

### Maltese *chibouks*. The Libyan connection?



A significant number of clay tobacco pipes in the style of the Ottoman *chibouk* can be found in museums and private collections on the islands of Malta and Gozo. Indeed the smoking of these pipes remains a folk memory with the majority of senior citizens.

In August 1994 Guido Lanfranco in his weekly phone-in folklore programme on RTK Radio elicited the following information.<sup>(1)</sup> One resident of Rabat, Malta, remembers an old man in the Bir Riebu area making clay pipe bowls in the 1930 s. They were not sold as a business venture. The same lady says that North African nationals sold similar pipes "They were cream coloured with nice shapes, they were curved, they cost tuppence halfpenny each. They used to sell sweet sedge root (*cyperus esculentus*) and pipes in a bag over their shoulder". There is more information from an 80 year old resident of Zejtun "There was a man who made pipes out of clay, he worked with his hands (no moulds). Red ones used to be imported, the Turks (North Africans) used to bring them, the cups were imported and then a thin reed (*qasba*) inserted for smoking them". It becomes obvious that very few of these artefacts were made locally. The Maltese, being at the geographical centre of Mediterranean culture, might have received these imports from anywhere along the North African littoral.

During the period 1530-1798 the Knights agreed various periods of truce with the

Barbary states for the purposes of trade, with the proviso that their ships did not enter Maltese harbours flying the Turkish flag.<sup>(2)</sup> After 1711, at the beginning of the Karamanli dynasty, relations between Malta and Tripoli became particularly friendly. Compliments and greetings were exchanged with the Pasha of Tripoli, he reciprocated with gifts and favours such as the freeing of slaves. Likewise with the Beys of Benghazi and Derna.

In the 19th century many Maltese migrated from their densely populated islands, principally to Algeria, Tunis, Egypt and Tripoli. Trade by Maltese masters of *speronara*, the sailing ships of 50-150 tons, was also conducted all along the Barbary coast. Migrant workers found it cheap and simple to move about in these vessels of their friends and families. A number of merchants, who settled in the centres where consular authority prevailed, even saved enough to become creditors. In 1832 seventeen of the forty four creditors of the Pasha of Tripoli were Maltese.<sup>(3)</sup> The trip to Tripoli or Tunis cost around two shillings. No doubt seafarers and merchants alike developed a taste for some of life's luxuries like tobacco and perhaps Libyan traders found a ready market for pipes amongst their Maltese clients.

This author made a study of *chibouks* in Tunisia, Malta's nearest North African neighbour.<sup>(4)</sup> The results, while defining the 'Tunis' pipe were inconclusive about the origin of the Maltese pipes. Could Libya provide the answer?

(1) Lanfranco, G. 1994 'Old smoking pipes' *L-Immara* 18, 5, 1.

(2) Cassar Pullicino, J. 1992 *Studies in Maltese Folklore*. Malta University Press.

(3) Price, C.A. 1954 *Malta and the Maltese*. Georgian House. Melbourne.

(4) Wood, J. 2000 'Pipes from Tunis. Were they traded to Malta?' *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 33, 233-241.