

Education in Hospitaller Malta

Carmel Cassar

Introduction

The educational achievements of early modern Malta must be set against a background of the widespread illiteracy in Europe at the time. It is probable that half the men and a much higher percentage of women were illiterate, even in the more advanced states of Europe.¹ Nonetheless, there is evidence that literacy was far more widespread than is often thought, especially if one takes into account the number of persons accused of owning or perusing prohibited books in various parts of Catholic Europe.² By the middle of the 16th century, the printed book had been produced in sufficient quantities that made it accessible to anyone who could read.³

Why could such a situation develop? It was perhaps thanks to the better opportunities for instruction that had, by the 16th century, become more extensive than before. Yet popular education hardly ever included Latin—the language of instruction par excellence—which was usually taught at grammar schools and universities for specialised learning. It seems though that non-Latinists made some progress in their studies through private reading in the vernacular. This may point out to a greater accessibility of elementary education to a larger number of people than had been possible in the late Middle Ages. Such

teaching mainly consisted of reading, writing, simple arithmetic and the learning of catechism.⁴ It was at that time that Latin began to lose ground in Europe. The reading public was becoming increasingly a lay public comprising women, tradesmen, and others with hardly any knowledge of the language.⁵ This was the main reason why the leaders of the Reformation had chosen to write in the vernacular, while Latin survived only because it continued to serve as the official language of the Catholic Church.

Élite and Popular Education

Until 1530 there was only a grammar school run by the Cathedral in conjunction with the *Università* (Town Council) at Mdina. Instruction could only be obtained from a few ecclesiastics and was practically beyond the means of the masses. By the middle of the century, Don Andrea Axiac, the grammar school master of Mdina, and Don Francesco Gesualdo, who ran another school at Birgu, were both accused of Lutheran sympathies. Axiac, in particular, was responsible for influencing most of the sons of the well-to-do who were known to have sent their children to his school.⁶ At this point, Bishop Cubelles (1542-1566), who from 1562 onwards had the power to act as Inquisitor, started proceedings against Gesualdo and Axiac. Gesualdo was eventually tried and

¹ R.R. Bolgar, "Education and learning." In R.B. Wernham (ed.), *New Cambridge Modern History*, 2nd edit. vol.3 (Cambridge, 1971), p.427.

² C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*. Eng trans. J. and A. Tedeschi (London, 1980), pp.29-30.

³ L. Febvre and H.J. Martin, *The Coming of the Book*. Eng. trans. D. Gerard (London, 1976), p.262.

⁴ R.R. Bolgar, "Education and learning", p.427.

⁵ L. Febvre and H.J. Martin, *The Coming of the Book*, p.320.

⁶ C(athe)dral A(rchives) M(alta) A(rchives of the) I(nquisition) M(alta) Crim(inal Proceedings) Ms.142, case 5, f.20.

burned at the stake as a heretic.⁷ Axiac had to abjure at the church of *Santa Maria Sopra Minerva* in Rome in March 1562.⁸ His school was apparently closed down, and by the time it reopened in 1568, the people's confidence in it was badly shaken. Likewise during the reign of Grand Master Claude de La Sengle (1553-1558) Fra Honorato Resicato of Nice taught the principles of the abacus at the church of *San Sebastiano* in Birgu where he was reported to have frequently praised the Lutheran creed with his students.⁹

The ecclesiastical authorities appear to have given Mgr. Dusina a full picture of the educational development in Malta in the course of his visitation in 1575. There was a school within the church of *San Salvatore* in Mdina, and another at the church of *Sant'Antonio* in Birgu.¹⁰ By then, a few private schools, generally under ecclesiastical direction, were the sole means of instruction that the islanders had at their disposal. There were, however, several religious orders running schools from the middle of the 15th century onwards, such as the Dominicans, the Augustinians, the Carmelites and the Friars Minor.¹¹ The Dominicans were also involved in imparting higher studies both at Valletta and Vittoriosa (previously Birgu)¹² while the Friar Minors were engaged in such teaching at Valletta.¹³

In a pastoral visit of the schools of Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua, held on 19 May 1588 Bishop Gargallo found that there were six schools at Vittoriosa of which only five had pupils, two at Senglea and none at Cospicua.



Bishop of Malta Mgr Tommaso Gargallo (1578-1614), founder of the Jesuit College.

⁷ CAM AIM, Mem(orie) Salviati Ms. 12 Tomo I. f.18; S. Sallelles, *De materiis tribunalium S. Inquisitionis*, vol.I, (Rome, 1651) p.48; C. Cassar, "The Reformation and sixteenth century Malta", *Melita Historica*, X (1988), p.59.

⁸ CAM AIM Crim. Ms. 4A, case 27, ff.204-8v.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Ms. 3B, case 34, f.473v; cf. C. Cassar, "The Reformation and sixteenth century Malta", p.61.

¹⁰ N(ational) L(ibrary of) M(alta) Libr(ary) Ms. 643, pp.248, 257; Cassar-Pullicino, "Malta in 1575: Social aspects of an apostolic visit", *Melita Historica*, I (1954), p.32. The church of Sant'Antonio in Birgu was the original parish of the Hospitaller Order of St. John.

¹¹ P. Debono, *Sommario della Storia della Legislazione in Malta* (Malta, 1897), p.116.

¹² M. Fsadni, *Id-Dumnikani fil-Belt, 1569-1619* (Malta, 1971), pp.105-9.

¹³ B. Fiorini, "I frati minori conventuali a Malta", *Miscellanea Francescana*, no.65 (1965), pp.305-48.

The six schools of Vittoriosa were those run by Notary Placido Habel with forty pupils; the school of the Neapolitan Don Joan Battista Spinola with twelve pupils; that of Michele Cap with fifty pupils; another school of eighteen pupils was held in the cemetery of St. Lawrence and run by Don Crispino de Charo; that of the Dominican Annunciation friary had no pupils attached to it and the school of Notary Andrea Albano which functioned without approval of the diocese. Similarly, the two Senglea schools run by Don Vincentio Caruana with twelve pupils, and that run by Don Bernardo Francese and his colleague, and which catered for twenty students, had no church licence. Thus only four of the schools at Vittoriosa had been approved or licensed by the ecclesiastical authorities, while the rest had no authorization from any institution.¹⁴

Apart from teaching grammar, the abacus and other subjects, teachers had to impart catechism lessons. By the 17th century teachers had also to make a profession of faith.¹⁵ V. Borg asserts that, 'the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witness a gradual development in the bishop's involvement regarding the granting of this licence'.¹⁶

From the late 16th century onwards, the social élite were mostly trained at the Jesuit College founded in Valletta in 1592. The College was

rather small, with 97 students frequenting the grammar and humanities classes by 1658.¹⁷ Some of these students proceeded to Italian, or more rarely, French universities.¹⁸ Grand Master Nicholas Cottoner founded the School of Anatomy and Surgery at the Holy Infirmery (General Hospital of the Order in Valletta) in 1676. In 1769, when the Jesuit College was closed down and the University of Malta was created, it became the Faculty of Medicine within the new institution. The Medical School was highly regarded from the very early years of its foundation and by the 18th century many foreign students came to Malta in order to study medicine.

The rest of the population had an oral education which, as the sporadic information available suggests, consisted mainly of catechism lessons. An indirect reference to this type of schooling is recorded in Mgr. Dusina's Apostolic Visitation of 1575. When asked whether he gave doctrine lessons at his Parish in Vittoriosa, Don Antonio Vassallo said that he did not have to, as the children went to school.¹⁹ When a few days later, the Apostolic Visitor asked the Parish Priest of Valletta, Don Gaspare Prato, the same question, the answer was that he gave no catechism lessons as there were no children in Valletta.²⁰ By 1606, the sixteen-year-old Francesco de Gaeta declared that he attended the school of Giacomo Xerri, master of the abacus, in the vicinity of the Jesuit church in Valletta.²¹

¹⁴ Archives of the Archbishopric of Malta Ms. VI Visitationes Pastorales, ff.19-20v; V. Borg, "Developments in education outside the Jesuit Collegium Melitense", *Melita Historica*, VI, no.3 (1974), p.218.

¹⁵ In reaction to the discovery of a few Protestant teachers, Pope Pius IV, published the bull *In Sacro Sancta Beati Petri*, on 13 November, 1564. From then onwards teachers had to profess their Catholic faith before their local bishop could grant them a licence to teach. P.F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy. Literacy and learning 1300-1600* (Baltimore and London, 1989), p.42.

¹⁶ V. Borg, "Developments in education...", p.218.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.223; the population of Malta in 1658 had risen to 50,073 (excluding the Order and its retinue) of whom 9,219 lived in Valletta and 9,584 inhabited the Three Cities. NLM Univerisità Ms.2, ff.165-66; D. Cutajar and C. Cassar, "Malta's role in Mediterranean affairs: 1530-1699", *Mid-Med Bank Ltd., Malta: Studies of its Heritage and History* (Malta, 1986), p.128.

¹⁸ Gerolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela studied at the Jesuit College and later proceeded abroad to further their studies. V. Borg, "Gerolamo Manduca: his life and works", *Melita Historica*, VII (1978), p.237. On Abela: B. Dal Pozzo, *Historia della S. Religione militare di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano detta di Malta*, vol. I, p.759.

¹⁹ NLM Libr. Ms. 643, p.457.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.490. By 1575 no families had apparently moved to the newly founded city of Valletta. Evidence that parish priests, or their subordinates, taught catechism is provided by Georgio Tabone, who served as sexton of the parish church of Qormi. Tabone recalled that the vice-parish Don Vincentio Callus had taught him prayers adding that he used to teach prayers to the children of the village. AIM Crim., Ms. 23A case 299, ff. 217-18.

²¹ CAM AIM Crim., Ms. 28B case 193 ff. 609"; C. Cassar, *Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition. A Study of Cultural Values in Early Modern Malta* (Malta, 1996), p.70.

The early modern schools available for children of the masses were simple classes run by poor men or women, mostly illiterates, who taught in an amateurish and cursory manner. One of these was Isabetta, widow of Joanello Caruana of Rabat, Gozo, who taught catechism to girls. The case of Isabetta Caruana is revealing because she admitted to have taught catechism to girls—at the *Monasterio delle Vergini*, as the Benedictine nunnery was then called—from the times of the siege of 1565 to the end of the century. She was accused before the Inquisition of teaching catechism erroneously, explaining among other things that the Virgin Mary bore Christ from her breast (“*men chobiha guelditu*”). She even related how the monk, who had previously taught her catechism, had said that Christ underwent his passion when only four months old, the period running from Christmas to Holy Week—a matter which greatly preoccupied the Inquisitor.²² However the nunnery probably served as the only outlet where the daughters of the masses could receive some basic education. Thus the wise woman Imperia, wife of Giulio of Mosta, had the habit of reading on the heads of her patients from a book. It was rumoured that she had learned how to read at the *monasterio* where she had spent some time before her marriage.²³ By the early 17th century there must have been other boarding schools for girls. In 1608 Lorenza Mallia, wife of Giovanni Raguseo, presented a petition to Inquisitor Leonetto della Corbara in which she explained that she could not afford to pay a 40 scudi fine imposed on her since amongst other she had to pay 12 scudi a year for the maintenance of her daughter Angelina who lived in the *Casa della Protezione della Madonna* with the Virgins of Charity.²⁴ Further evidence of education for girls is provided by Margarita Marmara of Valletta indicates that there

existed other outlets for a girl's education. In 1628 Margarita explained that she sent her two daughters to learn reading and writing at the school run by an old teacher of the abacus from Senglea called Mastro Scipione.²⁵ Nonetheless, as late as 1733 Canon G.P.F. Agius de Soldanis complained that the education of girls was not taken seriously and aired his concern for the lack of basic education for young girls. He therefore suggested the development of a small boarding school for girls, giving details as to how it should be run, and even proposing that the *Università* (town council) should provide financial support.²⁶

The *Lingua Franca* and Italian

Population shifts, and the continual increased rhythm of trade and communications made it necessary for the urban dwellers in the Harbour area to acquire the *lingua franca* which, in the early modern Mediterranean, consisted primarily of Italian words.

It is at this point worth examining the use of *lingua franca* in the Mediterranean. L. Coutelle argues that the *lessico mediterraneo* in Greece developed partly thanks to the presence of a merchant navy, continuously in touch with the French, Venetians and the Genoese. The use of *lingua franca*, with a neo-Latin base, helped to strengthen communications between Greece and the west European states. In reality, the Greeks had already been in close contact with the west due to centuries of colonization by ‘Franks’ of different linguistic background—Catalans, Provençals, French, Venetians and Genoese, all present on the mainland as well as in the Aegean and the Tyrrhenian seas. The presence of western corsairs—including the Knights of St. John—hailing from all

²² CAM AIM Crim. Ms. 147A case 4, ff.48–50.

²³ *Ibid.*, Ms. 23A case 303, f.273: 9.xi.1604.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Ms. 28C case 227, f.1364: 19.xi.1608.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Ms. 48A case 39, f.29: 31.i.1628.

²⁶ NLM Libr. Ms. 142(v), p.361 cf. Y. Vella, “Women and education in eighteenth century Malta”, (unpublished paper). Information kindly provided by Ms Yosanne Vella.

parts of Europe, enabled the Greeks to acquire some knowledge of various European languages. All these factors, stresses Coutelle, contributed towards the widespread use of *lingua franca* in the region.²⁷

Most elements adopted by Coutelle for Greece appear also as relevant for Malta following the advent of the Order of St. John. The Knights kept strong communications with Europe and strengthened both the merchant fleet and the navy. At the same time, Malta served as a base for corsairs against the Muslims of the Maghreb and the Turks in the Levant. Finally, one should include the multitude of foreign men who contracted marriages with Maltese women, notably in the Harbour towns. It was therefore natural for Margarita Bonnici of Vittoriosa to refer to a herb she used for a love potion both in Maltese and in *franco*.²⁸ Concurrently Minichella de Patti from Vittoriosa apparently communicated with her French husband Antonio Gontier in Italian.²⁹

'Italian' was then the language of trade in the Mediterranean³⁰ which in the Maltese Harbour towns spread at the expense of Maltese, then reduced to the status of a local dialect spoken by servants, peasants and the lower orders of society.³¹ By the late 18th century, this jargon seems to have developed

into what M.A. Vassalli labelled, *dialetto della città* (city dialect), which he considered as the most corrupt dialect of Maltese, due to the large number of foreign words it contained. The presence of a great number of foreigners, as well as the use of foreign languages, notably Sicilian, Italian, French and other European vocabulary, led to "*barbarizzare l'idioma nativo*" (the 'barbarization' of the native idiom).³²

This development induced Vassalli in 1796 to insist on the social need to cultivate *la lingua nazionale* (the national language). Vassalli reflected upon the attitudes of his times and admitted that Maltese seemed undignified and abounding in 'barbarisms' which, he concluded, were the result of the long neglect of the language.³³ Vassalli's ideal perspective of a defined Maltese culture and language, was to take root over a century after his death. His dream of Maltese consciousness could only materialise with the widespread use of literacy.

At the end of the 18th century, a little before Vassalli put ink to paper, very few Maltese could read and write and this seems to have been more evident in the rural areas. For instance, at Qormi in 1773, out of 226 heads of households, only 22 or 9.7 per cent could sign their name.³⁴ And a signature does not

²⁷ L. Coutelle, "Grec, grechesco, lingua franca." In H.G. Beck, M. Manoussacas, and A. Pertusi (eds), *Venezia: Centro di Mediazione tra Oriente e Occidente (Secoli V-XVI). Aspetti e Problemi* (Florence, 1977), p.539, elaborates on the *lessico mediterraneo* type of lingua franca by an analysis of the Greek case.

²⁸ In August 1617, Margarita Bonnici sive *La Bruna* stated that among other remedies for love magic, Margarita Bertone advised her to mix four pepper grains and a herb called *reheuma* in Maltese or *musco marino in franco* (i.e. lingua franca) or Italian. CAM AIM Crim. Ms.40A, f.161^v. Such indications help to confirm the widespread use of lingua franca among the lower echelons of the Harbour area at least since the early 17th century.

²⁹ Catherina wife of Vincentio Xerri reported that, "*Minichella con furia et collera iniuro a decto suo marito dicendoli cornuto... et molti altri iniuri quali io non posso sapere perchè non intendo della lingua Italiana stando che lei parlava Italiano.*" (With fury and anger Minichella offended her husband by calling him 'horned'... and many other insults which I could not know because I do not understand the Italian language since she spoke in Italian). CAM C(uria) E(piscopalis) M(elitense) A(cta) O(riginalia) Ms. 480, f.115: 21.x.1602.

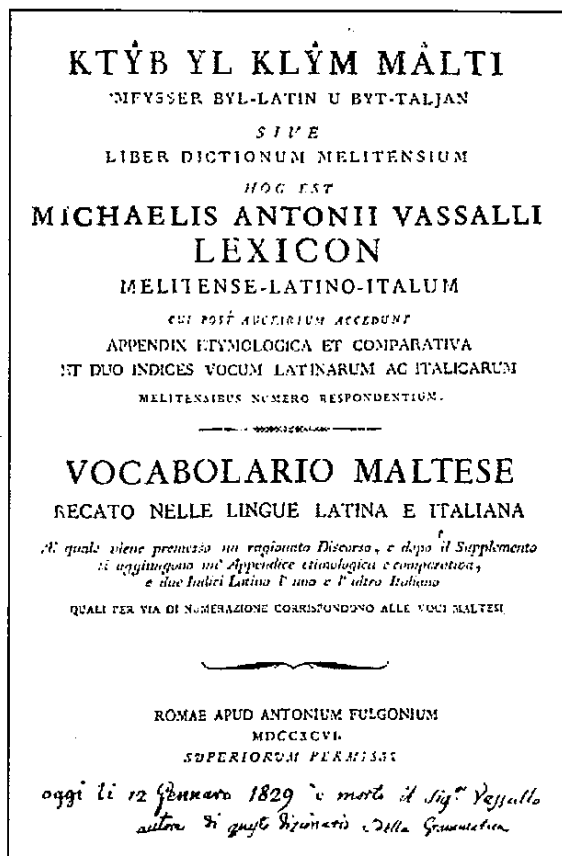
³⁰ K. Whinnom, "Lingua franca: historical problems." In A. Valdam (ed.) *Pidgin and Creole Linguistics* (Bloomington and London, 1977), p.297.

³¹ G. Wettinger, "Aspects of Maltese life." In G. Mangion (ed.), *Maltese Baroque* (Malta, 1989), p.61.

³² M.A. Vassalli, *Ktyb yl Klym Malti mfysser byl-Latin u byt-Taljan... sive liber dictionum Melitensium... lexicon Melitense Latino-Italum* (Rome, 1796), p.xvi.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.xix.

³⁴ CAM AIM Civ(il Proceedings) Ms. 5, ff. 190-208; F. Ciappara, *Marriage in Malta in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Malta, 1988), p.16.



Ktyb yl Klym Malti Mfysser Byl-Latin u Byt-Taljan, published by M.A. Vassalli in 1796.

qualify an individual as literate. Written works were accessible only to the educated few, the majority of whom were clerics. Hence, in spite of the theoretical existence of writing and printing, only a limited élite could fully utilise the written word. The net result was that oral culture continued to dominate the scene at least until the early 19th century.³⁵ It seems therefore that Malta, like the rest of the Mediterranean, possessed a definite literary class whose compositions

were often transmitted to the illiterate mass of the population in oral form.

The differentiation into high culture (written and low culture (oral) was not simply a cultural division: it also created a distinction between two kinds of work. Administrative academic and professional work could only be aspired to through the acquisition of a literary education; manual work required considerable experience in the craft performed. This means that manual workers generally had no motivation whatsoever to learn how to write. This seems to have applied to the gifted as well. The local engineer Mastro Thomaso Dingli, engineer of several important parish churches during the first quarter of the 17th century, is a case in point. Dingli concluded his deposition in front of the Inquisitor by marking the sign of the cross rather than signing his name.³⁶ Thus writing created a radical distinction between the literate and illiterate elements of society.³⁷

In the end, the kind of knowledge obtained from the literary tradition tended to be more highly valued than the practical knowledge and experience acquired by some form of manual participation.³⁸ Hence, written literature was considered to be the highest form of expression, even though oral culture remained the only accessible form of expression for the majority of the people. The frequent promulgation of *bandi* (edicts) which were read out aloud in town and village streets for the information of those present, was the only official way new filtered to the masses.³⁹ In such circumstances, literacy comes to be considered as the established and respected tradition, while orality is transformed into :

³⁵ W.J. Ong, "Is literacy passé?" In D. Potter and P. Sarre (eds), *Dimensions of Society: A Reader* (London, 1974) p.97.

³⁶ K. Gambin, "Fabio Chigi: Inquisitor-missionary and Tridentine reformer. A man of culture in Malta 1634-1639" p.22. (unpubl. MA thesis, University of Malta, 1997). cf. AIM Crim., Ms.51, case 14, f.40: 19.xii.1634.

³⁷ J. Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge, 1986), p.121.

³⁸ J. Goody, *The Interface between the Oral and the Written* (Cambridge, 1987), pp.162-63.

³⁹ Collections of *bandi* of the 16th and 17th centuries have been preserved. See for example: NLM Libr. Mss. 145 429, 430 and 641.



A town crier promulgating an edict ('bandu').

(Courtesy DOI, Valletta)

living art. Nonetheless, there is a constant interplay between oral and written forms.⁴⁰ In spite of this, there existed a fundamental tension between written and oral cultures. The literate elite was increasingly inclined to have recourse to the written word both in the public and private spheres; oral traditions were based "on nostalgic and utopian esteem for a society without writing, governed by words that everyone could hear and signs that everyone could understand".⁴¹

Education and the Uses of Literacy

The idea that writing could be an instrument in the hands of the powerful—and employed to control and communicate—has been stressed by several authors. It has been argued that in early modern Europe, writing was used to bolster up the power of the clergy, the administrative class which exercised power, and a small cultural elite.⁴² It all becomes evident when one realises the

⁴⁰ L. Chaytor, *From Script to Print* (Cambridge, 1945), ch.6. When referring to post-war peasants of Locrotondo in Apulia (Italy), H. Galt points out that, "Many peasants' lack of language facility and literacy limited their access to information emanating from administrative centres, such as the municipal and provincial levels of government. Information was diffused by word of mouth, often subject to distortion, as it passed from family to family through faulty understandings. Participation in town events, such as saints festivals and the Sunday mass, brought country folk closer to sources of information like posters, but these were written in Italian 'bureaucratese', and not always accessible." See A. Galt, *Far from the Church Bells: Settlement and Society in an Apulian Town* (Cambridge, 1991), pp.205–6.

⁴¹ R. Chartier, "The practical impact of writing." In R. Chartier (ed.), *A History of Private Life, III*. Eng. trans. (Cambridge Mass and London, 1989), p.123.

⁴² P. Burke, "Introduction." In P. Burke and R. Porter (eds), *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge, 1987), p.2.

importance that was attached to notarial deeds. Indeed Maltese people from all walks of life, had, ever since the 15th century, resorted to the notarisation of all important acts in both private and public life.⁴³ A great mass of documentation, ranging from marriage contracts and powers of attorney to official ordinances and petitions, was drawn up by notaries, who were experts in legal formulas and terminology.

Table 1
Notaries practising in the towns: 1560–1600

	1560	1570	1580	1590	1600
Valetta	*	5	10	14	11
Vittoriosa	5	9	9	10	8
Mdina	7	9	11	14	10

Sources: NLM Libr. 1365; Attard, Index of notaries 1465–1894.

Maltese society thus came to adopt a custom which was widely employed in most other Christian lands of the Mediterranean.⁴⁴ The great majority of notaries kept offices in the main centres of activity on the island, Vittoriosa and Valetta inside the Harbour area, while the old town of Mdina catered mainly for the peasants in the countryside. One needs only take a look at the list of notaries practising between 1560 and 1600 to appreciate the importance of these three centres. Practically all the notaries had an office in one of the three towns.

Notaries were then the specialist producers of writing especially since, together with the clergy, they formed the most conspicuous social group on whom the largely illiterate mass of peasants, craftsmen and labourers depended. Often this literate group communicated "the products of writing to non-literates by oral means".⁴⁵

Wettinger and Fsadni produce enough evidence to show that in the 15th and 16th centuries, notaries were continually translating contracts from the original Latin Sicilian and later Italian for the illiterate majority.⁴⁶ Typical of agrarian-based societies, writing had endowed its practitioners with high status, a social situation already firmly entrenched among the ancient Egyptians.⁴⁷ The hegemony of the notarial class was somewhat restricted in the Harbour area, owing to the presence of the Order's administrators, the multitude of foreign entrepreneurs, and other Maltese professionals who were able to read and write. But in the Maltese countryside, where life was centred around Mdina, and to a lesser extent in the larger villages, notaries often acted as power holders, participating in the running of the *Università*, and were by far the most respectable and influential group after the clergy. They often combined the profession of notary with that of landowner, businessman and *jurat* of the *Università*—which explains why seven out of the ten notaries practising at Mdina in 1590 invested in the grain trade.

Another influential literate group were the clergy. They had long been expected to be literate in order to celebrate mass, since their oral performance was in fact "a public reading from the service book, the Missal."⁴⁸ The clergy were obliged, or at least expected to recite other daily prayers, mostly reading from the Breviary. They had to keep themselves up to date in their pastoral care by reading other books as well "whether they were theological, devotional, or practical."⁴⁹ Occasionally priests could be insufficiently educated, at times even illiterate, a situation revealed by Dusina's Apostolic Visitatio Report of 1575, that brings out clearly the

⁴³ G. Wettinger, "The village of Hal-Millieri." In A.T. Luttrell (ed.) *Hal-Millieri: A Maltese Casale, its Churches and Paintings* (Malta, 1976), pp.58–9.

⁴⁴ P. Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987), p.113.

⁴⁵ J. Goody, *The Interface between ...*, p.114.

⁴⁶ G. Wettinger and M. Fsadni, *L-Għanja ta' Pietru Caxaru: Poezija bil-Malti Medjevali* (Malta, 1983), pp.27–32

⁴⁷ J. Baines, "Literacy and ancient Egyptian society", *Man-New Series*, 18 (1983), p.580.

⁴⁸ P. Burke, *The Historical Anthropology ...*, p.120.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

poor state of education among a large number of 16th century Maltese clerics.⁵⁰

Most of those examined by the Apostolic Visitor had received their education a generation or so before the closing of the last session of the Council of Trent (1564). On several occasions, Dusina had to remark that the priest concerned knew no grammar, or that he only had a smattering of Latin, or that he could read, but understand Latin very imperfectly. The priests' knowledge of theology was just as bad, so that in the end the Apostolic Visitor could express satisfaction with a mere ten out of the forty priests he examined.⁵¹ Access to the ranks of the clergy appears to have been rather effortless since candidates did not seem to require anything more than a 'right intention' and a minimum capacity needed to fulfil the appropriate duties.⁵² Many clerics received their rudimentary clerical apprenticeship from their own parish priest. Dusina was sent to Malta expressly to reform the diocese, and to upgrade the standards according to the instructions of the Council of Trent. He therefore insisted that a seminary be set up to train the secular clergy. Nevertheless, the proposal of the Apostolic Visitor was not discussed prior to the meeting of a Diocesan Synod called in 1591. On that occasion Bishop Gargallo decreed the foundation of a seminary, but the proposal was temporarily shelved. Instead, a Jesuit College was established in Valletta on the insistence of the Bishop himself. Early evidence of the services provided by the Jesuit

College is provided by the cleric Andrea Caruana of Qormi who was summoned before the Inquisition on New Year's eve of 1603. In his evidence Caruana declared his ignorance of village matters since he attended the Jesuit College and only returned to the village at night time.⁵³ The Jesuit College must have served the diocesan requirements well since it took more than a century before a seminary was finally set up by Bishop Cocco Palmieri in 1703.⁵⁴



The Bishop of Malta David Cocco Palmieri (1864-1711), founder of the Diocesan Seminary.

⁵⁰ NLM Libr. Ms. 643, pp.507-30.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² This state of affairs was widespread in Catholic Europe. See for example A. Torre, "Politics cloaked in worship: State, church and political power in Piedmont 1570-1770", *Past and Present*, 134 (1992), p.46.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, f.173: 31.xii.1603.

⁵⁴ V. Borg, "Developments in education...", p.216.

Until the 18th century the priesthood often constituted the only literate system of the community at village level. The clergy also served as a link between the government of the Order of St John and the mass of the villagers. The position of the parish priest was so strong that he sometimes took the place of the notary when a will had to be drawn. It also shows the social control exerted by the Church over the majority of illiterate inhabitants, with clerics forming the main bulk of teachers. Priests seem to have had the habit of setting up small schools in the form of single classrooms throughout Malta and Gozo. There was a particular concentration of such schools in the Harbour area like the one of Don Pietro Tanti who had a classroom in Valletta in 1677. But others opened their school at remote villages like Mqabba, as in the case of Don Andrea de Brincat.⁵⁵ The subjects studied at these schools were elementary and generally did not go beyond reading, arithmetic, catechism and possibly writing. Only very rarely was a higher form of education, like humane letters, imparted and this was generally restricted to the harbour towns.⁵⁶ By the late 18th century one out of every eighteen priests was engaged in teaching.⁵⁷ The Jesuit College and adjoining grammar school continued to teach grammar, theology and philosophy and gained the status of *Academia* in 1727 and could thus confer degrees until it was closed down in 1768 when the Jesuits were expelled from Malta by Grand Master Pinto.⁵⁸

The lack of a proper training college for priests may have encouraged non-conformist practices among the clergy, leading to their frequent accusation before the Inquisition

Tribunal. M. O'Neill demonstrates that in 16th century northern Italy, the priests were caught in an ambivalent cultural situation similar to their Maltese counterparts. Ideally they "should have constituted the primary barrier against rustic error", yet the line between "popular demands and the requirements of orthodoxy" was nebulous.⁵

Above all else the Inquisition records reveal that the Tribunal perceived writing and literacy as potentially a promoter of both heretical behaviour and social protest among the laity. From the Church's point of view the literate laity presented as many problems as the illiterates. In the post-Reformation period, literacy seems to have been far more widespread than it is often thought, a trend confirmed by the number of individuals appearing before the Inquisition Tribunal who were accused of owning or perusing prohibited books in various parts of Catholic Europe.⁶⁰ In reality, by the middle of the 16th century, the printed book had been produced in sufficient quantities to become accessible to anyone who could read.⁶¹

The case of Simon Provost, Master of the Mint, helps to shed light on the educational achievements of the period. Provost was in fact literate, though perhaps lacking in practice—"To so legere se non troppo bene". He admitted to having owned many books, adding that these were mainly about geometry, perspective, and other related subjects. He even admitted to having obtained a French translation of the Bible from a priest. The priest, we are told, was eager to have it off his hands, as the Church insisted on the authority of the Vulgate.⁶ The presence of Lutheran sympathisers, not

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.236-37.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.225.

⁵⁷ A. Camenzuli, "Maltese social and cultural values in perspective." (unpubl. MA thesis, University of Malta 1999) p.29.

⁵⁸ V. Borg, "Developments in education...", pp.230-34.

⁵⁹ M. O'Neil, "Sacerdote ovvero strione: Ecclesiastical and superstitious remedies in 16th century Italy." In S. Kaplan (ed.) *Understanding Popular Culture* (Amsterdam, 1984), p.75.

⁶⁰ C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms...*, pp.29-30.

⁶¹ L. Febvre and H.J. Martin, *The Coming of the Book*, p.262.

⁶² CAM AIM Crim. Ms. 167, case 1, f.10: 14.ix.1574.

only among the knights, but also amongst several Maltese, suggests that there were individuals keen to read any available books. After the departure of the Apostolic Visitor, Mgr. Dusina, the far reaching arm of the Inquisition was strengthened to such an extent that any books imported to Malta were scrupulously censored. Thus, when in 1577 the *Guardiano del Porto* allowed Mastro Giovanni Barbieri to transport books for the Maltese friaries from Palermo, an accusation was promptly laid at his charge and proceedings started against him.⁶³

Presumably, this situation must have indirectly restricted the availability of books on the island in the decades that followed. In his analysis of the Inquisitorship of Fabio Chigi (1634–1639) K. Gambin quotes the erudite Inquisitor who remarked that “in this country there is not even a single library, and to read some books... I had to bring them over from Venice.”⁶⁴ Likewise the learned Jesuit Athanasius Kircher who arrived in Malta in 1637, grumbled about “*la penuria dei libri*” (the shortage of books) on the island. Yet we are told that he carried away several manuscripts to Rome.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, A.T. Luttrell points out that G.F. Abela, a contemporary of Kircher, had direct or indirect access to a wide range of printed sources.⁶⁶ One must add, however, that Abela’s case was exceptional thanks to his position as Vice-Chancellor of the Order.

The first printing press was introduced in Malta only in 1642, and Abela’s *Della Descrittione di Malta*, published in 1647, was one of the first works to be printed. Due to a disagreement between the three juridical

authorities—the Inquisitor, the Bishop and the Grand Master—over the right of censorship, the press was closed down in 1656. No printing activity took place on the island for another hundred years, so that in 1716, the Venetian representative to Malta, Giacomo Capello, could remark “*non si vedono per la città librerie, vi era un solo libraio, et è fallito*”.⁶⁷ It was only in 1756 that Grand Master Pinto managed to open the official press of the Order. Nevertheless, in 1764, the Venetian knight Buzzacarini Gonzaga could still point out that “books, here are an unknown commodity.”⁶⁸

All of this explains why Count G.A. Ciantar published most of his works in Italy; the blocked situation in Malta seems to have discouraged the formation of a reading public. We can thus understand the long gap between the publication of Ciantar’s first volume of *Malta Illustrata* in 1772 and his second volume, published posthumously in 1780.⁶⁹

Aware of the dangers of heresy and political protest, the authorities put into operation a very rigorous censorship to control all sorts of transgression. Even the use of graffiti for candid unofficial commentary on particular situations was taken seriously, since these could act as subtle influence on the population at large. In a small island like Malta, with four busy courts of justice and a small population, all forms of transgression could be easily controlled. In 1557, Geronimo Falson found himself jailed in the Episcopal prisons for having drawn the figure of an ass on a decree issued by the Bishop on the eve of a ‘Jubilee’, which had been fixed to the

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Ms. 4A, case 5, ff. 33–6: 12.xi.1577.

⁶⁴ K. Gambin, “Fabio Chigi ...”, p.23. cf. B(iblioteca) A(postolica) V(aticana). Chigi Ms. A.I.4, fol.10. Chigi to Honorati: 26.i.1636.

⁶⁵ V. Borg, *Fabio Chigi: Apostolic delegate in Malta, 1634–1639* (Vatican City, 1967), pp.312–13.

⁶⁶ A.T. Luttrell, “Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela: Tradition and invention in Maltese historiography”, *Melita Historica*, VIII (1977), p.112.

⁶⁷ “No bookshops are to be seen anywhere on the island. There was a sole bookseller and he went bankrupt.” In V. Mallia-Milanes, *Descrittione di Malta, anno 1716. A Venetian Account* (Malta, 1988), p.98.

⁶⁸ V. Mallia-Milanes, *Venice and Hospitaller Malta: 1530–1798*. (Malta, 1992), p.253.

⁶⁹ J. Cassar-Pullicino, “The printing of *Malta Illustrata*: The problems of limited readership in 18th century Malta”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 22.ii.1976, p.11.

door of the Cathedral Church. Falson was accused of intending either to ridicule the 'Jubilee' itself, or the Bishop's person.⁷⁰

Unfortunately for historians, cases prior to 1562 were judged by the Bishop in his power as head of the diocese. The Falson case is thus reported summarily, and we have no record of Falson's reply in defence of the accusation. Nevertheless, this incident could be interpreted as a protest against official culture, whose main intent was to control and subjugate the population. P. Burke rightly stresses that historians of past oral culture "must resign themselves not only to studying the oral through the written, but also to investigating the language of ordinary people via records made for the most part, by members of the cultural élite."⁷¹

In most early modern Catholic states, this exercise could be worked out from the criminal proceedings of the Inquisition. The arm of the Inquisition was particularly strong, and concern for accuracy of witnesses was high enough to catch the spoken word with apparent precision. Thus, the Inquisition records have proved to be the main source "to hear the voice of the people",⁷² even though it has its limitations. The Inquisition manages to merge the categorical distinction between orality and literacy; between "the flow of speech, the spate of words, the flood of argument", where, "inconsistency even contradiction" can prosper, and the "fixity" and "rationality" of writing favoured the accumulation of "critical scrutiny."⁷³

During the 16th and 17th centuries, the common folk were strongly addicted to the magical resources of literacy. This gives

weight to the claim put forward by the Muslim slave Hali from Algiers who declares that "when Christians see us Muslims write they think that it is magic... they imagin that Musilms are devils and magicians."⁷⁴ The early modern Maltese often used writing to communicate with supernatural forces 'unofficially', without going through 'proper ecclesiastical channels. Such a state of affair reflects signs of respect for the written word common in societies where literacy is limited

Above all, the power of writing created an ambivalent situation. On the one hand, it evoked a persistent aura of hostility to its dissemination. This animosity was fed by three-fold rejection of writing which R. Chartier summarises thus: writing was the medium by which decisions were taken; it was used to record the obligations of the poor; it was thought to have magic and evil powers. In other words the ability to write was considered to be a tool, by which the authorities could dominate the poor as well as reject "communal equality."⁷⁵

This hostility is best shown in the Maltese retaliation against the imposition of new taxes by the French revolutionary regime barely three months after their occupation of Malta in 1798. On 3 September of that year the peasants from the countryside surrounding Mdina attacked the old town, massacred the small French garrison, and immediately stormed the administrative offices and burned the archives of the *Mdina Università*, as well as tax registers, feeling that new excise taxes threatened their livelihood.⁷⁶ Mob action of the kind was surely motivated by the peasants' deep-seated resentment against written documentation

⁷⁰ CAM AIM Crim. Ms. 3B, case 34, f.476v.

⁷¹ P. Burke, *The Historical Anthropology ...*, p.79.

⁷² J. Obelkevich, "Proverbs and social history." In P. Burke and R. Porter (eds), *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge, 1987), p.43.

⁷³ J. Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, 1977), pp.49, 37.

⁷⁴ K. Gambin, "Fabio Chigi...", p.23. cf. AIM Crim., Ms. 52A, case 171, f.23.

⁷⁵ R. Chartier, "The practical impact of writing," p.122.

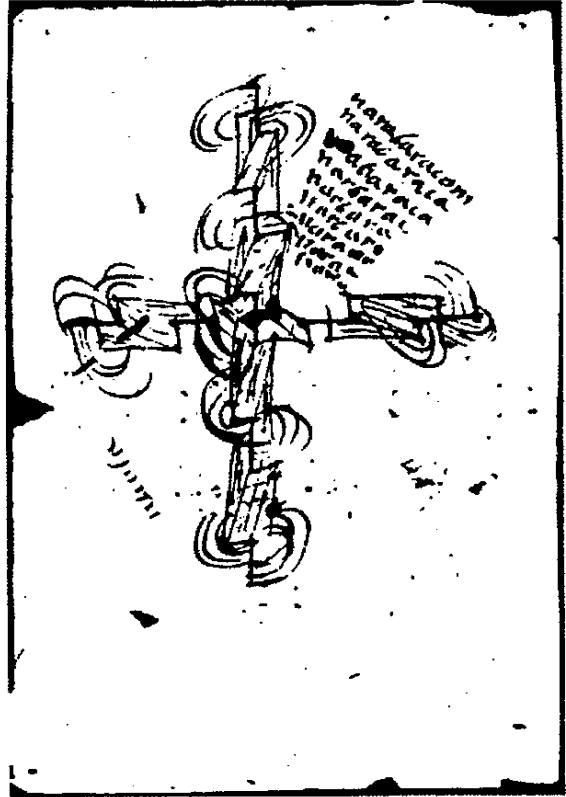
⁷⁶ C. Testa, *The French in Malta 1798-1800* (Malta, 1997), p.271. The burning of archival records was a feature of peasant uprising elsewhere in Europe such as in England 1341, Germany 1525 and France during the French revolution.

At the same time great hopes were placed in the power of the printed word. Inquisition records abound in examples revealing the importance of the written word in the cultural equipment of cunning men and wise women of early modern Malta both in the Harbour area and the countryside. The majority of these were either poor lonely women, or male Muslim slaves⁷⁷ who resorted to amulets written in "Turkish script", usually worn around the neck, kept in the mouth, in the hair or somewhere in the clothes if the subjects were female. Such exploitation of literacy by the illiterates are unmistakable signs of the respect for the written word, current in societies where literacy is restricted.⁷⁸

Among the typical instances, one can cite the case of Honorio Rosato who could not be cured by a drink given to him by a slave healer, and was obliged instead to keep a piece of wax in his mouth. On breaking it, Rosato found a piece of paper written in Arabic.⁷⁹ Similarly, Gan Petro Apap was shown a piece of paper intended to serve as protection against firearms if worn around the neck.⁸⁰ Again, Joanella La Gozitana kept a piece of paper with unknown writings in her clothes.⁸¹ Petrisa Parrodi was accused by her sister Isabella, of having kept a paper with "Turkish" characters in her hairband.⁸² All of these charges indicate that there was a general belief in the capacity of words inscribed on papers to prevent misfortune to their carrier.

Inquisition records in Italy likewise reveal the importance of the written word in the equipment of the cunning men and wise women in town and countryside alike, and the belief in its power to cure the sick.

Amulets, with writings on them, were so common, that diocesan synods frequently denounced the "superstitious words" inscribed on sheets of paper.⁸³ The Inquisitors frequently admonished people who believed in such practices, but apparently old habits die hard. In 1625, in an attempt to eliminate these beliefs, the clergy were obliged to denounce anyone who practiced magic either to the Bishop or the Inquisitor—a directive that was repeated in 1646.⁸⁴



A card with cross designed in rings and containing mysterious words common in witchcraft.
(Reproduced from "Maltin u l-Inkizizzjoni" by Alexander Bonnici, 1977.
Courtesy Klabb Kotba Maltin)

⁷⁷ C. Cassar, "Witchcraft beliefs and social control in seventeenth century Malta", *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 3, no.2 (1993), p.329.
⁷⁸ J. Goody, "Restricted literacy in northern Ghana." In J. Goody (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), p.202.
⁷⁹ CAM AIM Crim. Ms. 61B, case 126, f.632.
⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, case 50, f.257.
⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Ms. 147B, case 15, f.275: 8.v.1599.
⁸² *Ibid.*, Ms. 6C, case 89, f.1292: 9.iii.1582.
⁸³ P. Burke, *The Historical Anthropology ...*, pp.121-22.
⁸⁴ P. Cassar, *Medical History of Malta* (London, 1965), p.426.

This approach explains why techniques employed by witches in 16th and 17th century Malta were still in use till 1798 and perhaps beyond. Muslim slaves and wise women were still preparing concoctions, reciting prayers and other rites and formulas, making omens, and suggesting the use of talismans and amulets for protection against the evil eye.⁸⁵ Indeed, some forms of magic still persist among some sections of the population.⁸⁶ While the literate public had to be guided and kept under control in order to avoid any incipient 'heretical behaviour', the illiterates presented a different problem due to their propensity towards and belief in popular religion.

Some Inquisition cases refer to the writing of books on magic, some of which appear to have been manuals on magical practices, like the one found by two priests when still aged sixteen. Among other recipes, the book in question contained suggestions on how to acquire immunity against fire-arms, and others on love magic which the two accused tried to procure for themselves.⁸⁷

Books on magic could also be found in the libraries of learned gentlemen like Notary Jacobo Baldacchino, who owned a collection of books on necromancy. His accuser recalled some six of them with titles as: *Centum Regnum*, *La Clavicola di Salomone*, *il Ragiel*, *il libro delli esperimenti Cornelio Agrippa*, *Li Prestigii*, and *La compositione di quattro anelli*; the denouncer was positive that Baldacchino possessed a much larger collection.⁸⁸

The existence of books on necromancy suggests not only that the literate were keen

on witchcraft, but that they also found time to write on prohibited topics. Among such individuals, we learn about a certain Dr. Galeazzo Cademusto, a resident of Valletta, accused in 1579 of witchcraft practices, and even of having written a book on necromancy described as "*libro di diavoli*" (book of devils).⁸⁹

Evidence from the Inquisition archives suggests that oral and literate cultures not only coexisted, but they also interacted. Thanks to the widespread general illiteracy, books and written papers were attributed an aura of mystery. Yet it would be misleading to assume that the uneducated were the only ones who resorted to such practices. Whereas a sound education could control excessive credulity, it did not completely destroy faith in popular beliefs. Thus, the literate were sometimes so keen about magical practices that whole sections of their private libraries included books dedicated to the topic. In a general overview of the Reformation sympathisers in Malta, Jack Goody points out that the dissemination of ideas contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church was only partly aided by the advent of printing and the circulation of the book. He argues that the radical ideas themselves "struck chords in the minds of the inhabitants because they corresponded to existing doubts."⁹⁰

What was the position of the Church in all this? It seems that the Church believed that illiteracy encouraged 'superstition'. For this reason—in his *relazione* of 1654—Inquisitor Federico Borromeo (1653–1654) blamed the activity of slaves, who exerted direct influence on the 'weaker' sections of Maltese society, especially on women and simpletons.⁹¹

⁸⁵ C. Cassar, "The first decades of the Inquisition: 1546–1581", *Hyphen*, IV (1985), pp.207–238; A. Bonnici, *Il-Maltin u l-Inkizizzjoni f'Nofs is-Seklu Sbatax* (Malta, 1977), pp.71–122; F. Ciappara, "Lay healers and sorcerers in Malta (1770–1798)", *Storja* '78 (1978), pp.60–76.

⁸⁶ J. Cassar-Pullicino, *An Introduction to Maltese Folklore* (Malta, 1947), p.35.

⁸⁷ CAM AIM Crim. Ms. 61A, case 45, f.219.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Ms. 2B, case 31, f. 338v: 19.ix.1574.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, Ms. 6C, case 48, f.1037: 2.xi.1582.

⁹⁰ Concluding remarks by J. Goody on C. Cassar, "The Reformation", p.65 in J. Goody, *Representations and Contradictions. Ambivalence towards Images, Theatre, Fiction, Relics and Sexuality* (Oxford, 1997) pp.267–69.

⁹¹ NLM Libr. Ms. 23, p.258; Anonymous, "Relazione di Malta e suo inquisitoriato dell'inquisitore Federico Borromeo", *Malta Letteraria*, II (1915), p.189.



Coat of arms of the Roman Inquisition—Fresco at the chancellery of the Inquisitor's Palace, Vittoriosa.

On the other hand, the literate laity could also constitute a problem for orthodox Church teachings. They could fall into heresy as a result of reading prohibited literature, a fear which had been transformed into an obsession after the Reformation. Hence, in Malta as anywhere else in Catholic Europe, anyone caught reading the Bible in the vernacular (as promoted by the Protestants),

could be tortured—which is the fate that befell Simon Provost, the Master of the Mint—or excommunicated—as in the case of Don Andrea Axiac—or burnt at the stake—which is what happened to the Frenchman Don Francesco Gesualdo.⁹² This situation is excellently summed up by P. Burke who states that “the Church was thus caught in a classic double bind, with a problem if it encouraged the spread of literacy, and another one if it did not.”⁹³ He argues that the distinction between learned and popular culture already existed in the Middle Ages but the two cultures grew further apart in the 16th century.⁹⁴

Oral transmission has often been portrayed as characteristically present in societies anchored to a pre-industrial economic system. On the other hand, literacy has often been associated with civilisations characterised by the development of urban and bureaucratic systems, as well as by the rise of secular and scientific inquiry.⁹⁵

By the 16th century, two distinct separate cultures came into being: an ‘élite’ and a ‘popular’ culture. Élite culture was subject to changes in style: Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque, Rococo. It was basically academic and professional as well as recondite and expressive. It included the superior sort of painting, sculpture, chamber music, choice theatrical entertainment, as well as a written literature which required an educational basis to be appreciated. In contrast popular culture continued to uphold traditional values based on the spoken word, primarily expressed in songs, poems, stories and other artefacts of popular cultural entertainment.

⁹² C. Cassar, “The Reformation and sixteenth century Malta,” p.59.

⁹³ P. Burke, *The Historical Anthropology ...*, p.123.

⁹⁴ P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978), pp.23–9.

⁹⁵ M. Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. In E.R. Henderson and T.Parsons (eds), (Edinburgh, 1947), pp.329–41.