

### Clay tobacco pipes from Malta. A local product or imported?

A re-examination of the evidence

A number of areas in Malta have been in continuous occupation since the introduction of tobacco in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Of those Mdina and Zejtun have been associated with the production of *pipi tal-Qasba*, albeit on a modest scale. In the harbour area the one pipe factory, the former *British Empire Pipe Company*, used briar and olive wood for their products. They say clay pipes were probably imported.

No doubt Maltese from all walks of life found solace in tobacco. What is known about the loss or disposal of pipes bears out that fact. A number of fragments have been found in association with domestic bric-à-brac and refuse in diverse places such as Mdina, the Citadel (Gozo) and Palazzo Bonnici, Sliema. Fragments have also been found in military barracks at the Auberge de Castille in Valletta and Fort Rinella, Kalkara. In Gozo there is evidence linking pipe smoking with various tradesmen. A miller in Xaghra, a farmer in Xlendi and herdsmen at il-Mixta. Even priests were permitted to smoke in the privacy of their own homes. It would seem, at face value, that mariners and fishermen were by far the largest user group. However the sea does tend to keep ceramics in a good state of preservation, so it follows that this is where the bulk of artefacts would be found. Indeed it is so, particularly around the hub of trade, the dockyard and harbours.

There is scant information regarding this aspect of Maltese folklore. Guido Lanfranco, on his RTK radio programme, elicited interesting information from callers, from which I quote. In Valletta plaster pipes used to come packed in straw in wooden boxes. They sound like British style imports, especially as the caller goes on to describe how, as a child, he was given the breakages and would bridge the broken stem with a matchstick to play at smoking. This was in 1946.

Mr. Spiteri of Zejtun, an octogenarian in 1994, remembers an old man who made and sold hand crafted pipes. He goes on to describe pipes made entirely from bamboo. These can be made by almost anyone and are practical, if rustic. Spiteri's grandfather bought red *pipi tal-Qasba* from itinerant North Africans who used to trade in Malta before WW2.

According to a lady from Rabat, a professional potter working on domestic ware at Bir Riebu around 1934, made interesting reed pipes as a sideline for his friends. This correspondent also remembered the North African nationals selling attractive pipes in a cream colour.

These *chibouks*, or *pipi tal-Qasba*, were imported into Malta from North Africa within living memory, but not it would seem from Tunisia<sup>1</sup>. Therefore it would be sensible to look further afield for the source. A request for information is being considered in Tripoli, Libya, brokered by Sulieman Khoja, an Educationalist at the University of Malta.

The tobacco habit was introduced into Ottoman Turkey around 1600. At that time and until 1798 Malta was home to the Knights of Saint John. During this period pipe smoking became *de rigueur* with the Ottoman Turks. It was also popular in Malta, for in 1673 the Grand Master made tobacco a taxable commodity. Use of *nicotiana* was therefore an acceptable habit ashore, if not at sea aboard the galleys. The Knights had an ambivalent attitude to their Ottoman opponents. On the one hand a state of war existed and prisoners taken, frequently for ransom. On the other hand truces were arranged to conduct trade.

From 1798 to 1914, when cigarettes were issued to servicemen *en masse*, Malta was briefly French and subsequently a British possession. During the British period economic migration was widespread, initially around the mediterranean basin. At its height there were 15,000 Maltese in Algeria, 11,000 in Tunisia, 7,000 in Egypt, 3,000 in Tripoli and Constantinople and lesser numbers in Gibraltar, Marsilles and Smyrna. Migration was facilitated by Maltese crews sailing Maltese boats. Regular crises in Moslem states meant considerable re-patriation. Contact with Ottoman culture persisted throughout the centuries. Malta was also a customs clearing house and place of quarantine in a centrally situated commercial and militarily active environment.

In the past fine wares have been imported from Sicily and everyday pottery made locally.

<sup>1</sup> Wood, J. (2000) 'A study of clay pipes in Tunis. Were they traded to Malta?' *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 33, 233-241.

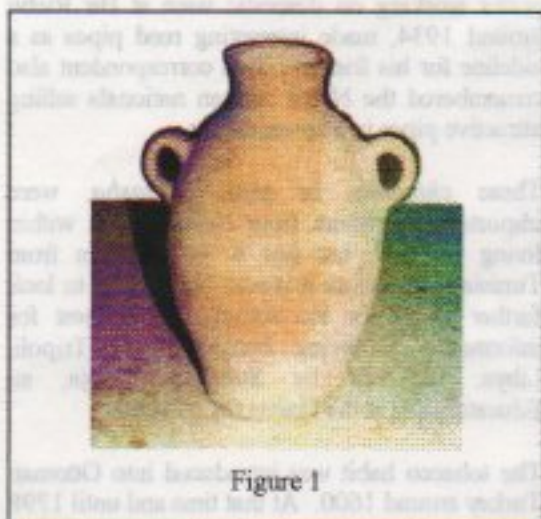


Figure 1



Figure 2

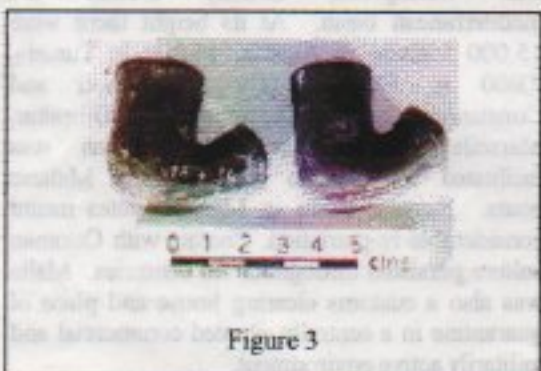


Figure 3

The occupation of potter, reflected in the nickname *Tal-Fuhhar*, was given to residents of Birkirkara.

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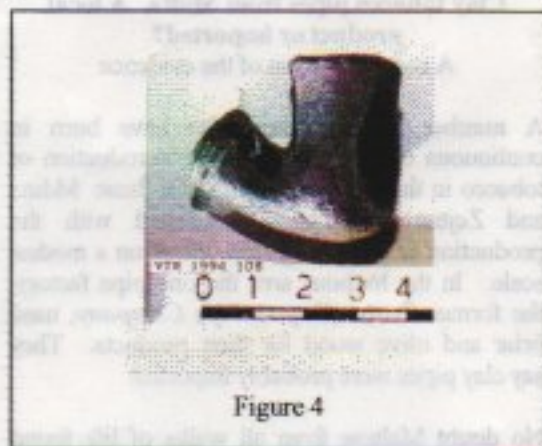


Figure 4

The octogenarian Salvu Axiq, interviewed in 1993, said that Carmel Sacco from Rabat (Gozo), made him pipe bowls at one time. Gozitan clay may be grey in the raw state, but the fired effect of Sacco's pottery (Fig. 1) is not the grey-black of Gozo 7 (Fig. 2) and its clone. Therefore the two Gozo pipes would not appear to be made from local clay. This clay which fires grey-black is predominant in both the Birgu and Gozo collections. In many respects Gozo 7 resembles a 'family' of nine pipes from the dockyard creek, Birgu, catalogue nos. VTR 1994 34, 38 (Fig. 3), 40, 42, 47, 90, 95, 108 (Fig. 4) and 138. Common features are the size, sacklike shape, clay and double ring decoration on the stem end. All the artefacts are mould made. Marked pieces from Varna and Marseilles have been found in the Maltese islands, but in a quite different clay. Given the absence of makers' marks on the pipes in question it is difficult to guess the place and date of manufacture. The colour, absence of pronounced keel and relatively small shank opening would point to an earlier model. Possibly 17<sup>th</sup> century (a 17<sup>th</sup> century British pipe was found in association with the Birgu reed pipes). However slightly more flared shapes, found in Greece, are dated to the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century. They are also found in Egypt and Palestine.

Given the cosmopolitan culture prevalent in Malta these artefacts might have come from anywhere the length and breadth of the mediterranean. It would be interesting to see similar pipes from elsewhere

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