

# Land as a projection of power, wealth and status in 16th century Malta



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In the midst of a politico-ideological division in the Mediterranean between the Ottoman southeast and the European States in the northwest, the Order of St John established itself in the Maltese islands in 1530, acting as the governing body of the archipelago.

Serfdom was long gone, and paid labour had surfaced as an economic arrangement, which enabled peasants to potentially become land owners. This did not mean it was universally reached, even though patches of lands were widely distributed among the inhabitants. Only the Church, a handful of Maltese families and the Order as the governmental institution owned sizeable territories.

Fertile land was highly valued and it was essential of it to be worked. The production and exportation of Maltese cotton and cumin was a tool to cut importation expenses of cereals from Sicily, on which the population was highly reliant.

## Land investments

Studies reveal that mid-16th century Malta was a dynamic society, with business and commercial negotiations happening on a daily basis. Notarial acts of the period unveil the activeness of society, shedding light on numerous territorial arrangements and projecting ideas of land investments.

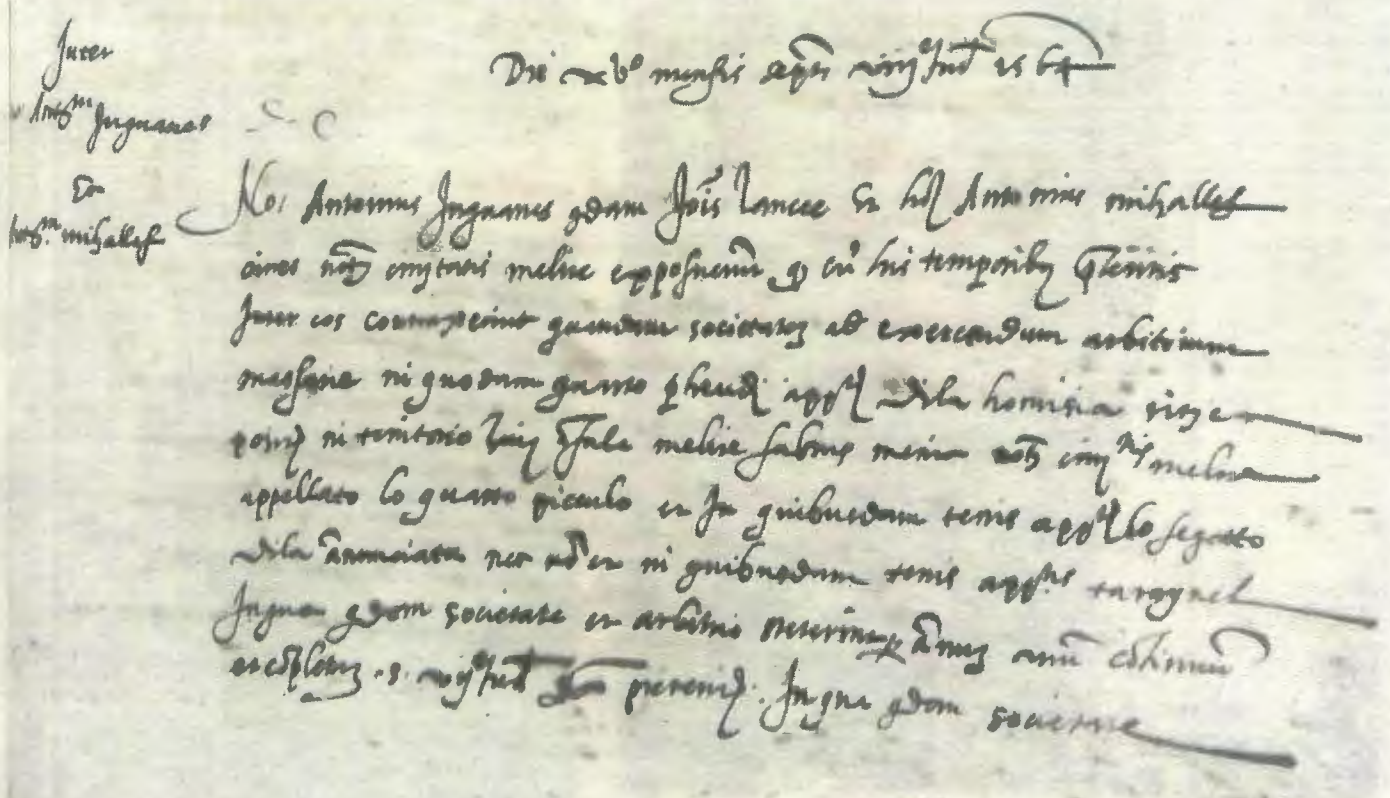
Three acts formulated in September 1564 express such remarks. Two men by the names of Antonius Inguanes and Antonius Mihallef appear to have had a *societas* contact, meaning they had formed an organisation that dealt with territorial business and finance management.

The first act involved division of profits that they had made throughout the past year from three agricultural lands held by them by *gabella*, a form of rent. The second contract revealed that Inguanes was to pay Mihallef the sum of 10 *uncie* as a form of share of profits from another different land which was rented to another person; while the third act consists of a rent agreement of three other territories. The latter, however, were rented to Inguanes by Mihallef, thus furthermore expressing intra-organisational agreements.

These types of activities appear frequently in the archives, and interesting settings are revealed. One such case was that of Johannes de Nicza from Qormi who bought a field at a place called Tal-Miezib, and on the same day is seen renting this field to Berto Schembri, which clearly shows that Johannes had no intention of working the field himself.

In a different contract a woman by the name of Barsula is seen buying back a field she had sold. She had kept the right of buying it back, and then sold it again to another person for a newly settled higher price.

Separately, a man by the name of Gregorio agreed to pay additional money to a certain Tomeus from whom he rented a house and a small field at Sancte



An extract of the first contract between Antonius Inguanes and Antonius Mihallef.

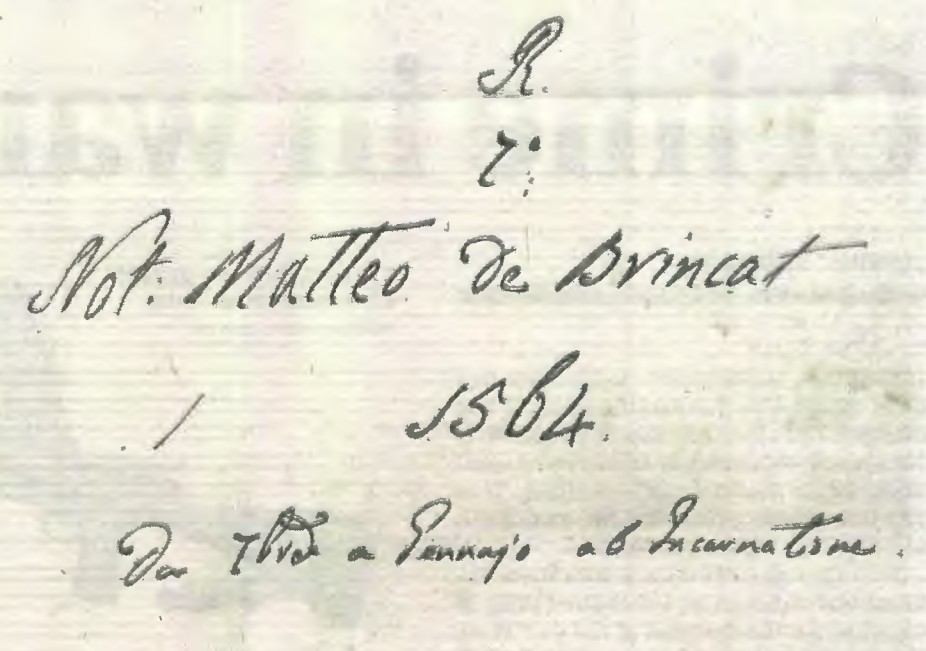
Margarite, Rabat, as a result of a revaluation of such possessions.

The acts also express a picture of social statuses. One could mention the contracts that involve a notary, a person of high society, by the name of Bartholomeus Haxixe, who appears to be renting various lands and selling farm animals, although it was noted that he was not necessarily the owner of these lands but in charge of their management.

**“Remarkably, Michael was given eight fields and a house by his family, apart from animals and two child slaves”**

Other types of acts, such as dowries, also reflect social standings of those involved. An example of this is the dowry given to the couple Angelica Cilia and Michael Manjuni from Birgu. Two fields and a land suitable to be built upon were given to Angelica by her family, apart from jewellery, a sum of money and shares, as well as household necessities.

Remarkably, Michael was given eight fields and a house by his family, apart from animals and two child slaves, which are a display of wealth themselves. Lands were therefore a clear symbol of richness and a display of a person's position in society.



The first page of the register at the Notarial Archives, indicating the name of Notary Matteo De Brincat and the year 1564.

## The modern context

Reflecting on a subject is always essential to further understand history. So what can one observe when trying to compare situations in the 16th century context to modern times?

Back in the 1500s, Malta was still largely agrarian; so agricultural lands were a great investment, which could be rented or worked by the owners themselves. In contrast, land today, although still very much valued, has experienced a shift in its use to one based on the huge demand to accommodate ever expanding modern developments.

Although land was widely owned by people, a few families and entities stood out from the rest with their great possessions.

Is land still a projection of power, wealth and status today? Land and

building possessions are surely not the sole indicators of authority; however, they still offer great investment opportunities and act as a stimulus of power and social standing, continuing a legacy of influential high-society landowners.

## Acknowledgement

The contracts referred to in this article are all part of the acts of Notary Matteo De Brincat, formulated in September 1564. These acts are at the Notarial Archives, Valletta; Register 214/7.

Ryan Grech is a history graduate from the University of Malta and an alumnus of the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies. He recently carried out an analysis on 16th century Maltese society and also examined European politico-economic and technological aspects in the first half of the 19th century.