

LIFE & WELLBEING HISTORY



The first recorded printing in Malta of a part of the Gospel was for use at the altar of St John the Evangelist in Our Lady of Victories church, Valletta. PHOTO: COURTESY OF DIN L-ART HELWA



Coat of arms of Inquisitor Pietro Dusina who ordered every priest in Malta to have a copy of the Bible.



The German translation of the Bible by Martin Luther, 1534.



Pope Innocent III (1189-1216), who opposed the translation of the Scriptures into national languages.



Coat of arms of Inquisitor Evangelista Carbonese, who ordered the public burning in Vittoriosa of heretical Bibles.

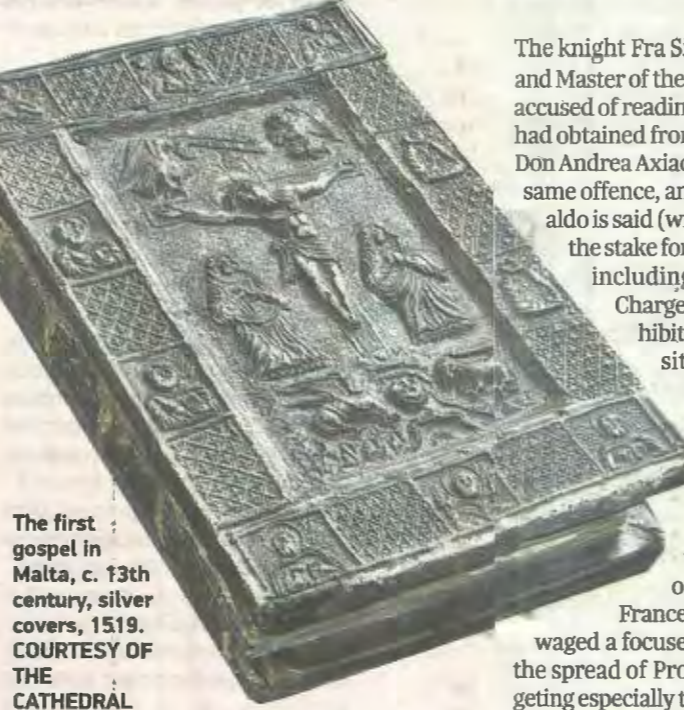
# The Bible's irrelevance in Malta at the time of the Knights



There is, so far, absolutely no confirmation in Maltese records that the Holy Scriptures were ever printed or widely circulated in Malta during the rule of the Order of St John, in their original languages, in the Latin Vulgate edition, or in translation. Considering that Malta was, in that period, almost a Catholic theocracy, scarce evidence exists that the Bible enjoyed any widespread popularity among the knights, the lay population, or the ecclesiastical class itself. In Malta, three religious entities uncomfortably shared between them the entirety of civil and spiritual power: the Grand Master of the religious Order of St John, the Bishop of Malta and the Inquisitor, all three directly subject to the ultimate jurisdiction of the Pope in Rome. And yet the living presence on the island of the fundamental books of the Christian faith is difficult to trace and to profile, quite likely because of their really minor relevance to local spiritual life, not to say their stark irrelevance. No entire or partial printed translation of the Bible into Maltese is known to exist before the British period. The records of the Order's printing press suggest that in 1757 (twice) and again in 1759, the Reverend Don Francesco Grech and the Reverend Don Giuseppe Fiteni, procurator of the venerable altar of St John the Evangelist (Our Lady of Victories church, Valletta), placed orders for the printing of the Evangelio del sudetto Glorioso San Giovanni. No copy of these three printings is known to survive, so we can only speculate about the contents: was it the complete Gospel of St John, or only those short

extracts used in the liturgy? Was it in Latin or in the Italian Malermi version of 1471? The next Catholic translation into Italian, by Bishop Antonio Martini, came later, in 1769 to 1781. The Order and its members, throughout centuries of history, repeatedly had religious books published for the guidance, education and edification of the 'monks of war': breviaries, missals, officia, prayer books, tracts, ascetic and devotional literature – yet not a single issue of the Old or the New Testament in some way connected with the Order is recorded. One exception was the commentary on the Psalm *Miserere mei Domine* by the Maltese Capuchin Friar Pietro Paolo Ros printed in Malta in 1763 – probably the first and only Bible-related publication. The liturgy specific to the Order, varied and dazzling though it undoubtedly was, could hardly be described as anything like Bible-centric. The general level of education of the majority of the clergy in the earlier period of the Order, before the erection of the Seminary in 1703, appears to have ranged between low and extremely low – with not a few admirable, or even outstanding, exceptions. Many of the priests could only read with difficulty and even fewer owned any books. The detailed record of the apostolic visitation by Mgr Pietro Dusina in 1575 does not inventory one single copy of the Bible, in Latin or in translation, to be found in any church in Malta. The closest came the Cathedral, with an *evangelistano* (*evangelistario*?) di *parcamena coperto a li coperti di argento*. Even this is listed, not as a sacred book, but with the objects of precious metal, the binding more noteworthy than the contents. And all three Dominican convents in Rabat, Vittoriosa and Valletta had small libraries. Though these contained several theological works and biblical commentaries, not a single copy of the Bible seems to appear in the inventories. In fact, when during and after the Great Siege of 1565, the spirits of the beleaguered knights and inhabitants were fortified by the

devout and stirring sermons of Italian Capuchin Fra Roberto da Eboli, what remained memorable about them was the preacher's extensive and erudite quotations from the Bible – something his audiences seem to have considered truly exceptional. This religious ignorance and disregard for the holy texts caused major consternation to the saintly and culture-loving bishop Baldassare Cagliares, who insisted that every priest should have a copy of the Bible. In his general census of ecclesiastics he noted down diligently the names of all priests who did not own a copy of the Holy Scriptures and who he ordered, under the sanction of penalties, to acquire one – there are some 50 defaulters listed by name. It is not known whether it was the Latin Vulgate version that Cagliares recommended. If it was, several of them would have found it incomprehensible. From early records we get glimpses of how the local clergy related to the Bible in their pastoral work. Zurrieq parish priest Don Nicolaus Bonnici, in 1594, gave catechism lessons by selecting parts of the Gospel, translating them into Maltese and explaining them to the people. Don Dionisius Mangion, in 1575, shared with Mgr Dusina the fact that, though he was able to read the Gospel, he was at a loss as to how to translate its contents, as he had never studied grammar. Similarly, Mgr Dusina found that Don Sanctorus de Nasis, though well versed in grammar, had difficulties in explaining the Gospels. Rome rather frowned upon popular translations of the Bible into national 'vernacular' languages, for a number of complex reasons, and this is not the proper forum to examine them. The famous letter by Pope Innocent III to the Bishop of Metz in 1199 is usually taken as the pontiff's blanket ban on vernacular translations, but that would be a rather simplistic reading of a highly nuanced and multifaceted text. Leonard Boyle has shown that what concerned Innocent III were not the popular translations of the holy



The first gospel in Malta, c. 13th century, silver covers, 1519. COURTESY OF THE CATHEDRAL MUSEUM

The knight Fra Simon Provost, gifted sculptor and Master of the Mint, was tortured after being accused of reading a Protestant French Bible he had obtained from a priest eager to get rid of it; Don Andrea Axiaq was excommunicated for the same offence, and priest Don Francesco Gesualdo is said (wrongly) to have ended burnt at the stake for various crimes of conscience, including owning translated Bibles. Charges of possessing or reading prohibited literature swamp the Inquisition's records, and many of these referred to the scriptures translated in modern languages, mostly originating in Protestant countries or from heretical sects. Differently from his brother who became one of the leaders of the Protestant revolt in France, Grand Master Jean de Valette waged a focused and systematic war against the spread of Protestantism in the island, targeting especially the distribution of heretical literature, mostly unauthorised translations of the Bible into French, German and English, and commentaries thereon. De Valette did everything in his power to stem the dissemination of these books. In 1562 he appointed a formal commission of high-powered knights to take all necessary measures to "fight the poisonous books of the Lutherans and other heretics" to make sure "that the Order and the island be completely purged and cleansed of such books". As four of the Order's galleys had just returned from France, de Valette bid the commissioners to raid them, break open any boxes, irrespective of who they belonged to, however high his office, "without respect or deference". The commissioners trawled for books and other literature "by the heretic Lutherans and others of their sect and by any other prohibited writer". Findings had immediately to be handed over to the bishop of Malta. The Grand Master also

authorised the commissioners to enter any house to search for and seize heretical books. The most dangerous of these would have been unauthorised Bibles in vernacular languages. Permission to read translations of the Bible had to be requested from the Supreme Congregation of the Faith in Rome. Some knights of Malta did that in 1601, and Inquisitor Fabrizio Verallo interceded in their favour to obtain the requisite licence. Rome adamantly refused: they were only permitted to read those extracts from the Gospels and the Epistles that were included in the Roman Missal. Much later, in 1718, Inquisitor Lazzaro Pallavicino petitioned Rome to allow two Capuchin friars, in Malta to hear the confessions of French knights, for permission to own and read a Bible in French. Rome again answered with a stony refusal. "Pietro Dusina in 1575 does not inventory one single copy of the Bible in any church in Malta" The Inquisition looked out for anything that might contaminate the faith, not least, versions of the Holy Scriptures published by heretics and unauthorised translations in vernacular languages. Principal suspects were the Scriptures as translated by reformers like Martin Luther and the scriptural writings of Jean Calvin. In 1563, Antonio Xerri had found himself in hot water after borrowing some books from Matthew Falzon and others, and was denounced to Bishop Domenico Cubelles for having in his possession Luther's 1525 *Sermon on the Gospel* and Calvin's *Confessions of Faith* and his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, co-authored with William Farrel. Ahead of disappearing from Malta, Falzon burnt all his heretical books, before being himself burnt in effigy.



The Malermi Bible, 1471, the first translation of the Bible into Italian.

Inquisitor Evangelista Carbonese organised a spectacular public burning of heretical books in the main Square of Vittoriosa, on May 5, 1609. These included a translation of the Bible into English, translations of the psalms in French, the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles and a life of Christ, all in French. The scribe of the Inquisition, Giovanni Luca Gauci, kept a careful list of all those evil books destroyed by fire, and noted how the bonfires were watched by "a multitude of people". It is not known if the Inquisitor was struck by the prophetic irony of his name and surname – gospels and coal – being attributed to the organiser of the evangelical pyre. It seems that the Bible copies that existed in Malta were not used for the purpose of study, prayer or meditation, but as the solemn prop to take an oath on. The oath of witnesses and accused in front of the Inquisitor was taken by laying one's hand on the Bible, and not by kissing the crucifix, the stereotype formula being *iuramento tactis scripturis de veritate dicenda*. This respected a very old custom: in 1485 the Jewish community in Malta had petitioned to be exempted from being forced to take the oath on the Bible, and the authorities complied – henceforth no one *compellere possint dictos Judeos ad prestanda dicta iuramenta predicta supra la biblia*. People taking an oath in 1522 were still required to do it *super Evangelistario Sancti Pauli*, popularly known as *Lu libru di Santu Paulu*, c. AD 1160, now in the Cathedral Museum. And those who abjured heresy and pleaded for re-entry into the Roman Catholic fold made the request in a public ceremony, touching the Bible. But at some later stage the crucifix edged the Bible out. It is not known when or why, this transition occurred in administering the oath.