Siġġiewi district of that name. According to Camilleri, De Brancato had allegedly built a wall encroaching on public land. Nor was this apparently the only of De Brancato's misdemeanours. He had been involved in similar activity on his land called Tha Xortin in Hal Kbir. The Council came down on him like a ton of bricks and ensured that all his illegal constructions were reduced to their pristine form.³⁴ If only we were to be half as efficient in the twentieth century! The villagers were certainly very jealous of their common rights to public land because this meant free and untaxed income in the form of grazing land for their flocks and right to collect brushwood at prescribed times of the year (to ensure its preservation - how wise!) to feed their kitchen fires. Little wonder that Hal Xluq villagers, under the baton of their leader Blas Mangion, turned unanimously on Paulu Buttigieg who

had enclosed by a wall part of a public thoroughfare in April 1550, especially since Buttigieg was a relapser in this respect.³⁵ Within a fortnight Mangion had obtained the desired necessary injunction against Buttigieg from the *Università*.³⁶

Right of way to houses in the same street, especially leading to residences in *cul-de-sacs* and alley-ways (Malt. *sqaqien*), often gave rise to litigations between neighbours. To understand the situation one needs to digress somewhat into the origin of the Maltese *sqaq*. It was certainly not a defensive stratagem against corsair incursions as has been repeatedly proposed; the corsairs were villainous indeed but they get blamed for more than what they deserved! In medieval times the village habitation unit (and sometimes also the town residence) was what was termed in notarial deeds a *locus domorum*, that is, an amalgam of living quarters disposed around a centrally situated common yard access to which was via a covered walk-way called a *siqifah*.³⁷ Such a *locus domorum* would have originally belonged to the single family which built it but with the passage of time and after several wills and property divisions the various quarters would end up in different hands often totally unrelated by consanguinity or affinity. The common central area, belonging to all and to none, would soon begin to suffer from lack of adequate maintenance and a *siqifah* that crumbles collapses and gets swept away for good. The outcome is a narrow passage-way leading nowhere with distinct disconnected houses sharing the common entrance or *sqaq*, the characteristically Maltese alley-way. This is a good recipe for the fomenting of squabbles between people in very close physical proximity, that leaves little room for privacy, and not much else to bind them together.

Within this framework one can understand the litigation between Laurenz Dingli and Angelo Farruġe sharing a common *intrata* (the *sqaq*) to their *loci domorum* in Siġġiewi, a quarrel that ended them up before the Mdina jurats in June 1542,³⁸ and was still boiling over a year later.³⁹ Similar litigations erupted between Jorlandu Dingli and Luca Pachi in connexion with the access to their houses and fields in Siġġiewi, and between Antoni Cap and Ambrosi Pachi arising from conflicting claims to right of access to their Siġġiewi fields in 1544.⁴⁰ In 1560, Dominica, daughter of Fanġiu Pach of Siġġiewi, was forced to clean up the house she had been living in and quit the property on the insistence of Petru Zimegh and Andria Mamo; further details are not given except that the injunction was served to Pach in the presence of Don Georgio Cuzin who was Siġġiewi's Vice Parish Priest at the time.⁴¹

Taxation

The *Università* not only protected the villagers' threatened rights but also ensured they made their contribution to public funds that were needed to aliment its various activities. During the period under review, the *Università* was entitled to impose a fifteen per cent tax on annual produce from land in the hands of all non-resident feudatories. These rich land-owners, being away from the island, used to lease their fiefs to local farmers, usually for four-yearly periods, who made annual payments

according to agreed conditions. The most efficient way for the *Università* to collect its due was obviously to turn on the farmer before he sent his annual payment abroad. The fiefs around Sigġiewi were, very often, leased to local Sigġiewi farmers so that it was often with these people that the *Università* had to contend and whose names appeared regularly in the municipal registers when they failed to cough up promptly. Thus in 1536, Joanni Pachi was down for paying 12.13.10 *uncie* on the Tabrija fief and Pachi Cassar for another 1.17.5 *uncie* on the Ta' Dolf estate.⁴² Two years later, the *cabelloti* of Tabrija, Joanni Pachi, Demetrio and Micheli Frendo, were again called up to settle their accounts with the *Università* in connexion with this 15 per cent tax.⁴³ In that same year, the freed slave (*manumisso*) Domenico Grima who held the fief of Dejr is-Saf belonging to the De Mazara family was likewise called up.⁴⁴ With the passage of time and for a number of different reasons these non-resident land-owners lost interest in their Maltese fiefs and sold them out either to the Order itself or to Maltese residents. Thus, the *Università* which was deriving the 15 per cent tax therefrom came to lose this revenue. This was the case with the Dejr is-Saf estate which was sold by the De Mazaras to Dun Matteo Surdo by virtue of a deed drawn up in Syracuse on 26 March 1540; in that year the annual revenue from that land amounted to no less than 23 *uncie*.⁴⁵

The *Università*, however, retained other sources of income from local taxation. In order to collect these taxes more efficiently various trade transactions were constrained to take place within the city. One of these was the sale of imported Sicilian wheat. Every time the duty-free *tratte* of wheat arrived from Sicily the *Università* issued a *bando* banning its sale in the villages. A typical *bando* of May 1536 read: *Let no one dare carry the wheat, recently imported from Licata, from the ships [directly] to the villages...but to the City [Mdina]*.⁴⁶

Another way of control adopted by the *Università* is illustrated by the following instance. Dionisiu Vella had checked Masio Gatt of Sigġiewi in connexion with the use of land in the village, as already mentioned. For some unstated reason, possibly because Gatt was guilty of no infringement, it was deemed by the court that Vella owed Gatt 12 *tarì* which he was reluctant to pay. His reticence was not taken lightly by the jurats and his movements were confined to Mdina, as if it were his prison, - *tenere debeat totam civitatem pro carcere* - until he thought it time to pay the outstanding sum.⁴⁷ A similar expedient of confining persons to their home, or village or to the whole island until they had paid up some outstanding debt was often resorted to.⁴⁸

Village constables

The most convenient way for the *Università* to make effective contact with law-breakers in the villages was through the local constables who held the pulse of village-life in their hands and nothing escaped their scrutiny in the small Maltese villages and surrounding countryside. These officials were appointed very regularly

and used in the control of law and order in the villages. Thus, when the sale of wheat in the villages needed to be controlled in 1542 the services of four constables from Siggiewi and its dependent hamlets were sought. These were Georgi Pachi and Micheli Gatt from Siggiewi itself and Bernardu Vella and Angilu Tabuni from Hal Xluq and Hal Kbir, respectively.⁴⁹ In 1559, Siggiewi constable Georgi Pachi who had left the village and, at any rate was too old to continue in that office, was replaced by Marcu Mamo.⁵⁰ Angilu Tabuni, too, is recorded to have moved out of Hal Kbir by 1550 when he was likewise replaced by the jurats who appointed Julianu Pachi in his stead.⁵¹ A similar appointment was made in 1553 when Antoni Azzopardo was made constable for Hal Qdieri.⁵² Another important official in major villages, although to date one has not yet been encountered as appointed for Siggiewi itself during the sixteenth century, was the *Alfier*, or standard-bearer in the local militia.⁵³ In 1561 the constables of Rabat/Dingli and of the *quattro cappelle*, that is of Naxxar, Birkirkara, Siggiewi and Żebbuġ, were burdened with the personal responsibility of *going to fetch the grain that was due to them* when, contrary to established practice, on that occasion the wheat that had been imported on Franco Chincio's vessel got distributed prior to taxation.⁵⁴ A similar situation arose two years later when the Siggiewi representative in council is identified as Notary Angelo Bartolo.⁵⁵

The constables, in turn, also looked after the interests of their villagers even if these were at times narrow and self-centred. In May 1551 the municipal council, with full representation of the villages, was discussing the very important issue of defence and in particular it was being proposed that a new tower be constructed on the Mdina walls. As it turned out, Mdina was to be besieged by a strong Moorish army only a few months later and it was certainly considered miraculous at the time that tragedy was averted.⁵⁶ Thus the question of building the tower was certainly not a trivial issue to be taken lightly. As it turned out and as often happens the discussion swayed this way and that but in the end, when it came to the vote, the village constables very short-sightedly voted against the motion, doubtlessly knowing fully well that the burden of the construction, both in terms of physically building it and in financially supporting the endeavour, would fall squarely on the villagers' shoulders.⁵⁷

The Order and defence

In such a situation, however, there were other considerations that were being brought into play. After 1530 the defence of the island had passed into the hands of the Order and people resented having to carry the full burden of defence. Corsair incursions had become an increasing problem for these islands. They were not a mere nuisance to be put up with but they posed a real threat to the very existence of our forefathers. This reality could not be brought home more forcefully than when in 1429 a massive invasion under Qa'id Ridwan at the head of a horde of 18,000 on 70 vessels almost wiped out the population of these islands when they

carried away into slavery some 3,000 victims.⁵⁸ On such occasions the real worth of the coastal watches was brought home to the population which had only one alternative to follow, namely to collect hurriedly all possessions and stock they could muster and to lock themselves behind the protection the islands' three walled enclaves of Mdina, Birgu's *castrum maris* and the Gozo Citadel had to offer. The arrival of the Order, which ironically should have meant a pledge of safety for the archipelago, proved to be, in fact, a liability, actually exacerbating the situation. The Turks that had ousted the Order from the Island of Rhodes in 1522 did not take lightly the fact that their arch-enemy had found a new home and base whence to pursue the centuries' old warfare against the Crescent. They were determined to strike while the iron was hot and while the Order's new base was still very precarious and indefensible. The result was that the early decades after 1530 witnessed an escalation in these attacks, which became even more frequent and daring in conception and execution. The attacks of 1551 and the more massive invasion of 1565, The Great Siege, were nothing but the highest peaks in this escalation of hostilities.

The knights chose to make the old *castrum maris* their headquarters and to develop that part of the island as the new capital. This ran counter to existing vested interests of the old Maltese élite ensconced at Mdina. Attitudes of antagonism may not have been very overt but the smouldering rancour could not have gone unnoticed by the Order. The reaction of the knights was to weaken the power-base of the *Università* by reducing its jurisdiction in the *campagna*. Overnight the island was split in two with the creation of a second *Università* based at Birgu sustained mostly by pro-Order stalwarts from among the loyal Rhodiots that had followed their masters faithfully all the way from Rhodes.⁵⁹ Of the nine rural *cappelle*, Mdina retained only Naxxar, Birkirkara, Sigġiewi and Żebbuġ. After the near-disaster of 1551 the Mdina *Università* could not but send an impassioned appeal to the Grand Master that it was most unfair that Mdina was expected to shoulder former defence responsibilities with a mere half of the population and that he should reverse the partitioning to the pristine situation – *that we should be given back our other parishes and our people*.⁶⁰ Up till that council meeting the representatives of all parishes had attended the Mdina council but thereafter only Mdina's four parishes, including Sigġiewi, are recorded. It is obvious that the appeal had fallen on deaf ears and that someone ensured that, thereafter, the partition should be really effective. Furthermore, the power that the Mdina *Università* had wielded up till then began to be consistently and increasingly eroded with the Order making deeper and more incisive inroads into its jurisdiction and activities.⁶¹

Lutheranism

The Order's arrival in these islands coincided with a hurricane of ferment that was sweeping throughout Europe. The Reformation was in full swing and Martin Luther's burning ideas and issues did not take long in reaching Malta's shores

particularly as this time also coincided with the revolutionary invention of printing which made the dissemination of ideas that much easier. Times were indeed ripe for change. The Church, which was the butt of Protestant aggression, had been reeling under overwhelming problems of excessive worldly power compounded with crass ignorance at all levels and reeking with immorality, also at all levels. It had seemingly lost its orientation and sight of the lofty ideals of perfection that had been set by its Founder. The local Maltese church was no exception. The Maltese clergy of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries reflected the universal decadence the Church had fallen into. Lust for power is evident in the unedifying petty pique indulged in by dignitaries of the Cathedral jockeying for positions of prestige and power, as seen at the time however banal and ridiculous they appear now, such as first places in the choir, and during processions as well as in the acquisition of the more remunerative benefices and control of the more prestigious offices. In the chase of these mundane values people's rights got trampled over such as when the laws of kith and kin took over, when nepotism was rife and when abuses such as the appointment of minors to high offices were pursued with zest. The Church records of the period are replete with evidence for a certain preoccupation with money if not of outright greed. The exacting of rights to the last dime be they spoils, tithes, first fruits or sacramental dues, often verging on simony, was the order of the day. If so little restraint was exercised in the pursuit of worldly power it is little wonder that equal abandon in matters of chastity is encountered.⁶² Wettinger's pioneering paper on concubinage among the clergy shows how, right down to the Council of Trent, several of the clergy - as many as a fourth or even a third of them - including the very highest-ranking such as Vicars General, Archdeacons and other dignitaries regularly gave way to comforts of the flesh. Siggiewi too was more than tinged. Dun Amator Zammit, its parish priest who died on 26 March 1534 and who held the highest ecclesiastical rank of Diocesan Vicar, second only to the Bishop, had generated at least one daughter. The Parish Priest who succeeded him, Dun Andrea Axiaq whom we have met already squabbling in court over property and power, did him full justice. He had a concubine - a foreigner from Sicily called Joannella La Panhormitana - with whom he cohabited for more than ten years.⁶³ In a certain sense we should not be judging these people too harshly and with the yardstick and hindsight of the twentieth century. There was a lot of muddled thinking in the Church at the time and it was not very clear what the official position of the Church was regarding celibacy. This issue was, in fact, one of the key points of Martin Luther's stand, namely that it was licit for the clergy to marry. It was also commonly held that fornication was not a sin. In this area people were groping in search of the truth and whereas they retained a basic allegiance to the Church of Christ they were critical of existing attitudes and tried to make sense of their situation. A case in point was Dun Andrea himself who by no means did he throw his Church overboard. He remained curate of his home village, Siggiewi, and at the same time took his concubine to the Mdina Church of *Santa Maria della Rocca*

where he promised her unfailing love *before all present* in accordance with ecclesiastical rites. These details transpire from his own words when he was made to abjure after Inquisitorial proceedings into his heretical stance.

The arrival of the Order in Malta acted as a catalyst for the infiltration of 'modern' Lutheran ideas particularly through the activities of its French-speaking members who were the most exposed to it on the continent. The foremost exponent of Lutheranism in the Order and among those who bore the brunt of the Church's retaliatory action was a certain ordained French chaplain called Don François Jesuald. By 1540 Jesuald had founded at Birgu *La Confraternità dei Buoni Christiani* through which school, the works of Luther and Melancthon were freely read, and he was effectively disseminating very unorthodox ideas. The first to check him was Grand Master Homedes but he was later tried also by the Bishop-Inquisitor Domenico Cubelles under whom he was condemned to be burned at the stake. Don Jesuald had by that time corrupted many a student who attended his school and there is little doubt that Don Andrea Axiq was contaminated by him. Don Andrea was a very intelligent priest who, further to his parochial duties in his native village, undertook the teaching of grammar in the Mdina municipal school between 1540 and 1560. The way he ran his school was rather informal, moving from one Mdina or Rabat churchyard to another followed by his retinue of a dozen or so pupils. At times he used to go down to Birgu for weeks on end where, doubtlessly, he came in contact with the Birgu school of Jesuald. As Dun Andrea was a very influential person under whose guidance were entrusted the children of Malta's élite families it did not take too long for his activities to catch the eye of the Bishop-Inquisitor. In fact, as early as April 1546 he was already being tried for infringement of the Church's law of abstinence and for professing heretical views, an accusation that was leveled against six others who had once been his students; these were Pietro Calavà, Michele Allegritto, Jacobo Callus, Thomasi Bonello, the silversmith Ġio Maria Bonello, the medical doctor Antonio Bonello and Notary Giuseppe De Guivara who was further accused of having a concubine. In the following year Dun Andrea was further accused of possessing prohibited books and irreverence towards the Blessed Sacrament. The influence of Dun Andrea was not restricted to his students but he seemed to have held sway also over mature adults, especially ones in the legal profession, such as Notary Bartholomeo Haxixe (Axisa) who exercised his profession in Sigġiewi - it is recorded that Axisa even underwent torture at the Inquisitor's hands - Dr Nicola Antonio Xerri, a lawyer from Sigġiewi, and Notary Giacomo Baldacchino, all of whom were accused of heretical leanings and of owning prohibited books. Needless to say, as curate of Sigġiewi, Dun Andrea was not most edifying. During his trial, witnesses asserted that he used to scandalize his flock by preaching publicly that no one should revere the saints and their images. He was even accused that, in 1540, he had made fun of a procession that went by the Church of St Sebastian - he jokingly referred to the participants in the procession as animals adoring images. Don Gregorio Mamo of Sigġiewi in the

witness-box, recalled how, as a student in Dun Andrea's school, he used to bring meat for his master's Friday and Saturday meals from the house of his woman whom he kept as his wife. He remembered how Dun Andrea used to say that it was not a sin for a priest to have a woman for himself and that he kept that woman as 'my father kept my mother'.⁶⁴ Like Jesuald, Dun Andrea was found guilty of the charges brought against him, but unlike his French colleague, he had enough sense to accept to go to Rome and make his abjuration before the General Inquisitor, Thomas Scoto. The sentence passed on him stated that his abjuration was to be made publicly, that as a sign of penance he had to wear for as long as he lived the San Benito yellow garb with red crosses at the front and back, as worn by professed heretics, he was to be interned at home, to fast for seven years on bread and water twice weekly, to recite the seven psalms weekly for seven years, to say the Office of the Blessed Virgin and the Office of the Dead, to confess every month, to keep the images of Christ and of the Virgin at home, not to exercise his profession and to be suspended from church services.⁶⁵ In fact, Dun Andrea was replaced as Parish Priest in 1551 by Dun Bartholomeo Aquilina who held that position till 1564.⁶⁶ The Rome abjuration of Dun Andrea took place in the Church of *Santa Maria sopra Minerva* in March 1562,⁶⁷ whereas, on his return to Malta, his public recantation was appropriately made in the Mdina Church of *Santa Maria della Rocca* - later the Carmelite Church - where he had once 'wedded his concubine'. His San Benito garb was exposed in the Cathedral sacristy after he died where it was on display till the earthquake of 1693. When the present Baroque cathedral was built it was again displayed in the sacristy and where it was last seen in the 1760s.⁶⁸ The sentence meted out to the Siggiewi lawyer Dr Nicola Antonio Xerri was milder: he had to confess and receive Holy Communion on the four principal feasts of the Church for five years, he had to pay for Masses for the dead, to recite the seven psalms on Wednesdays and Fridays, to keep images of Christ and the saints at home, to be imprisoned, to observe indulgences, to hear High Mass on feast days and to pay 250 *scudi* to the Holy Office.⁶⁹

It was clear that these ideas, which in a sense depended on the free dissemination of books, were rife among Malta's intelligentsia. The Church, as seen, came down hard on her straying sheep. The setting up of a dual tribunal to combat the heresy, namely the Order of St John's and the Inquisitor's, effectively nipped unorthodox trends in the bud and would have eradicated the heresy completely had a major event in the islands' history - the Great Siege of 1565 - not interfered with the momentum of proceedings.

Sieges and population movements

The population of these islands throughout the late middle ages had hovered around the 10,000 level, all told, but for some as yet not fully understood reason it had begun to climb towards the turn of the sixteenth century. In the early fifteenth century the populations of Siggiewi, Rahal Kbir, Rahal Tabuni, Rahal Qdieri and

Rahal Xluq were 405, 120, 55, 65 and 85, respectively, a total of some 730 in all, whereas in the 1480s this total increased slightly to around 750.⁷⁰ The report that the Order's commissioners drew up in 1524 mentions 12,000 inhabitants in Malta and some 5,000 in Gozo. On the assumption that the Sigġiewi population did not experience any changes other than those affecting the whole archipelago one concludes that before the Order's arrival in 1530 there were some 1050 inhabitants in the Sigġiewi *cappella*. We do not have exact figures for the early sixteenth century but only total population counts. Envoys to the Viceroy of Sicily in 1535 reported that Malta had around 22,000 inhabitants (further to another 6,500 in Gozo).⁷¹ This shows an increase of some 10,000 from the 1524 count that cannot be accounted for by a 1530 influx of members of the Order and their dependents who could not have exceeded 5,000 by much, in all.⁷² A further document of 1545, related to the islands' wheat requirements, puts the total population of 1530 up to 30,000. This figure may have been inflated as demands on wheat were not likely to be on the short side. The same document asserts that this figure went down to 22,000 on account of the fact that some eight to ten thousand had fled the islands because of famine (which is, incidentally, well documented). It is very unlikely that Sigġiewi was affected by the initial influx of foreign immigrants that came in the wake of the Order's arrival - some evidence exists that the Rhodiots, at least, preferred the area around the harbour and only penetrated into the villages much later⁷³ - but the effect of a poor harvest and resulting food shortages would hit people in towns and villages equally, so that, some loss in population was probably registered then. One can conclude that, by 1550, the Sigġiewi *cappella* probably counted close to a 1000, in all.

All of these, together with the people from the three other parishes of Naxxar, Birkirkara and Hal Żebbuġ, further to the Mdina/Rabat/Dingli people - some five to six thousand - crammed themselves in behind the Mdina walls in 1551. Able-bodied men from Sigġiewi were placed under the command of Fr. Aleramo de' Conti della Langueglia to guard the north curtain of Mdina facing Mtarfa. From there they had an excellent view of Dragut's hordes of thousands amassed below the city's walls taking stock of the defences. It was then believed that it was only through the intercession of St Agatha, whose statue was placed on the city walls, that the Moorish attack was averted and Dragut turned his sights on the easier prey that was Gozo.⁷⁴

The villagers could breathe a deep sigh of relief as they drove their livestock before them and pulled their children along heading for their farmsteads. But peace was not long enduring. The rumblings of the 1551 invasion had hardly died down when Grand Master Jean de Vallette began to receive clear messages from his agents in the Levant that the Turk was contemplating an even more massive reprisal against Malta. Defence preparations were stepped up with urgency. Several people, including old folk, women and children who were more of a hindrance in time of war, were packed off to safety in Sicily. The Grand Master consolidated the existing

local militia by appointing knights to take command in the major villages. His good intentions are not to be doubted but whether the appointment of knights to the posts of captain ensured stricter observance of discipline and generally led to more efficiency is a moot point. The Żurrieq captain Fr. Petro De Rourre managed to get himself hated enough to get murdered in 1560,⁷⁵ and the Siġġiewi captain in 1554, Fr. De Torrellas, appears to have been corruptible enough to get accused by the Turcopilier's lieutenant, Fr. Oswald Massingberd, that for a fee, he was letting the Siġġiewi villagers off their watch and other duties.⁷⁶ Whether this accusation was genuine or not is hard to tell but it is known that, a few weeks before, Massigberd had alleged grievances suffered from the captains of Mdina and the villages.⁷⁷ It is not inconceivable that he was only getting his own back. Be that as it may, a new Siġġiewi captain was appointed in 1561.⁷⁸ The rendezvous with destiny was not long in coming. On 18 May 1565 a host of white sails filled half of the southern horizon. Last-minute preparations were hurriedly undertaken and the villagers, once again, packed up their mobile belongings and thronged for the safety of the walls. This undertaking did not run very smoothly. Many villagers thought that, as in 1551, the dark cloud would soon pass them over and, in disregard for the Grand Master's orders, they left many of their livestock behind for the enemy's foraging parties to collect. Some villagers actually opted to take refuge in caves on the south cliffs where they were eventually found out. Furthermore, as rumours spread that it was the Grand Master's intention to sacrifice Mdina, several headed for the better protected harbour towns which had been girt with newly-built strong bastions.⁷⁹ As all these masses could not be accommodated in Birgu, De Vallette deviated several of them into Senglea and sent the militia regiments of Birkirkara, Birmiftuh, Qormi, Żejtun and Żurrieq - some 2370 men - to Mdina to allay the fears of the *Università*. The Siġġiewi militia, consisting of 570 men, was stationed in Birgu facing the dangerous post of Aragon.⁸⁰ The Siġġiewi women and children would normally have been assigned to Mdina but the fact that there was only one birth and baptism at Mdina to a Siġġiewi mother, compared to the ten, say, from the Naxxar *cappella* during the five months of the siege, strongly suggests that several must have followed their men to the more dangerous harbourside, that was the scene of all the action. The only baptismal registers that showed an uninterrupted rhythm of life during the siege were those of Mdina and the Gozo *Matrice*. All others have yawning gaps for the period that speak of a traumatic disruption. Siġġiewi's last recorded birth before the siege was on 12 February 1565 and records do not resume before 8 December 1567, almost three years later.⁸¹ It has been stated by the Order's chronicler Giacomo Bosio that no less than a third of the entire island's population - some 7,000 - lost their lives during the siege.⁸² Although at first this figure appears to be somewhat inflated it does receive confirmation from a different source. A document dated 1568 and conserved in the Vatican archives shows how the island's population was reduced to a mere 7,813 and how the *men capable of taking up arms* counted just 2,307 - a loss of some 700.⁸³

An unspecified number of Sigġiewi men, and possibly also women and children, must have lost their lives at Birgu, which affected the overall population figure of the *cappella*. Ironically, this figure was possibly even more affected by the long-term effects of the 1551 invasion which were being felt after the Great Siege. Dragut's onslaught on Gozo resulted in a savage near-total depopulation of that island which was carried away into slavery, mostly at Constantinople. Although a number of Gozitans managed to evade capture altogether or, in the case of the better-off, managed to get themselves redeemed, several of the survivors eventually sought better protection in Malta's harbourside cities. When the turmoil of the mid-sixteenth century finally began to settle down and life began to return to a semblance of normality, it was soon realized that Gozo's fertile fields lacked workers to the detriment of the islands' food supply. The vacuum left by the Gozitans needed to be filled by Maltese and foreign, mostly Sicilian, farmers who were attracted to the smaller island by employment prospects and, possibly, by the vague promise of land acquisition. A thorough study of how Gozo was resettled after 1551 shows that some 0.6 per cent of villagers from the Sigġiewi/Qormi/Żebbuġ area were sufficiently attracted by the Gozitan dream to migrate. (These numbers were close to the average for the whole island but appreciably less than those for the Żurrieq area.) The names of the Sigġiewi *émigrés* that could be identified are the following:

Joanni Bonello, Joanni and Anġela Tabuni, Aloysiu Pachi, Dominicu Axac son of Mikeli, Ambrosiu Cafor, Anġilu Cachie, Andria Miczi son of Anġilu, Petru Mamo, Marianu Pachi son of Nardu, Joanni Calleya son of Bendu, Zacharia Bonello son of Joanni, and Andria Mamo, all of Sigġiewi, and Andria Manġion son of Blasi from Hal Xluq.

Most of these names begin to appear in Gozo in the 1570s.⁸⁴ As late as the 1630s, some of these *émigrés* were still holding dear their Sigġiewi connexions and making use of them. This was the case of Domenico Buttigieg who, in a *supplica* to Grand Master Lascaris in 1639, describes how he had emigrated from Sigġiewi to Gozo, where he had settled, and how his late father Joanni had once been granted by Grand Master Wignacourt some public land in Sigġiewi on which to build a habitation and plant a garden, which was then in ruins. Domenico requested the Grand Master to grant this ruined property to one of his daughters who was about to get married. This *supplica* reveals an interesting detail about seventeenth-century life in Sigġiewi. It is recorded how the opinion of the Sigġiewi constables was sought in this matter and how constables Pasqual Borġ and Ġuliu Dingli congregated their fellow villagers in the village parish-church cemetery and, after due deliberation, they agreed that the request by their former friend Buttigieg was justified and recommended, in a very democratic way, that the land be assigned to his daughter.⁸⁵

Returning to late sixteenth-century developments, Siggiewi was also subjected to yet another centrifugal force from different quarters. The Great Siege was a slap in the face for the Order which gelled it into action. It was no longer possible for the knights to vacillate on their stand *vis-à-vis* these islands. They had to decide whether to quit for good or stay come what may and to invest solidly in their fortification. They chose to stay and plans for the building of a new city on the Xeberras peninsula, which had been gathering dust for too long, were immediately put into practice. The gigantic enterprise created innumerable jobs related to construction for the Maltese on the new very extensive building site. A thousand were required immediately just for the clearing of debris. Not enough local labourers were, in fact, to be found so that several others had to be imported.⁸⁶ Several labourers from the villages gravitated towards the new city and not a few settled there when it was completed. Statistics from 1576 show that whereas there were 1133 living in Siggiewi itself, no less than 4109 civilians had already made their home in Valletta further to 3843 members of the Order and their retinue - a total of 7952.⁸⁷

Around this time there is also evidence of foreigners settling in and around Siggiewi. Further to the Captains-at-arms appointed by the Order, one comes across, for example, a certain Mastro Cesaro Napolitano at Hal Xluq described as a *foreigner* in 1571 when his first child is being baptized but not so called on a similar occasion two years later.⁸⁸ Perhaps only by coincidence, the presence of prostitutes – *meretrichi* – mostly in the surrounding hamlets is also in evidence; among these one notes *Agnesa ta Manso di Casal Kibir*, *Agata meretrici del Zorico abitanti in Casal Kibir*, *Vicensa meretrice* and *Caterina meretrice di Casal Sigeui*, all baptizing their newly-born offspring in the 1570s and 80s.⁸⁹

Dusina's apostolic visitation

The population of 1133 in the Siggiewi *cappella* is known to have been broken down into 220 hearths (families or households) in Siggiewi itself, 30 in Hal Xluq, 20 in Hal Kbir and another 6 in Hal Qdieri thanks to a quite unique report dated 1575 that was the outcome of the Apostolic visitation of these islands by Mgr Pietro Dusina. The Council of Trent (1545-1563), which was very badly needed to bring about discipline within the Church's ranks and to counter the Reformation movement, ensured that all the faithful, lay and clergy, towed the line thereafter. In Malta, the prelate sent to ensure that the decrees of Trent were respected was the Apostolic Visitor Mgr Pietro Dusina who was here for nine months between August 1574 and May 1575. As a result of this visitation Maltese history has been enriched by an outstanding report on the state of the Maltese Church in that year. The snapshot vision provided by this report encapsulates the life of the Maltese Church in a unique way and sheds light on many an aspect of Maltese social life. Further to the demographic information about the Siggiewi *cappella* Dusina gratuitously

informs us that in the village there was an old man living in that year who was 108 years old and was *still healthy and strong*.⁹⁰

The most useful data given, however, concerns the Maltese diocese. He gives a good description of the old parish church of St Nicholas, which today - alas - lies in shameful ruins, and how it had three other churches abutting it - dedicated to the Visitation of the Virgin, to St Sebastian and to St Michael, respectively - as was the common practice in the Maltese islands at the time.⁹¹ In the hamlet of Hal Xluq there was a cluster of six churches whereas in and around Hal Kbir there were no less than ten others in close proximity to each other, several of which had the same dedication; at Hal Qdieri there was the Church of St James.⁹² Within the village, too, the Church of *Sancta Maria de mense Septembris* (that is, the Nativity of the Virgin) had a Church of St Matthew on one side and a Church of St Catherine on its other side. There were no less than six churches dedicated to *Sancta Maria de mense Augusti* (that is, the Assumption of the Virgin) also within the village and three dedicated to St Nicholas further to the parish church. Other dedications were to the Saviour, to St Bartholomew, St James, St Mark, the Birth of St John the Baptist and to St Margaret. Most churches were in a very bad state of preservation although several were endowed with a field or two from whose proceeds the maintenance of the building and the celebration of stipulated services were, theoretically, guaranteed.⁹³ One of the Assumption churches abutted onto the Church of St John the Baptist (not the one that can be seen today, dedicated to the Beheading of the Saint, and which was built during the eighteenth century). It is recorded that a guard used to be posted on the roof of this church, doubtlessly one of the *Dejma* patrols. This custom, which was already in vogue in the 1470s,⁹⁴ appears to have been resented by the people who requested Dusina to have it stopped.⁹⁵ Thus, within Sigġiewi itself, Dusina found no less than twenty-two churches and, further to the eleven churches in the dependent hamlets there were also thirteen other rural churches in the surrounding *campagna*. These included the Tal-Gholja churches, already discussed, a church at Hal Tabuni, one in Tabrija and another at Ta' Lapsi. The Church of St George ta' Dejra l-Imghallaq was probably already disused as it receives no mention.⁹⁶

Dusina visited the parish church on the morning of Wednesday 2 February 1575. He was met by the Parish Priest, Don Giacomo Calleya (1564-1587) who celebrated Mass to initiate the visitation of his parish. Dusina then went round the church commenting on all the things he saw and what he wanted to see changed. He mentions a panel painting - *incona* - above the main altar, which must have been very old as it was entirely stripped of the paint.⁹⁷ Beneath the painting was kept the Blessed Sacrament in a gilt leaden pyx in a wooden tabernacle. Dusina was not very impressed by this arrangement that one hardly noticed the Real Presence. He ordered the construction of a standard tabernacle and that the pyx should be changed to one made of gilt silver. The sacristy behind the altar was more to the Visitor's liking. When he came to inspect the baptismal font the Parish Priest

confessed that he was still baptizing infants according to the old Gallican rite, adding, to protect himself, that he did this with the permission of the Bishop. Not to frighten little children he did not insist that they go to confession but, instead, he said prayers over them taken from the Gallican missal; when he performed these ministries he earned a hen or capon, three loaves of bread and half a quart of wine. Other sacramental dues exacted were 4 *tari* for himself for a burial and a further 5 *grani* for the Bishop and 5 *grani* for the island's clergy and 5 *carlini*, a loaf and a caraffe of wine for a wedding. Dun Giacomo said that he imparted Christian doctrine at Mass during the offertory collection. One cannot tell how demanding the Parish Priest was in the exacting of his dues, but other parish priests were accused of simony.⁹⁸

It appears that Dun Giacomo was himself the victim of simony when he was refused ordination in Sicily unless he paid. He had not received proper training as Dusina soon discovered. The Apostolic Visitor saw that 'he could read well but understood nothing because he had not been taught grammar'. Nor did he answer correctly to the questions put to him. This was not the case with the other Sigġiewi priest, Dun Gregorio Mamo, interrogated by Dusina, but he was old and complained that he had also to serve two days a week at Birkirkara where there was a greater need.⁹⁹

Mgr Dusina wore various hats on his Maltese visit. An important office he was to set up was that of the Roman Inquisition of which he was the first Inquisitor - Bishop Cubelles before him had been Pro-Inquisitor. In this capacity and during the short nine months of his stay he pried deeply into several interesting cases among which he was to pass judgement on both Sigġiewi priests as well as on some laymen. Pietro Pachi of Sigġiewi was accused of irreverence in church. He had stopped attending Mass since he was not allowed to continue sitting in the choir and on the altar steps any longer.¹⁰⁰ Don Gregorio Mamo, who had given witness against Dun Andrea Axiaq during the heresy trial before Cubelles, was himself not untainted by his mentor's convincing stance and he had to renounce before Dusina his belief that 'it would be better for a Latin priest to have a wife as is the custom with Greek priests'.¹⁰¹ But perhaps the most grievous accusations were levelled against the parish priest himself. Dun Giacomo was accused, in two different court proceedings, of a case of homicide and a case of transvestitism - it was alleged that he went about at night dressed as a woman.¹⁰²

Plague and poverty

Although the worst that the sixteenth century had to throw at the Maltese was over and solid foundations based on security and improved economic prospects had been laid, life was still a hard upward slog. In 1592 an epidemic of bubonic plague was to hit the island. The disease spread in 1592 killing some 300 by June of that year. When it was thought to have abated, a second bout erupted in November and again a third, more violent than before, in March 1593. By the time the epidemic had

spent itself in June, no less than 3,000 had lost their lives. This was the first epidemic in Maltese medical history that was reasonably well recorded by a medical man.¹⁰³ Sigġiewi was to lose one of its dependent hamlets - its smallest, Hal Qdieri, that consisted of six households in 1575 - as a result of this epidemic. It is recorded in the parish's first baptismal register that *Casal Kideri a hamlet dependent on this parish of Siggeui came to naught in this year 1592 in circa.*¹⁰⁴ The plague stricken inhabitants were interred in the parish church graveyard near the *domus curialis*.¹⁰⁵

Apart from the hazards of war and disease the villagers had to face at this time a continually depressed economic situation. The standard of living was only marginally above starvation level as one can deduce from the several appeals for assistance from villagers to the Grand Masters. In 1603 Dominico De Manuei of Sigġiewi wrote asking for a small house *in view of his poverty*.¹⁰⁶ Luca Zahara also of Sigġiewi, *a pauper who is married with a wife and four children still living with him further to three others that are married and settled*, was requesting a small field in the district of Blat il-Qamar near to *La Croce* where similar deserving cases had been granted some land by previous Grand Masters to build their own accommodation. In this case, as was usual, the opinions of the Sigġiewi constables were sought but they were not in favour of the Blat il-Qamar area, suggesting instead il-Ghassiewi (near the Ta' Kandja round Roman tower).¹⁰⁷ The 1639 case of Domenico Buttigieg who had emigrated to Gozo has already been quoted.

The phenomenon of exposed infants, especially evident during the first half of the seventeenth century, may be the symptom of a number of social disorders among which poverty can very plausibly be included. Perhaps not as frequent as in Valletta or at Rabat, where the Hospital of Santo Spirito was equipped with a special *ruota* that allowed the depositing of unwanted babies in the institution anonymously,¹⁰⁸ there are a sufficient number of cases recorded to make Sigġiewi comparable with other villages in the *campagna*, such as Lija, in the same period.¹⁰⁹ Typical poignant cases that show the concern of the parents for their offspring, insofar as the babe is left somewhere where a church-verger or the village nurse are sure to notice them, include a newly-born infant baptized as:

Hilarione... found in the meadow(?) [biura] at Santa Marija tal-Għolja, or Fortunato, of unknown parents, who was carried by Giulio Balzano the verger of [the Church of] the Madonna tal-Għolja who said that he was found in the cemetery, or Lucretia found on the doorstep of the house of Malgarita the village midwife, or Dorteia found on top of the altar of San Micheli situated in the cemetery, or Maria who was found in the Sigġiewi church of Santa Marija ta Janni, or yet another Maria found in the church at Hal Xluq;¹¹⁰ this concern, however, was not always in evidence such as when the infants were merely abandoned on the street – found on a street in the village or was left 'exposed' in the street.¹¹¹

The physical state of the churches, too, speaks of apathy and depression. Many had fallen into a state of dereliction so that several of them had to be deconsecrated by the Church authorities, especially during the first half of the seventeenth century. Thus, further to the eleven churches deconsecrated by Mgr Dusina, namely the four churches dedicated respectively to the Assumption of the Virgin, to St Nicholas, to St Bartholomew and to St James all in Siġġiewi itself, the Church of the Assumption known as Ta' Żenqa at Hal Xluq and six other rural churches dedicated respectively to the Nativity of the Virgin, the Assumption known as Ta' Lapsi, St Nicholas, St George and two others dedicated to the Nativity of the Baptist,¹¹² of the several churches dedicated to the Blessed Virgin alone no less than fourteen were closed to worship after 1600; these were eight churches dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin - Ta' Harramija (1692), Ta' Ġanni (1653). Ta' San Ġwann (1736), Ta' Kabra (1618), another at Hal Ramija (1618), Ta' Hal Kbir (1658) (later reconstructed as Tal-Providenza), Ta' Bir Ġabrun at Hal Xluq (1658), and Ta' Dun Nard at Hal Xluq (1658), and Ta' Żenqa (1618) which had been restored - four dedicated to the Nativity of the Virgin - the one abutting on the Church of St Matthew on Siġġiewi's main square (1667), Ta' Gioannet at Fawwara (1621), Ta' Hal Tabuni *sive* Ta' Barru (1658), and Ta' Saliba at Ta' Mwieżel (1658) - an Annunciation church at Ta' Petra Nigra, and a Visitation church abutting on the old parish church whose masonry was used to repair the old parish church.¹¹³ Besides, the Church of St Catherine which was in very bad shape by the 1680s was decreed by Bishop Cocco-Palmeri to be razed to the ground in order to prevent it being used as a hiding-place by thieves and vagabonds.¹¹⁴ Also, the building in Siġġiewi referred to today as *Il-Kamrun* is clearly a former deconsecrated church, probably that dedicated to St Leonard. Thus, within two centuries, of the 46 churches visited and listed by Dusina there were just thirteen left by 1780.¹¹⁵

The several appeals for help noted above, by no means characteristic of Siġġiewi, illustrate graphically the level of poverty endured by many. Not enough wheat was produced by these islands to maintain the population so that its importation from Sicily continued to be a mainstay of these islands' food supply. Starting in 1590 and thereafter, regular censuses of the population began to be compiled in connection with demands for the tax-free importation of Sicilian wheat. As it was in the interest of Malta to engineer as large a concession as possible one has to be rather cautious about the interpretation of figures derived from these population counts. In fact, the Sicilian authorities were very conscious of these vested interests and on most occasions they supervised carefully the way these counts were conducted. It is quite clear that on some rare occasions the Sicilians dropped their guard as patently happened in 1632. The Siġġiewi population figures from these censuses down to 1670 are as follows:

Year

1590	1614	1617	1632	1645	1658	1670	1680
------	------	------	------	------	------	------	------

Population

1184	1317	1377	1784	1531	1469	1723	1400
------	------	------	------	------	------	------	------

If the artificial peak at 1632 is ignored one can detect a gentle upward gradient which reflected a gradually improving situation that permitted the population to grow. This trend in the Sigġiewi gradient was common, in varying degrees throughout the island. Localities with populations of up to a 1,000 tended to hold their ground and retaining that population till the end of the eighteenth century. The populations in the large harbourside cities exploded to unprecedented proportions with Valletta's, particularly, increasing sevenfold in two centuries. Sigġiewi's growth was typical of middle-sized towns which started with more than 1,000 inhabitants in 1575.¹¹⁶

The last two figures of the above table show a distinct drop of more than 300 between 1670 and 1680. One is tempted to explain this loss by the fact that within that decade Malta had suffered the worst plague visitation ever in its history when close to 11,300 lost their lives. However, whereas as many as some 9,300 of all deaths were recorded in Valletta and the Three Cities - c. 41 per cent of their population - only some 2,000 were lost from all the villages taken together, that represented a mere 7 per cent of the total *campagna*. Sigġiewi itself, in fact, got off rather lightly with only 34 plague deaths, just 2.3 per cent of its population, doubtlessly thanks to its relative isolation. The first fatal case occurred on 25 March 1675 and the very last plague mortality for the whole island was to take place at Hal Xluq on 30 August of that year, a good fortnight after the pestilence was thought to have subsided altogether.

In spite of this apparent reprieve, like the rest of the island the village had to endure several inconveniences and restrictions. In an effort to isolate contaminated areas all commerce between towns and villages and between villages was severed and guards were posted on all roads leading into populated centres. People had to stay indoors and only one person per household was allowed to leave the house to buy daily provisions. Curfews were very strictly enforced and gallows were put up in public squares to remind would-be offenders that the penalty for transgressing was death; some cases when the ultimate penalty was exacted have been recorded.

Law and order was placed under the supervision of appointed captains responsible for the various districts of Malta. Sigġiewi was under Don Bernardino de Negra. Cats and dogs, which were thought to be carriers of the disease, were exterminated. Clothes too were thought to be responsible for contagion. Men were, therefore, forbidden to wear cloaks in public and women their *manto* or *faldetta*. There were several infringements, however, of this last *bando* as women were very

reluctant to show their faces in public. Infected houses were barricaded and belongings of affected persons burnt.

To avoid the gathering of people in confined places, Mass was said on provisional altars in the streets. The saints invoked as protectors against the plague were Sts Roque, Sebastian, Anne, Rosalia and the Blessed Virgin. A staunch Siggiewi woman, however, is recorded to have obtained deliverance through the intercession of St Nicholas. A number of processions in every parish were organised on 14 April. The Qrendi people vowed to make an annual pilgrimage to the Annunciation church in the limits of Siggiewi whereas Bishop Aztirias vowed to make a pilgrimage to Mellieha.

Like the rest of the island Siggiewi suffered from food shortages as the Sicilian authorities severed all communications with Malta and no wheat was sent for the duration of the plague. The resulting shortages were reflected in increases in the prices of food.

When the pestilence finally abated a general clean-up of the island was undertaken. Buildings were fumigated and whitewashed, burial-grounds used for the plague-stricken were walled up and the earth above the graves beaten hard. To make up for the losses a very large number of marriages were contracted in the cities, with one of the parties often being a widow or widower. In the villages this phenomenon was much less marked as the need was that much less.¹¹⁷

Recovery

In spite of the very heavy losses in Valletta and the Three Cities, which is clearly visible in the population graph for the whole island, the Valletta population hardly registered any change over the 1670-80 decade. The loss of some 4,000 from Valletta must have been amply compensated for by immigration both from abroad and from the villages. This would then explain the dip in the Siggiewi profile between 1670 and 1680. Fortunately, within a decade of the great plague, population estimates began to be available in profusion in the form of *status animarum* records which, practically, constituted a yearly census of all Christians in the community subject to the bishop. *Status animarum* lists were drawn up every year by the Parish Priest at Easter time with the primary purpose of registering the faithful observance or otherwise of the paschal precept. In the process the Parish Priest also gave much important additional information relating to the ages of his parishioners, household constitution, at times nicknames, village place-names and other data.

The earliest complete set of *status animarum* for the whole of Malta that has been analysed to date is that of 1687. One particularly important piece of information given relates to home-ownership in Siggiewi in that year. Of the 383 households in the village as many as 282 were resident-owned (*in aedibus propriis*) whereas only 99 were in rented accommodation (*in aedibus conductis*); in two cases no information is given. One would be rash to extrapolate to the national

situation from this unique case; Sigġiewi may not even have been representative of rural Malta. One can, however, compare with profit this 73.6 per cent owner-occupier households of 1687 with present-day figures. According to the 1967 Malta Census, Report on Housing Characteristics, Sigġiewi had only 51 per cent of its households residing in their own home - a marked diminution over three centuries.

The population of Sigġiewi in that year was 1394 of which 987 or 70.8 per cent were of communion age, that is, of age thirteen or more. This figure is somewhat beneath the national average of 72.13 per cent indicating that the village population was slanted towards the younger child bearing age bracket. This fact must have influenced the vigorous growth in the village over the last century of the Order's rule. *Status animarum* figures show how the village grew to twice the size.

Year

1687	1702	1716	1726	1736	1745	1760	1784	1797
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Population

1394	1460	1463	1434	1571	1645	1788	2247	2865
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The number of priests in the village too showed a marked increase from the situation prevailing a century earlier. In 1687 there were 7 priests in Sigġiewi compared to the two during Dusina's visitation. This must have influenced the quality of religious observance in the village and probably accounts for the fact that all villagers observed the paschal precept and exchanged the *bollettino* in that year.

Status animarum list all the villagers by name and surname. It is clear that in 1687 there were various interesting surname concentrations in Sigġiewi. Almost 20 per cent of all Bonellos in Malta were at Sigġiewi in that year. So also were 20 per cent of all Dinglis, 19 per cent of all Mamos, whereas 30 per cent of all Paces and 38 per cent of all Vassallos were to be found in Żebbuġ and Sigġiewi. On the other hand medieval surnames that were common at Sigġiewi were only apparently extinct because they had changed form. Thus Cafòr, already recorded in the 1270s, had turned into Gafà by the end of the seventeenth century and, indeed, 14 of the 80 Gafàs of Malta were still to be found there.¹¹⁸ More interestingly, the surname Mohammed - an eminent relic of Malta's Islamic past, still extant in 1498¹¹⁹ had very understandably ceased to be very popular by 1687; it had by then metamorphosed into Mamo. Zimech and Dimech, which were originally quite distinct, came to merge but at Sigġiewi they were still separately represented in 1687.¹²⁰

Growth in population is a sure indication of prosperity but it is not the only index. By the turn of the eighteenth century rural Malta witnessed a boom in ecclesiastical grandiose Baroque architecture that was completely out of proportion to the minuscule settlements, their low-lying tenements and equally inconspicuous box-like monocellular medieval churches. The mushrooming structures transformed the Maltese rural sky-line in a rather short period of time. Sigġiewi was

no exception. The smaller old churches were pulled down and rebuilt in the modern flamboyant idiom. Such were the new Church of St Mark and the Assumption Church Ta' Ċwerra. The former, rebuilt in the early seventeenth century, possesses a fine renaissance-style façade and an equally fine interior consisting of a barrel-vaulted nave with arched ribs springing from a high ledge; on stylistic grounds it might be ascribed to the entourage of Tommaso Dingli. The latter is a gem of Maltese vernacular Baroque architecture and it is a real shame that it has been allowed to disintegrate to its present state. It was rebuilt by the Birgu Dominicans in 1742 with proceeds from a bequest of the Pace family of Birgu, nicknamed Chuerra.¹²¹ The bequest included fields intended to make good also for the maintenance of the rebuilt church.¹²² Other churches that were rebuilt about this time included Santa Marija tal-Gholja (1694), Santa Margarita (1707) and Tal-Providenza (1750).¹²³ This last church was an important cult centre and focus of pilgrimages as the several *ex voti* that once decorated its walls clearly witnessed.¹²⁴

New churches were also built at this time. The embodiment of the village's prosperity is, needless to say, the glory of its new parish church. It was begun with money collected by the villagers in 1675 to the design of Malta's most eminent architect, Lorenzo Gafà. The spacious interior is very richly decorated with fine sculpture in stone and paintings of high calibre, foremost among which is the main altar-piece from the *bottega* of Mattia Preti. On the exterior, the very high dome - very modern for its age - was, probably, so constructed to be visible from the village main square that slopes away from the church façade. Inside the church, the furnishings were to the highest of standards and the envy of other villages. Suffice it to mention that when a new organ was commissioned for the new parish church of Lija the church procurators mentioned the Siġġiewi organ as the model on which their church organ had to be constructed.¹²⁵ The processional statue of St Nicholas of Bari was another precious acquisition by the village when it was executed in wood by the sculptor Pietro Felici of Senglea in 1736.¹²⁶

A concomitant Baroque sensibility began to be acquired by the village also in the sphere of painting. Whereas down to the mid seventeenth century the villagers had been exposed only to the stereotyped, stylized medieval representations of hieratic saints typified by the murals of the old parish church¹²⁷ and the odd groping towards more modern expressions of provincial artists like Ġio. Maria Abela who, in 1591, produced the *Madonna of the Rosary*, now in the Cathedral Museum, by the time the new Baroque parish church came to be built the village was experiencing the blowing of a fresh breeze as new important works of art began to be commissioned for the newly erected churches. Further to the main altar-piece in the Baroque parish church, the two lunettes depicting *St Nicholas in Prison* and *St Nicholas at the Council of Nicaea* were produced by Malta's leading eighteenth-century artist, Francesco Vincenzo Zahra. A painting of the *Blessed Virgin of the Rosary* was made by Alessio Erardi, a noteworthy painter, in 1703. GianNikol Buhaġiar, who had close family connexions both with Zahra and with Siġġiewi,

also contributed the small but important painting of the *Baptism of Christ*.¹²⁸ The smaller churches as well partook of this openness to new trends. The main altarpiece of the Church of St Margarita is by Zahra and so is that in the Church of the Beheading of St John. Even outlying country churches as Tal-Providenza, Tal-Gholja and Ta' Hal Xluq came to house non-negligible Baroque paintings.

Another outstanding example of a new church in the village is the centralized church of the Beheading of St John the Baptist, like Ta' Ċwerra, on Sigġiewi's spacious main square. This church was built in 1727 by Fr. Antonio Cutajar, a chaplain of the Order of St John, and by him very handsomely endowed with several plots of land, which in 1765 realized no less than 5,000 *scudi*. These lands included the field Tal Palumbara in the Ta' Kerċepu district, the houses called Tal-Balliju and others called Scemen at Hal Ramija, houses in St James Street, a field in Gozo called iċ-Ċens ta' Partaran near Sannat, another field in Gozo near Tal-Ġordan or Wied il-Ghasri and a field near Għar il-Kbir, close to Il-Buskett, called Ġirnia.¹²⁹

The accounts books of the Sigġiewi churches at this time speak of a more relaxed atmosphere to which the stringent, depressed conditions of the previous century are completely alien. The village titular and other *lesser festas* were celebrated with verve both inside the new church and outside with processions and fireworks displays. To quote the case of the relatively small church of the Beheading of St John, expensive damask and silk vestments were richly decorated with local and foreign lace (imported from France), not a little money was spent on gilding interior decorations and fireworks were provided both on the eve and on the day of the titular feast. These same records provide the names of a number of local craftsmen such as *Mastro* Giovanni Mamo, the village carpenter, and *Mastro* Carlo Camilleri, the village blacksmith, who were both needed to effect repairs and decorations to the church. When the need of a glazier was felt the church procurators had to go to Valletta and *il bronzaro* Bertolini, needed to make the *fešta mascoli*, was likewise sought in the City.¹³⁰

The well-being of the Church is reflected also in the increase in number of its priests. Whereas there were only two priests in the village during Dusina's visitation which number increased to 8 by 1687 there were no less than 28 *sacerdoti*, 12 *chierici celibi* and 4 *chierici coniugati* - some four times as many - a century later. These statistics can be gleaned from the *Stato delle Chiese di Malta* of 1782 which gives the village population as 2158, or twice what it was in 1687.¹³¹

The Parish Priests of Sigġiewi: 1531-1798

1531-1551	Don Andrea Axiaq
1551-1564	Don Bartholomeo Aquilina
1564-1587	Don Giacomo Calleja
1587-1600	Don Gioannello Falzon
1601-1607	Don Stefano Buttigieg
1607-1636	Don Gio. Domenico Farrugia

1636-1650	Don Georgio Carletto
1650-1671	Don Vincenzo Colonia
1671-1687	Don Domenico Farrugia
1687-1694	Don Michele Axiaq
1694-1723	Don Eugenio Azzopardo
1723-1743	Don Salvatore Tabone
1743-1760	Don Michel' Angelo Mamo
1760-1790	Don Salvatore Paçe
1790-1694	Don Pietro Deçelis
1794-1810	Don Salvatore Corso

[Source: PAS Liber Baptizatorum I, ff. 267v-8.]

The local militia continued to play a central role in the life of the village although by now incursions by Moors and pirates were very much a thing of the past. Being a soldier in the regiment meant having a steady income from a practically sinecure job more than anything else and the higher ranks were keenly sought. In 1681, Francesco Vassallo of the late Domenico of Siġġiewi was quick to point out to Grand Master Caraffa that Mario Mamo, who had occupied the post of standard-bearer (*alfiere*) of the village infantry, had turned 65 and was, therefore, due for replacement. As Mamo himself, *standard-bearer of the regiment of the musketeers*, turned up in the Seneschal's office and spontaneously resigned the post, Vassallo was appointed in his stead.¹³² Others were more keen on getting exemptions from duty. In 1727 *Mastro* Salvo Zimech, a carpenter from Siġġiewi, complained to Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena that he had been fined 5 *scudi* for failing to provide a beast of burden for the militia. He claimed that he had never been expected in all his life before to provide this service and that was because his income was not sufficiently high. When the usual officials had made the necessary investigations and verified the truth of his assertions he was let off the penalty.¹³³

The move away from the medieval exclusively agriculture-oriented economy to other jobs and employment with the Order is illustrated by the interesting case of Francisco Camilleri son of Giacomo of Siġġiewi who claimed that he had served as falconer for His Eminence Grand Master De Paule for the previous ten years, in which capacity he had travelled on the continent to His Majesty the King of France and twice to Spain to carry falcons caught in Malta and given by the Order as prized presents to the monarchs of Europe. In recognition for his labours Camilleri was requesting the Grand Master to grant him the job, then vacant, of *guard at the manderaggio* which carried the annual salary of 15 *scudi* derivable from the dues paid by ships entering harbour.¹³⁴

Other details are indicative of how the standard of living in rural Malta had risen by the end of the eighteenth century. Whereas in previous decades the Parish Priest used to make manual note of his parishioners' observance of the paschal precept no sooner was the Grand Master's printing press set up in the Palace, Valletta, than

Parish Priest Michel Angelo Mamo (1743-1760) began printing not only his *bollettini* but also his church services programmes. In 1753 he spent 4.5.10 *scudi* for various adoration cards and in 1758 another 1.6.0 *scudi* on *bollettini*. His successor Dun Salvatore Pace (1760-1790) kept up the tradition.¹³⁵

The expansion of business enterprises necessitated the presence of local notaries to record all kinds of transactions. The way the numbers of notaries public increased after 1600 must reflect their increased need that goes with an expanding economy. The following table lists the notaries that are known to have worked in Sigġiewi between 1600 and 1800.

The Notaries Public of Sigġiewi: 1600-1800

1601-1614	Matteo Dingli
1633-1651	Gio. Battista Micallef J.U.D.
1651-1673	Fabrizio Bigeni
1714-1743	Giovanni Dimech
1745-1796	Michel' Angelo Saliba
1753-1774	Gio. Ignazio Balzan
1772-1774	Francesco Caruana
1791-1831	Nicola Azzopardi

[Source: Attard, 9-10.]

As is evident from the above data, one can see that whereas before 1600 Sigġiewi villagers had to trudge all the way to Mdina to make a contract, and how throughout the seventeenth century one notary sufficed for all village needs (and there were periods when there was no village notary - 1614-1633, 1673-1714), after 1750 there were always two and sometimes even three notaries working contemporaneously. One presumes that there was enough work for all of them.

A number of *suppliche* made to the Grand Master relating to Sigġiewi notaries are of interest. In September 1713 Giovanni Dimech of Sigġiewi requested the permission of Grand Master Perellos to be given the warrant of a notary public, a request he had been making since 1707 and recalling that he had already served as a notary to the Notabile Court for the previous four and a half years. He also requested permission to be able to draw up deeds in the acts of Notary Tommaso Cauchi, *who had passed away to a better life*, or those of Notary Ignazio Debono.¹³⁶ In March 1752, Giovanni Balsan made a similar request to Grand Master Pinto in relation to the deeds of Notary Felice Grech whom he described as *his master*. This detail confirms how the notarial profession was passed on from one generation of notaries to the next by means of a number of years' apprenticeship with an established practitioner.¹³⁷ In 1774 a request by Nicola Balzan of Sigġiewi was made to Grand Master Ximenez in favour of his grandson Giuseppe Balzan, the son of the late Notary Gio. Ignazio Balzan, Nicola's own son. Unlike the two preceding requests, Giuseppe does not appear to have been successful in securing a notary

public's warrant. It is not very likely that he had received proper training and the object of the request was, at any rate, simply to be allowed to issue copies of deeds drawn up by his late father. The grandfather was making a plea on humanitarian grounds as the late notary his son had left five minor children, Giuseppe's brothers and sisters, and the family needed some source of revenue.¹³⁸ Among these *suppliche* is to be found also the request for a notary public's warrant of Nicola Azzopardi made to Grand Master De Rohan in December 1788.¹³⁹

Village family life

It has been seen already how the majority of Siġġiewi villagers owned their own house by the turn of the eighteenth century. The average size of a Siġġiewi family unit was 3.9 in 1750-1798, a figure that was very close to the national average of 4.0. Contrary to commonly held beliefs, people in the eighteenth century did not marry young. Out of a total of 95 marriages in Siġġiewi in 1776 no bridegroom was under 20 and only five brides were. This figure was very typical for the whole of rural Malta. The mean age of brides at marriage was in fact 22.2 and for the bridegrooms 25.8.¹⁴⁰

Newly-married couples tended, in their vast majority, to set up home on their own and independently of in-laws. Thus, at Siġġiewi in 1792 there were 498 married couples of whom just one was living with in-laws - the husband's brother. As already pointed out, families tended to be young with the average age of parents at around 30. Also, of the 690 marriages registered at Siġġiewi between 1750 and 1798, in about a half of them both parents of the bride were alive on the wedding day and in only 84 cases they were both dead. For the same period, about a third of the bridegrooms' fathers were deceased.

In order to start their wedded life on a sure financial footing, many brides, further to their dowry, sought to apply for a *maritaggio*, or marriage legacy founded by some philanthropist. At Siġġiewi no less than 36 per cent of all brides between 1750 and 1780 managed to obtain a *maritaggio*. Most Siġġiewi brides - 61.8 per cent of them - found bridegrooms from the village itself. Out of 700 between 1750 and 1797, 465 chose a local groom. The other preferences were Żebbuġ (66), Żurrieq (35), Mdina/Rabat (28), Mqabba (26), Qrendi (25), Qormi (17), Valetta (13), Mosta (11), Dingli (9), Naxxar (8), Attard (7), Balzan (6), Cospicua (6), Birkirkara (5), Luqa (5), Ghaxaq (4), Gharghur (3), Kirkop (3), Senglea (3), Vittoriosa (2), Gozo (1), Gudja (1), Lija (1), Safi (1), Tarxien (1), Żabbar (1). There is no record of any Siġġiewi girl having a foreign suitor in this period. This also goes for Siġġiewi people marrying abroad. Out of 135 applications by Maltese for a *stato libero* there were none from Siġġiewi compared to as many as 55 from Valetta.¹⁴¹ It is obvious that distance in the eighteenth century was an important deterrent in matching couples. Siġġiewi's high percentage of endogamous marriages can be contrasted with Balzan's mere 24.4 per cent and Lija's 35.3 per cent. In Lija's case, 8 Lija brides chose a Siġġiewi groom, in contrast to the opposite situation. It is obvious that Siġġiewi women set great store by the Maltese

dictum *A good cow is sold in its own village - Baqra tajba tinbiegħ f'pajjiżha*. Sigġiewi figures are, in fact, the highest for Malta and are at par only with Gozo's.

In spite of the fact that most Sigġiewi matches were local, the village population of more than 2,000 was large enough to provide matches which were sufficiently distant. Thus, there were only 6 dispensations requested in 1750-1800 for reasons of consanguinity or affinity compared to Birkirkara's 23 and Valletta's 73. Second marriages were also relatively few with 522 out of the 690 being first marriages.

These positive aspects were not without their shadows even in eighteenth-century Sigġiewi. The case of a couple who resorted to a night time wedding at Sigġiewi because the bride was already pregnant is well-nigh unique for 1750-1800. This is indicative of the kinds of social pressures that can be brought to bear on couples in a closed rural environment. Yet, social pressure is no panacea for ensuring 'correct' behaviour and the solution of marriage problems. Then, as now, not a few ended in separation. In 1793, Sigġiewi's Parish Priest had every reason to be worried and to complain that no fewer than ten families from his flock had broken up with one of the partners eloping with a lover to some 'faraway' town or village like Mqabba, Żurriq, Città Rohan, Floriana or Valletta. The night time wedding was unique in execution but far from unique in conception. Pre-marital pregnancies - 277 cases between 1748 and 1778 - occurred in as many as 5.8 per cent of all marriages, which although low by European standards of the day was by no means low by absolute standards. The rate of illegitimacy at Sigġiewi during the last half of the eighteenth century was not negligible at 0.8 per cent (34 out of a total of 4498 baptisms) albeit well below the national average of 4.7 per cent and the very high 25.7 per cent for the Porto Salvo parish in Valletta, but it may not be entirely accurate as, for example, four foundlings baptized at Porto Salvo are known to have originated from Sigġiewi. Strong social pressure must have coerced many an unmarried mother to give birth away from her village, in the relatively impersonal Valletta environment. Although most births took place in the home a number of hospital cases are recorded; 70 Sigġiewi mothers gave birth at Santo Spirito Hospital in Rabat.

Infant mortality in the eighteenth century was very high. Between 1750 and 1799 there were 18 cases of still-births and 54 others who died at birth. The number of children who did not survive their fifth birthday averaged 31 per year, or 54.5 per cent of all births. Although no eruption of plague is recorded in the whole of the eighteenth century, other fatal diseases were not uncommon especially ones affecting infants. Suffice it to mention that there were two smallpox epidemics - *variolarum malignitas seu contagio* - in 1769 and in 1780. The first carried off 82 Sigġiewi infants under five, 21 of whom were under one year, and the later one resulted in 104 fatalities of children under five, 37 of whom were under one, in the village.

The last days of the Order

On the 19th of July 1797, following the recent death of Grand Master de Rohan, the Council of the Order elected Fr. Ferdinand von Hompesch, Bailiff of Brandenburg, as its Grand Master. Hompesch knew Malta very well and he even spoke Maltese having been brought up from an early age in these islands as a young page of Grand Master Pinto. He was ill-equipped, character wise, to stand up to the vehement upheavals that were to hit his Order and these islands in the wake of the French Revolution. Yet, he was generally well-liked by the people and he certainly did his best to oblige. A number of villages soon took advantage of the weakness of his character and the fact that he was approachable to the point of partaking in village *festas* by inundating him with requests to elevate their villages, which by this time had come to be called *terre* or towns, to city status doubtlessly appealing to the precedent that had been created by Hal Qormi. This village had, very much under false pretences, managed to wrest from Grand Master Pinto the title of *Città Pinto*. By the early 1700s the Church, through its *status animarum*, had become such an efficient collector of statistics that the Order's civil Government stopped competing with the Church in the production of censuses and relied on the Church instead for this kind of information about the population. This was patently the case in 1708 when a new militia list needed to be drawn up and it was practically done for the Order by the Parish Priests who, in that year, omitted to produce the usual paschal catalogue. The Hal Qormi figure collectors were quick to realize they could exploit the monopoly they held and began to fiddle the numbers of 'souls' (*anime*) in the village, which they progressively upped from the normal 3,000 level to twice that much in a matter of thirteen years. Once they ascertained that their bloated total had not been questioned they made their request to Pinto, through the Parish Priest Vella, that Hal Qormi was not less than any of the other cities of Malta and should, likewise, be elevated to that status. Shrewd Pinto swallowed it hook, line and sinker and granted the village the title *Città Pinto*. Having achieved their devious aim, the Qormi figure collectors, neither too soon nor too late, dropped the population totals to acceptable levels within two years.¹⁴² This precedent having been established, it was not long coming for Hal Żebbuġ, Qormi's next-door neighbour, to acquire the title *Città Rohan*. Once Grand Master Rohan's name had been used up, no one saw the point in making any similar requests but no sooner had his successor been ensconced in office than three different villages jumped on the band-wagon and made their respective pleas. Siġġiewi was one of them together with Żabbar and Żejtun. Żabbar waited for the Grand Master to visit the village on the occasion of the festa and then made their request; the *Fiat* was issued from the Palace on 14 September.¹⁴³ Siġġiewi tried a similar ruse *Nhar San Nikola*, 6 December 1797, and in the meantime Żejtun, from which *matrice* Żabbar had been dismembered, had a *fortiori* right to the title and made their corresponding request. The poor Grand Master was rather hard put to pleasing everybody having already donated his surname to Żabbar. Always obliging, he gave his name to Siġġiewi and his

mother's surname to Żejtun: *Fiat prout petitur sub nomine Sancti Ferdinandi* (Let it be done as requested with the name St Ferdinand) to the former and *Biland* to the latter, both dated 30 December 1797 over the signature of the same *auditor* S. Zammit.¹⁴⁴ One should note that the current practice of calling Sigġiewi *Città Ferdinand* does not quite tally with the wording in the original *bullā* which gives *Sancti Ferdinandi*.

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Notes

1. For the equivalence of the two names, Notarial Archives, Valletta [=NAV] Not. A. Alban R12/4, f. 712 (2.xi.1586): *Contrata Sancte Marie ta Halie sive Gkemune*.
2. Busuttil 1989.
3. Museum of the Cathedral, Mdina [=MCM], Archivum Cathedralis Melitae [=ACM] Prebende 6 (Decano, 1522) f. 90: *Terreno ta Czigochi in contrata Tabirie*. The Ziguci family was prominent in Mdina during the fifteenth century: MCM ACM Misc. 437 n. 3 (1419-20) f. 40 and Fiorini 1996, Doc. 181 (30.iv.1487) *et passim*.
4. Report on cultural aspects of the visitation drawn up jointly by the present writer and Dr M. Buhagiar.
5. Wettinger 1975, 208-11.
6. Abela 1647, 95.
7. Wettinger 1982-87, 145, 69.
8. MCM ACM Prebende 8 (Decano, 1648) f. 325.
9. A *Niculozu Zurafe* was to be found at *Casali Siggeui* itself in 1419-20: MCM ACM Misc. 437 no. 3 (1419-20) f. 27v.
10. MCM Curia Episcopalis Melitae [=CEM], MS. 12 (1533) f. 10: *Angilu Xiluc*.
11. Moscati 1936, 506 (Doc XXVI, 13.xii.1277): *Raynaldus Ramia civis Malte*.
12. NAV Not. C. Canchur R140/3, ff. 1-2 (25.ii.1506): *Salvo Farruge habitator Casalis Tabuni*. In 1687, Status Animarum records give populations of 9 and 7 for Hal Kbir and Hal Xluq, respectively: Fiorini 1984, 46-7.
13. Wettinger 1985.

14. National Library of Malta [=NLM] Lib. MS. 670, ff. 19^v, 22^r: *Lj persunj sunnu tinuti ad habitari ala Chitai dilj bidujnj*.
15. NLM Università [=Univ.] 13, f. 384 (14.xii.1563).
16. Busuttill 1989, 189-91.
17. For the export of cumin, Del Amo/Fiorini/Wettinger, Doc. 110.
18. NLM Univ. 13, ff. 53-4^r.
19. *Ibid.*, ff. 70-1.
20. *Ibid.*, f. 127 (15.xii.1536).
21. *Ibid.*, f. 174^v (29.i.1539).
22. *Ibid.*, f. 142 (19.vii.1542).
23. *Ibid.*, f. 240^v (19.i.1544).
24. *Ibid.*, f. 114^r (5.vii.1536).
25. *Ibid.*, f. 242 (28.iii.1544).
26. *Ibid.*, f. 277 (6.v.1550).
27. *Ibid.*, ff. 159^v (15.vii.1538).
28. *Ibid.*, ff. 163^v (23.vii.1538).
29. *Ibid.*, f. 153 (22.xi.1537).
30. *Ibid.*, f. 155^r (16.i.1538).
31. *Ibid.*, f. 173^r (2.i.1539).
32. *Ibid.*, f. 175^r (19.ii.1539).
33. MCM ACM Prebende 6 (Decano, 1522) f. 114: *Julianu Sumeh Seveye casalis Cuderi*. The nickname Seveye (Sevilla) probably refers to connexions with that Iberian city.
34. *Ibid.*, f. 194 (24.iv.1540).
35. *Ibid.*, f. 276^r (30.iv.1550).
36. *Ibid.*, f. 277^v (11.v.1550).
37. For a discussion of this plan and Sicilian parallels in the *Trapanese*, Buhagiar/Fiorini 1996, i, 51-68.
38. NLM Univ. 13, f. 223^v (26.vi.1542).
39. *Ibid.*, f. 233^r (30.vi.1543).
40. *Ibid.*, f. 211^r (4.v.1541); f. 242 (24.vii.1544).
41. *Ibid.*, f. 355 (16.x.1560). For Cuzin, *vide* Parish Archives, Siġġiewi [=PAS], Lib. Bapt. I, f. 17 (iii.1560).
42. *Ibid.*, f. 110 (v.1536).
43. *Ibid.*, f. 164 (3.viii.1538).
44. *Ibid.*, f. 171 (23.ix.1538).
45. *Ibid.*, f. 206^r (xii.1540).
46. *Ibid.*, f. 111 (5.v.1536). For similar *bandi*, *Ibid.*, f. 41 (7.ii.1531); f. 47^r (17.iv.1532); f. 171^v (15.xi.1538); f. 230^r (20.xi.1542) *et passim*.
47. *Ibid.*, f. 164^r (21.viii.1538).
48. References in Fiorini 1993a, 133.
49. NLM Univ. 13, f. 220^v (10.iv.1542).
50. *Ibid.*, f. 346^r (21.viii.1559).
51. *Ibid.*, f. 275 (22.iii.1550).
52. *Ibid.*, f. 315^r (13.viii.1553).
53. The appointment of the *signifer sive alfer* for Casal Curmi is recorded in 1549: NLM Univ. 13, f. 263 (3.iv.1549).
54. NLM Univ. 13, f. 362 (29.viii.1561).
55. *Ibid.*, ff. 364v-5^r (10.vi.1563).
56. On this incident and, more generally on the defence of Mdina, Buhagiar/Fiorini 1996, Chapter 7.
57. NLM Univ. 13, f. 292^r (31.v.1551).
58. Mifsud 1918-19; Valentini 1937.
59. Fiorini 1994a, 198.
60. NLM Univ. 13, f. 313 (1.vi.1553).
61. Buhagiar/Fiorini 1996, ii, 499-502.
62. References in Buhagiar/Fiorini 1996, i, 114-5.
63. Wettinger 1977, 168, 176.

64. Wettinger 1977, 183.
65. Cassar 1988; Cassar 1990.
66. Ferres 1866, 403.
67. Cassar 1988, 59-64.
68. Buhagiar/Fiorini 1996, ii, 504.
69. Cassar 1990.
70. Fiorini 1993a, 122.
71. Fiorini 1993b, 297-8.
72. In 1590 there were around 3,500 members of the Order, their slaves and galley crews: NLM Univ. 2, f. 39. These numbers amounted to 4,350 in 1632: NLM Lib. MS. 162, ff. 127^r. To these must be added some 500 Rhodiots accompanying the knights but not directly dependent on them: Fiorini 1994a. The rest must have been recent immigrants who came in the wake of the Order, probably looking for work.
73. Fiorini 1994a, 197.
74. On the Mdina siege, Buhagiar/Fiorini 1996, ii, 467-8.
75. NLM Archivum Ordinis Melitae [=AOM] 90, f. 120 (20.ix.1560); Lib. MS. 149, f. 176 (30.ix.1560): *Bando*.
76. NLM AOM 89, f. 140 (18.vi.1554).
77. *Ibid.*, f. 6^v (5.v.1554). Various complaints were later lodged by soldiers against their captains: *ibid.* 91, f. 171^v (8.viii.1566).
78. This is asserted in Cutajar/Cassar 1985, 35 but the archival reference given there (fn. 25) is erroneous. In the same footnote, Żejtun is a misreading for Żurrieq. In the parish's first baptismal register, which gives his name as Di Curtes, he is recorded acting as godfather on various occasions: e.g. PAS, Lib. Bapt. I, f. 18 (7.vi.1561).
79. Balbi di Correggio 1961, 48-9.
80. Zabarella 1902, 164-9.
81. PAS, Lib. Bapt. I, f. 23.
82. Bosio 1684, iii, 737.
83. Figures quoted in Bonnici 1977, 280.
84. Fiorini 1986.
85. NLM AOM 1184, ff. 244-7 (1.xii.1639).
86. Hoppen 1993, 403-5.
87. Collura 1937, 33-43.
88. PAS Lib. Bapt. I, f. 32 (2.ix.1571) and f. 36 (7.i.1573).
89. *Ibid.*, f. 32 (15.vi.1571), f. 41^v (19.ix.1575), f. 53 (2.ix.1580) and f. 61^v (25.vi.1586).
90. Aquilina/Fiorini 1983, 83, f. 54^r.
91. *Ibid.*, ff. 52^r-4.
92. *Ibid.*, ff. 60-2.
93. *Ibid.*, ff. 55-60.
94. MCM CEM Acta Originalia [=AO], vol. I (22.vii.Ind.VI [=1473]): *Jn casalj Sigeuj...a Sanctu Johannj undi fachimu guardia*.
95. ASV S.C. Visita Apostolica, 39 (Dusina, 1575), f. 58^v.
96. For a published catalogue of all these churches, Ferres 1866, 635-7.
97. For a discussion of the architecture and fresco paintings in the church, Buhagiar 1975, 172-3.
98. ASV S.C. Visita Apostolica, 39 (Dusina, 1575) ff. 52^r-4, 218^r-9.
99. *Ibid.*, ff. 217^r, 285. A document of 1514 describes the situation of the Maltese clergy in that year: *La isla de Malta...hay mas de sesenta aldeas y no hay mas de treynta cappellanos y la maior parte dellos sirven ala yglesia catedral* (Del Amo/Fiorini/Wettinger, Doc. 100).
100. Cassar 1993, 438.
101. Wettinger 1977, 183.
102. Cassar 1990, 175 (Item 145) and 178 (Item 199).
103. Cassar 1964, 165-70.
104. PAS Lib. Bapt. I, f. 74.
105. NLM Lib. MS. 1076, f. 14.
106. NLM AOM 1182, f. 4 (10.ix.1603).
107. *Ibid.*, f. 183 (27.v.1615).
108. Fiorini 1989, 36, 48.

109. Fiorini 1994b, 18-9.
110. PAS Lib. Bapt. I, f. 110 (10.iii.1610), f. 145 (20.viii.1625), f. 146^v (1.xi.1626), f. 149^v (28.ii.1629), f. 191 (23.iv.1651), f. 198 (16.ii.1653).
111. *Ibid.*, f. 202^v (21.viii.1654), f. 236^v (3.vi.1665).
112. Ferres 1866, 80-1.
113. Borg 1983, passim.
114. NLM Lib. MS. 1076, f. 20.
115. Ferres 1866, 684.
116. Fiorini 1983, Tables I-X.
117. This section is based on the thorough account of the 1675 plague in Micallef 1985, esp. 19, 26, 33, 38, 51, 53, 55, 90, 107-8, 113, 118, 120, 126-7.
118. The one entry in the first baptismal register of the parish (PAS Lib. Bapt. I, f. 23^v) is valuable: the surname Cafor in an entry of 1568 is rendered Gařan in a marginal docket entered about a century later.
119. Wettinger 1993, Doc. 947 (12.xi.1498): *Johannes Muchumud [Casalis Zabar]*.
120. Information in this section is gleaned from Fiorini 1984.
121. This intriguing sobriquet was, in fact, an old medieval surname which subsequently turned into a nickname qualifying the Pace family. In 1445 at Birgu one encounters Bonfiglu [C]Huerra (Fiorini 1993c, 222) and in 1469 a Jorgi Chuerra *patrum di barkecta*, very probably also at Birgu (MCM ACM Misc. 437 no. 8: *Tabula et cuntu dilj spisj facti per la ambaxata di Malta*, f.2 [1469]). In the 1490s among the *persuni sunnu tinuti ad habitari ala chitai dili biduni*, very probably from Siggiewi, there were Aluys Chuerra and Petru Chuerra (NLM Lib. MS. 670, f. 19). Very significantly, in 1532 Notary Geronimo Cumbo records *Hieronimus Pachi alias Chuerri habitator casalis sigeui* (NAV R196/1(II), f. 7 (27.iv.1532)).
122. NLM Lib. MS. 1076 (Visitatio Davide Cocco-Palmeri, 1686), ff. 15^v-6: The Bishop complains of *onera non adimpleta* and gives details of property bequeathed to the Dominicans by the Pace family: Legacy of Pietro Pace (Not. Bernardo Azzupardi (17.iii.1609): *clausura iccinus ta Blas*); legacy Laurentio Pace (Not. Martin Zammit (21.x.1611): *clausura ta tifał in contrata Noscieha*); legacy Margarita wife of Clement Tabone and daughter of the late Pietro Pace (Not. Salvatore Cianzar (16.vi.1656)).
123. Ferres 1866, 398-411.
124. Unfortunately, the church recently suffered the sacrilegious theft of its altar painting (a Velasco) and several *ex voti*. Descriptions of five of the more artistically appealing items are found in an exhibition catalogue: Buhagiar 1983, 73-9, items 24, 30, 35, 43, 45.
125. Borg/Zammit/Bonnici Cali 1982, 28, fn. 55. The Siggiewi church organist at this time was the cleric Nicola Pace: NLM Lib. MS. 1076, f. 102.
126. Borg 1981. The old processional statue is preserved in the sacristy of the parish church.
127. Hyzler 1843.
128. Ferres 1866, 402. Montanaro 1986.
129. NLM AOM 1190, ff. 267-78; AOM 1191, ff. 433-60.
130. NLM AOM 1191, f. 443 (1766-1771).
131. Archbishop's Archives, Floriana, Corr. XX, f. 29.
132. NLM AOM 1185, ff. 431^r (10.iii.1681).
133. NLM AOM 1187, ff. 164-6 (7.x.1727).
134. NLM AOM 1184, f. 47 (14.x.1633).
135. Fiorini/Zammit 1990, 11, 46, 56.
136. NLM AOM 1186, f. 327 (6.ix.1713).
137. NLM AOM 1189, f. 111 (15.vii.1752).
138. NLM AOM 1192, ff. 225-6 (25.viii.1774).
139. NLM AOM 1195, f. 369 (12.xii.1788).
140. The conclusions of this section are gleaned from Ciappara 1988.
141. Although no Siggiewi people are recorded to have married while abroad, travel was not unknown to the villagers in the eighteenth century. Of the 3251 applications for a marriage licence filed at the Bishop's Curia between 1750-1798, 40 came from Siggiewi.
142. Fiorini 1983, 334-6, 341-3.

143. NLM AOM 623, ff. 183rv (14.ix.1797).

144. *Ibid.*, ff. 208-9v (30.xii.1797).

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