

Delighting in the devil in the details of Malta's historical maps

TEODOR RELJIC speaks to Joseph Schiro of the Malta Map Society about how perceptions of map collection and analysis are often only partially correct, and how Malta can boast of a rich array of cartographic treasures

What were the main aims of the Society when it was first established, and how did these change over time, if at all?

The aims of the Society are very simple and they are to support, encourage and disseminate the study and preservation of maps, with a particular emphasis on early maps. And I believe we have been consistent during these last 10 years since the Society was founded in 2009 by Dr Albert Ganado who at 96 is the President of the Society. We have helped individuals, whether they were members of the Society or not, and governmental and non-governmental organisations, with the identification of maps, with advice on acquisitions, with map authentication, with the building of map collections, with their conservation and preservation needs, all for free because we believe that when a person approaches us with a map he is the one who is doing us the favour as one can never know whether that particular individual might unwittingly have in his possession that very rare elusive map which could turn out to be that real long lost treasure.

As a society we have not changed our aims but we are now trying to reach out to the younger generations and endeavour to involve them more in the study of antique maps. For some years now we have been working very closely with the Geography Department of the University of Malta and we organise map viewings and talks for the B.A. (Hons.) Geography students. When the museums

open again we also would like to cooperate with the curators and hold map days for school children.

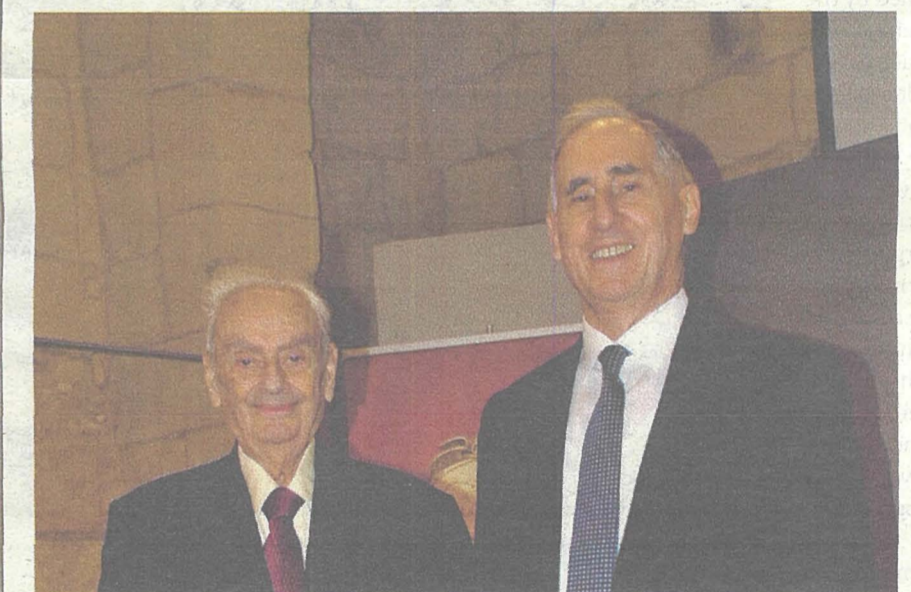
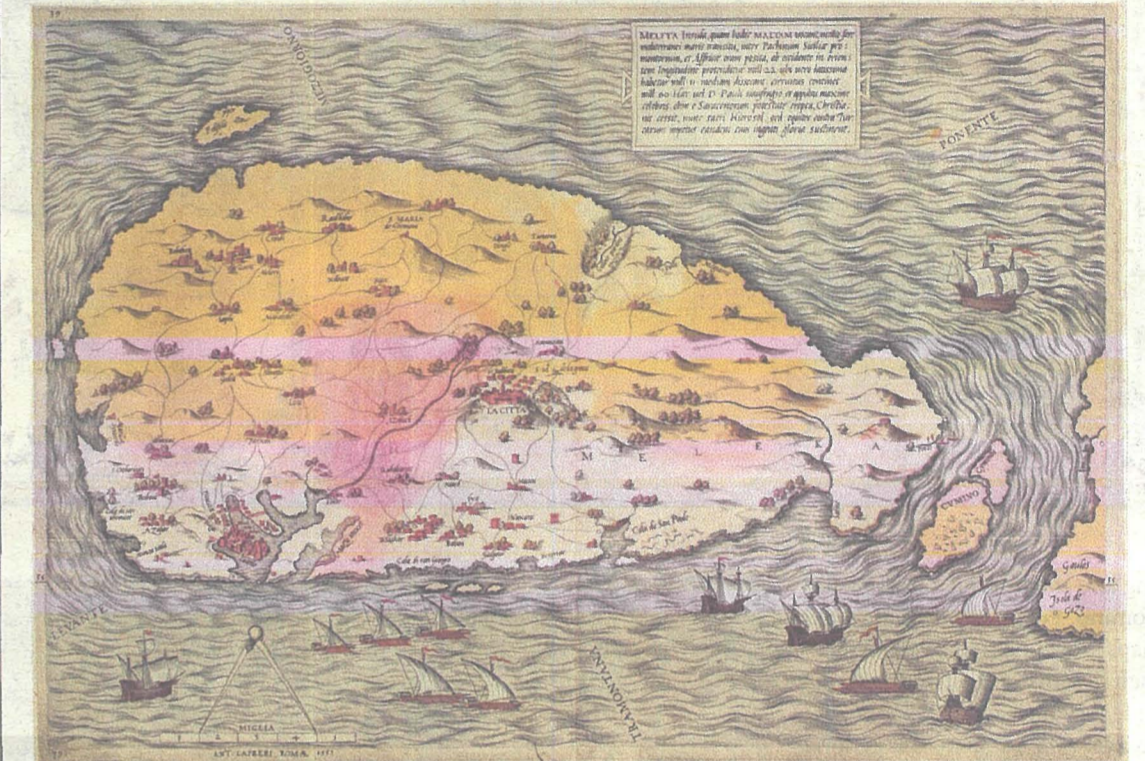
How was cartography viewed in Malta at the time of you setting up the Society, and what has changed in that regard since then?

The collection of antique maps has universally been associated with people who have the money to collect maps and with nerds who study them. But this is a very wrong impression. The collection and study of maps can take many forms. We have a member in our society who is very knowledgeable on Malta maps but I don't think he even owns one original map. With collecting, one can also go for specific periods or types. Some collect only British period maps of Malta because they would be interested in the history of the British period in Malta. When I started collecting, I used to buy only miniature maps because those were the ones that I could afford. Then there are map collectors who are willing to pay any price to obtain that rare map.

What has certainly changed since the Society was born 10 years ago is more public awareness because the Society has managed to establish a national and international reputation for publishing erudite works on Malta's fascinating cartography under the professional guidance of Dr Ganado's expertise and thanks to the dedication of the Committee members. We have published nine newsletters, four journals, and four books all



Left: Giovanni Giacomo de Rossi, 1686 and (below) the Lafreri map of Malta of 1551, one of the earliest and most accurate maps of Malta



L-R: Dr Albert Ganado (President) and Joseph Schiro (Secretary) of the Malta Map Society

concerning the study of Maltese cartography. On top of all this, the Society has organised several talks and exhibitions, and the very successful International Map Collectors Society (IMCoS) Symposium which was held in Malta in 2011 which created international contacts and friendships with very important people in the field.

What is it about antique maps of Malta that makes them so notable when compared to those of other countries? What does it say about how the island was perceived and recorded, particularly given the colonial nature of a lot of these endeavours?

When compared with other maps of other countries, the map

The collection of antique maps has universally been associated with people who have the money to collect maps and with nerds who study them. But this is a very wrong impression

of Malta is very attractive being a fish-shaped island surrounded with blank spaces of sea for artists to fill. It is found in the middle of the Mediterranean, is endowed with a very fascinating history and has been the protagonist of some very important historical events. The shipwreck of St Paul was perhaps the earliest important event which put Malta on the international map, so to speak. Many early maps of the Mediterranean make reference to the shipwreck of St Paul in Malta and when Malta started to be depicted on its own, several maps showed a shipwreck off St Paul's Bay.

With the Order's presence in Malta, the number of beautiful maps by French, Italian, Dutch,

German, English and Spanish cartographers increased exponentially. The Great Siege of 1565 was followed very closely by all countries in Europe and hence the number of maps which were published to illustrate pictorially what was happening made this battle the most documented and covered event in history. Voltaire wrote "nothing is more famous than the Siege of Malta". After the French interlude and with the arrival of the British, Malta remained at the centre of things since the British Empire was a strong one in the 19th century. Malta has welcomed many important figures and many kept a diary of their peregrinations which was later published, usually accompanied with illustrations

showing scenes of Malta and a map of the islands of Malta. With the digitisation of many collections in libraries all over the world, new maps of Malta are continuously being discovered. When we had first established the Society one prospective member had asked me whether it was worth joining, knowing that Dr Albert Ganado had covered the field so well and so thoroughly. What I can say is that the number of new maps which have been discovered since has bemused even Dr Ganado who never stops to say that the study of Malta maps is never-ending.

What would you say are some of the most important maps in the

Society's collection, and what makes them so notable?

The Malta Map Society does not have its own collection of maps but knows and studies maps in the private collections of its members and in the collection of libraries and museums in Malta and abroad. The biggest collection of maps in Malta is that which is housed at MUZA in Valletta after Dr Albert Ganado passed on his collection of maps which he had put together in the past 60 years to the State, in exchange for the house where Dr Ganado lives, which was public property. The collection, which consisted of 19 manuscript maps, and 431 printed maps produced between 1507 and 1900, together with the map

collection which the museum already had, makes it the largest collection of maps of Malta in the world. Perhaps the most notable maps in the Ganado collection are the sixteenth century Italian maps, the so-called Lafreri maps, which he managed to acquire over the years. These maps are so rare that in some instances, only one exemplar of the map is known to exist. It is a collection which can only be accumulated once and can never be repeated, even with all the money in the world. A beautiful map in the collection which is of great interest to us Maltese is the Lafreri 1551 Malta map which is very accurate for such an early map. Then there are maps by Maltese cartographers such as

by Aloisio Gili and Antonio Borg which are so rare and beautiful. There are however other private collections which are important and which include some very rare exemplars too.

What kind of feedback does the society receive during and after public events, particularly from those with a more casual interest in cartography? What is it about Malta's historical maps that they find appealing?

Infallibly people are always interested in the little details found in maps, which is of course very positive and which makes maps so fascinating and appealing. There are for example maps of the Great Siege which show bird net-