

## **Was early modern Malta an 'isolated world'?**

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In the first part of *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, written more than thirty years ago, Fernand Braudel makes some very interesting observations on Mediterranean islands. One such observation concerns their isolated worlds.

'Isolation' [he explains<sup>1</sup>] is a relative phenomenon. That the sea surrounds the islands and cuts them off from the rest of the world more effectively than any other environment is certainly true whenever they are really situated outside the normal sea routes. But when they are integrated into shipping routes, and for one reason or another ... become one of the links in a chain, they are on the contrary actually involved in the dealings of the outside world, less cut off from them than some inaccessible mountain areas.

Braudel's notion of 'isolation' is entirely restricted to material values - to the powerful force of trade in generating material prosperity - almost completely ignoring the equally potent civilizing dynamism of ideas - whether these concern political philosophy or unorthodox religious beliefs, military engineering and defence technology, or the inspiring enriching styles of all forms of art, manners, habits and fashionable entertainment.

The present paper endeavours to assess the validity of Braudel's thesis with regard to early modern Malta. How far, for instance, was Malta in early modern times a 'land of hunger', and its inhabitants 'prisoners of their poverty'? To what extent may it be identified as a 'besieged territory', as Braudel calls the Balearics, Corsica, Sicily, and Sardinia; or 'a maritime frontier under constant enemy attack', as the island of Elba has been described? Is it historically acceptable to define domestic life on early modern Malta 'withdrawn and insecure', 'precarious, restricted, and threatened'? All these qualifying terms belong to Braudel. He employs them consistently with reference to Mediterranean islands in general or to the larger ones in particular.

The paper argues that unlike practically all Mediterranean islands, large and small (which were generally outlying peripheral regions of composite States and Empires whose administrative core lay in distant centres), Malta from 1530, and especially more so after 1565, when the Hospitaller Order of St John was fully committed to a permanent presence on the island, had increasingly become an 'independent' sovereign State, no longer practically on the receiving end of the political dictates of either Spain or Sicily.

In all but name, the Grand Master was every inch a monarch. The further the Order became removed from the monastic spirit of 'poverty and humility' that had characterized its early years in Jerusalem, the more prominent and enticing did the symbolism of the 'closed crown' of royalty increasingly appear to successive Grand Masters, very intimately reflecting the evolution of their sovereign authority.

The Order's personality, the highly efficient organization, matured by a long tradition, behind its vast estates spread all over Catholic Europe, the accumulation of practical knowledge in all spheres of insular government, naval warfare, and international diplomacy, its persistent endeavour to justify its relevance to the contemporary Christian world, and the Hospitallers' own eminently sophisticated lifestyle and aspirations - the dynamism of all these potential forces of change helped gradually to integrate the island within the major spheres of European activity, and in the pursuit of exclusively Hospitaller interests getting the island inevitably 'involved in the dealings of the outside world' in an altogether new way. To the Maltese, these were emerging novelties which they only progressively began to discover how to appreciate and exploit. They had been unexpectedly caught up indirectly in a European-Mediterranean role for which they were unprepared on account of their size, history, and underdeveloped economic base. The enormous infrastructural changes which the Order found necessary to undertake with urgency were in no way marginal to its natural expectations. And although it had never been the Order's mission, certainly not one of its priorities, to civilize the local population, it unwittingly succeeded in breaking late medieval Malta's isolation, the long-term results of which, for sectors of the native population, must have signified an outward expansion drive, one that would prove momentous in all domains of material and cultural life. From a sparsely settled, largely sedentary, rural society, it was transformed over the course of two and a half centuries or so into one marked by relative mobility and densely populated urban centres with strong elements of proto-industrial features, like the arsenal for shipbuilding and repairs, arms manufacturing, warehouses, and trans-shipment facilities.

Unfortunately, we are not yet in a position to discern properly the measure of literacy on late medieval Malta, or its extent towards the end of the Order's rule. In the mid-1630s, for example, Fabio Chigi, the future Pope Alexander VII, lamented the absence of books on the island and had had to import copies of what he wanted from Italy to make up for his deep sense of isolation. In 1716 the Venetian Giacomo Capello, equally frustrated at the magnitude of illiteracy on the island, complained that books in Malta were a very rare commodity, and that not only was the book trade negligible, it was barely worthy of the name. This notwithstanding, there can be no denying that the winds of change were blowing in the direction of the central Mediterranean.

Hospitaller Malta could at least boast of a Jesuits' College in the early 1590s, a medical school and a printing press in the sixteenth, and a seminary, university, and public library in the eighteenth, none of which - or anything similar - existed before. The first narrative history of Malta was published in 1647.

It was the presence of the Hospitallers and their wide-ranging activities - rather than geography - that gave Malta its strategic importance. Before 1530 the islands' political and administrative centre was necessarily located in or around inland Mdina. By way of contrast, the Hospitallers exploited Malta's spacious grand harbour. They first focused on the tiny seaport of Birgu, the only commercial centre of medieval Malta and which Godfrey Wettinger identifies as the 'only one settlement right on the shore ... sheltering within the bow-shot of the walls at the Castle of Sant' Angelo', turning it into their new headquarters, and secondly by the building of Valletta, thereby providing 'windows opening outwards', making it possible, Braudel would say, 'to glimpse, as from an observatory, the general history of the sea.'

It was a complete volte-face. For centuries the surrounding sea had offered the local community a threatening, hostile frontier. The advent of the Ottoman adversaries and the Hospitallers' consequent commitment to an aggressive naval policy dictated a new defence strategy which progressively discarded the philosophy of the vulnerable coastline and determined the new role Malta would increasingly assume as an important base for military and naval operations. Indeed, writes a recent historian,<sup>2</sup> it 'pitchforked the Maltese islands into Mediterranean power politics.' Manned 'with slaves, convicts, and Maltese sailors, and with others, often foreigners',<sup>3</sup> Hospitaller galleys sailed to all corners of the Mediterranean, either on their own in search of human and material booty or with other European forces in the naval operations of the Christian West against Ottoman lands or against ports and territories belonging to the Sultan's vassals in the Maghreb. The contemporary chronicles of Giacomo Bosio, Bartolomeo dal Pozzo, and the Abbé de Vertot amply illustrate the Order's, and (albeit to a much lesser extent) their Maltese subjects', heroic contribution to the several combined Christian European efforts of the times. Tunis and Lepanto, Cyprus and Crete, the Morea and Belgrade are classic examples, few and isolated.

Notwithstanding the elaborate arguments that each successive Grand Master consistently employed to convince the crowned heads of Europe of the ever-imminent threat from Islam, in the hope of receiving some solid form of financial assistance, the massive building programme, indeed tremendous by the nativist norm, was not undertaken because the island was a constantly besieged territory, as Braudel would have us believe, but because it lay in the logic of the warlike exigencies of the character of the Order. There was no confusion of roles and purposes.

Unlike late medieval Malta's, the new Hospitaller State's interests and concerns were no longer exclusively internal and inward-looking, confined to the discomfiture of drifting rudderlessly. The formidable Hospitaller fortresses built on the island conformed neatly to the essential requisites of a military headquarters, directly acknowledging political reality. A most explicit ideological affirmation of the spirit of the times, they formally dismantled the inbred medieval structure of political isolation and cultural insulation, and ironically allowed, indeed encouraged, an unprecedented movement of peoples with as many ideas and commodities which in the long term exerted considerable cultural influence on all sectors and in all spheres of society.

It was a process both complex and interesting, one that was not confined exclusively to soldiers, sailors, and cannon, but comprised a much wider circle of enterprising local and foreign merchants and traders, artists, architects and military engineers, slaves freshly procured and captives lately ransomed, corsairs of diverse nationalities, Hospitallers on their way to or from their European commanderies, ministers and inquisitors. Within the motivating force of this flow of people moving lay dangerously novel perceptions of the present and the future. Scarcely a corner of life in Malta remained untouched. This is evidenced in part by the enormous amount of documentation in the archives of the Inquisition. The independent Tribunal of the Roman Inquisition on the island, itself a momentous innovation, felt increasingly committed to the maintenance of Catholic orthodoxy by reinforcing the Tridentine doctrine and pruning out with all religious scruple not only the slightest traits of Reformation theology but also those of Muslim beliefs and practices, most of which infiltrated the islands with slaves on board Hospitaller galleys. Along with a roughly estimated total of 6,000 slaves, employed as much on the fortifications, arsenals, magazines, and the galley squadron, as they were in domestic service and within the local trading community, there was a thriving slave market, an extremely profitable business which was widely renowned throughout the Mediterranean. Together with the widespread corsairing activity, very closely related and as lucrative and rewarding, it too constituted an important source of contact, a very close link, with the outside world.

I am inclined to believe that the basis of this continuous progress towards increasing integration with the outside world was what D.K. Fieldhouse would call 'the mental attitude' of a wide sector of the native society. The initial cultural shock which the Order's forceful presence must have caused within Maltese society was gradually transformed into a much longer, slower, and barely perceptible process of shattering the traditional archaism by exposing, through continuing influence, the islanders' experience to different degrees of European sensibility as it had never been exposed before.

Their existence had been for centuries 'compressed', if I may be allowed to use Edward Said's expression, 'into that of a subjugated particle', and were destined to remain politically so for centuries to come, unable to withstand or resist the new Hospitaller State's 'imperious decrees, its overwhelming harsh measures, its awesome and seemingly unchecked ability to do what it wanted according to imperatives' that the Maltese alone 'could not affect'.<sup>4</sup> But the striking cultural asymmetry unwittingly lifted the 'bell jar' under which the indigenous way of life had long lain 'isolated', 'withdrawn and insecure'.

The great sense of movement in and out of Malta cannot be attributed to any major demographic shift on the island. At least the current state of our historiography does not permit of such a view for the early modern period. Nor could this regular flow of people have been a collective resistance to religious intolerance, or one driven, like several other migratory movements, by a strong desire in search of 'a real alternative to the authority of the State',<sup>5</sup> however increasingly inflexible Hospitaller Government was allowed to develop. The riots or upheavals in the form of public protests that occasionally occurred at remote intervals during the Hospitaller period on Malta were not loud manifestations against the complex affiliations with the 'alien' world outside and of which economic and social life on the island was the direct beneficiary; they were invariably expressions of anger and resentment provoked by the autocratic style of Hospitaller government.

At its most simple, the islanders' 'acceptance' of this new Hospitaller experience - whether through what gradually grew into a 'positive sense of common interest with the ... State, or through inability to conceive of a [better] alternative' - made durability of the process possible.<sup>6</sup> The consequence of succumbing to the novel lure of lucrative adventure dramatically unsettled, indeed uprooted, one way of life, in all its cultural, social, economic, and institutional dimensions, to have it gradually substituted by what was thought to have been a more promising one. And if the historian is allowed to interpret the often indecipherable hidden motives behind the actions of the common man, then I would not hesitate to read in this flow of people a perhaps unconscious sense of discontent, conveniently and resoundingly challenging the archaism and insecurity of their late medieval insular confinement, indeed their traditional sacred reverence to the soil - an expression of dissatisfaction with the past. It was a response to pressing Hospitaller demands for necessities and luxuries in a land of poverty, a response initially inspired by the islanders' basic requirements - first to eat and then to eat better, first to work and then to get paid regularly, until higher and nobler aspirations began to dwarf material ends.

In the long perspective of Malta's historical development, the Hospitallers constituted an irresistible force of 'integrative reality', Europeanizing Malta not only by their long presence on the island, but by unwittingly releasing 'liberating energies' within all sectors of society. The stream of 'nomadic freedom', of people moving from as far North as the Baltic Sea 'to the shores and harbours' of Malta for the exchange of merchandise and other trade purposes, and vice versa, struck the attention of Mgr Angelo Durini, Inquisitor and Apostolic Delegate, who in 1760 described the island as a prosperous meeting-place 'not of one people, but of several nations.' The number of foreign consulates set up on the island was a clear indication of the trend. In the course of the seventeenth century, at least fifteen foreign States, kingdoms, cities, or ports had a consular representative resident on Malta to look after the needs of his fellow countrymen. It was an international conglomeration of sea-faring folk, hailing from England, Belgium, France, and Spain; others from Venice, Tuscany, Genoa, Naples, and Sicily; and others still from Armenia, the Greek islands, Syria, Dalmatia, and Egypt. New consulates were again set up in the eighteenth century for Dutch, Ragusan, Sardinian, Corsican, Hungarian, and American traders conducting business with or through the central Mediterranean island. Added to these were other centres (like the Barbary Regencies and Constantinople) whose merchandise was directed to the Grand Harbour under the protection of a foreign flag, very often French. Moreover, significant numbers of foreign merchants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sought 'naturalization' in Malta to be able to set up business concerns on the island, requesting the privilegio nazionale to qualify for preferential treatment. The same may be said of Maltese consuls settled in foreign ports.

Without denying 'the persistent continuities of long traditions',<sup>7</sup> this silent forgotten revolution, as Braudel would call it, constituted in itself a movement away from most of what late medieval Malta stood for. During their long sojourn on the island, the Hospitallers had provided the more daring and adventurous sectors of the population with ample opportunity of transcending the restraints of insular limits. Indeed, this 'optimistic mobility', ironically generated by one of the most conservative monastic orders of the Church, marked a more radical transformation which may well be defined, to use Dirk Hoerder's expression,<sup>8</sup> as the 'secularization of hope', which the same historian explains as the islanders' general 'aspiration for improvement in this life rather than in the next'.<sup>9</sup>

- 1 F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. S. Reynolds (London, Collins, 1972), 150.
- 2 A. Hoppen, 'Military Priorities and Social Realities in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Malta and its Fortifications', in *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798: Studies on Early Modern Malta and the Order of St John of Jerusalem*, ed. V. Mallia-Milanes (Malta, 1993), 401.
- 3 A.T. Luttrell, 'Malta and Rhodes: Hospitallers and Islanders', in *ibid.*, 268.
- 4 E.W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, Vintage, 1994), 38, 39.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 395.
- 6 D.K. Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires: A Comparative Survey from the Eighteenth Century* (1965; rept. Houndmills, Macmillan 1991), 103.
- 7 See, for example, L. Butler, 'The Maltese People and the Order of St John', *Annales de l'Ordre Souverain Militaire de Malte*, xxiii-xxiv (1965-66).
- 8 D. Hoerder, 'Migration in the Atlantic Economies: Regional European Origins and Worldwide Expansion', in *European Migrants: Global and Local Perspectives*, ed. Dirk Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch (Boston, Northeastern University Press, 1996), 21-51.
- 9 *Ibid.*