

terms of classical “Orientalising” tropes and can be considered as tools by which the Maltese were constructed as colonial subjects. As the Palestinian scholar [Edward Said](#) observed: “To say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact.”

An example of how an apparently neutral historical account served to Orientalise the Maltese and to legitimize colonial rule can be seen in an early description of Malta’s experience of ‘boom and bust’ in the first two decades of the nineteenth century which was published in 1824 in the ‘Knights’s Quarterly Magazine’. This takes the shape of a morality tale in which the initial flourishing of the Maltese (when Malta was used as a base for smuggling British goods into Europe in order to undermine Napoleon’s ‘Continental System’) is contrasted with the mass-poverty which developed after the bubonic plague outbreak of 1813. The initial boom is described in these terms:

The Maltese, like all people deficient in information, suddenly emancipated and suddenly enriched, became proud and overbearing. Their contempt of foreigners, which many of them testified by contumelious expressions, both in their jargon and in broken Italian, was truly ridiculous, considering that they lived and got rich upon those very foreigners; as Malta, left to its own resources, is far from being a rich country, and the Maltese capitalists were inconsiderable compared to the foreign settlers. The very porters and boatmen of the marina of Valletta or Isola would ask an unreasonable reward for the most trivial service, which, if not granted, they walked away muttering about beggarly foreigners, and saying, scornfully, they did not stand in need of money, shaking at the same time their scarfs well stocked with Spanish dollars. Their jackets were ornamented with double rows of silver, or even gold buttons, and they wore buckles of the same materials to their knee-bands and shoes.”

Here Maltese prosperity is seen as an inversion of the natural order of things.

Since Malta is a small country with limited natural resources and—at the time—a tiny number of capitalists, the Maltese had no right to be rich and still less to act independently and seek to negotiate the price of their services with the foreigners. The outrageous refusal of nouveau riche working class Maltese to adopt a proper servile attitude was completely unacceptable ‘in a people deficient in information’ and unable to express themselves except ‘in their jargon and in broken Italian.’

It is hard to ignore the smug attitude with which this anonymous British author treats the impact of the plague, which killed thousands of Maltese; treating it almost as a divine intervention which restores the natural hierarchy of wealth, status and dependency between colonisers and colonised:

The plague was to them a heavy visitation: those who survived had their little savings completely exhausted; and when, at last, the communications were re-established, they found the source of their former wealth drained. They were then humbled and crest-fallen; they wished they had been more prudent and reasonable in the time of their prosperity; but it was too late... Malta became a port of secondary importance: one scanty compensation, however, was found, in the fall of the price of provisions, which, during the war, had risen to an enormous rate.”

After the plague, the ‘humbled and crest-fallen’ Maltese were now experiencing mass poverty and this set the stage for the consolidation of British rule, with Malta formally becoming a British colony in 1815. Henceforth the native Maltese were increasingly depicted in racialized terms which naturalized their poverty, ill health and religious beliefs; drawing an implicit contrast with their European and Protestant rulers.

The non-European racial distinctiveness of the Maltese was alternately founded upon their appearance and their language. For instance, Lady Hester Stanhope^[ii] observed:

The Maltese have never mixed with the nations which have held them in subjection. Their original character, therefore, remains

unchanged, and their physiognomy indicates an African origin. Their hair is curly; they have flattish noses, and turned-up lips, and their colour and language are nearly the same as those of the people of the Barbary States. It is a lingo of Italian grafted on Arabic."

From this 'African origin' and while acknowledging that the Maltese 'are said to be active, faithful, economical, courageous, and good sailors', Stanhope proceeded to derive a set of Maltese characteristics:

They are Africans for passion, jealousy, vindictiveness, and thieving, being likewise very mercenary. Their superstition in religious matters is proverbial. By many English, however, who had resided among them for some time, the Maltese were pronounced to be ferocious, ignorant, lazy, passionate, revengeful, and, if married, jealous beyond conception."

The power of this discourse in legitimizing Maltese poverty and dependence can be seen even in the work of more sympathetic observers, such as the American Protestant Missionary, Sarah Lanman Smith^[iii]:

Malta, Nov. 15, 1833. —Oh how it makes the Christian's heart ache to behold these poor Maltese. In Malta and Gozo, there are 123,000 inhabitants, most of them poor, ignorant, degraded beings, such as you never beheld. Some of the most miserable of our Indians will give you some idea of them, if you except drunkenness, which is however gaining upon them here ; and add an incessant jargon, which, especially their ' cries,' resemble more the inarticulate sounds of brutes than of human beings. But it is more especially affecting to know, that they are subject to the dominion of a tyrannical priesthood, who may be found at every corner. Yesterday, while I was out, a procession was just entering St. Paul's church, on their return from the administration of the Viaticum to the dying, when numbers, old and young, through the streets dropped upon their knees. Like David I can say, ' Oh that my head were waters."

Here the poverty, ignorance, degradation and religious fanaticism of the Maltese are melded into a unitary whole and compared to “some of the most miserable of our (American) Indians.” From this racialized perspective and completely ignoring the ability of many Maltese to converse in two or three languages, Mrs Lanman Smith construed Maltese speech as more similar to the “inarticulate sounds of brutes than of human beings.” Similarly, she could only see Maltese religious devotion in terms of fanatical submission to ‘a tyrannical priesthood.’ Once she had adopted this de-humanising perceptual framework, she was capable of cruelly dismissing her Maltese servant on a whim:

October 21. —We have dismissed our Maltese servant. He was in many respects useful, but he had begun to feel above his place; and being disposed to go with Mr. and Mrs. Bird, we cheerfully dismissed him. When about to leave us, I told him that I had one thing only to say to him; I wished to inform him why I had not placed more confidence in him—that from the first I had discovered that he had no regard for truth. He wept, and begged me to enter into particulars; but I declined.”

However Mrs. Smith’s eyes cannot avoid following her erstwhile servant as he leaves her house and what she sees moves her:

As he turned to go down the stairs, his usual erect form and firm step gave place to the cringing movement of the Maltese of the island, the first beings whom I saw on missionary ground. The recollection of the feelings which overcame me when I first beheld his pitiable and contemptible countrymen, rushed upon me, and I was obliged to struggle with my emotions.”

This account clearly illustrates the connections between the Orientalising and racialising discourses through which British colonisers came to perceive the Maltese, the way they related to them and the impact on the Maltese themselves. By the 1830’s, the ‘proud and overbearing Maltese’ of the first decade of British rule had turned into a submissive people who cringed before their colonial overlords and had internalized, even at a bodily level, a complete dependency on them.

The terrible dehumanizing power of these discourses must give us pause; especially when noting their presence when African migration to Malta is discussed by Maltese. Like the Southern Italians observed by anthropologist Maurizio Albahari^[iv], the Maltese:

have been historically constituted as objects of a disparaging moral geography—still pervasive—that denies their coevalness in a dichotomous relationship with Europe. And yet, they are also agents of a disparaging moral and temporal geography. This hierarchical geography situates them and non-EU migrants and their places of origin on interpretive maps of cultural affinity and difference, poverty and development, religion and civilization.”



[ii] *Travels of Lady Hester Stanhope; forming the completion of her memoirs. Narrated by her physician. In three volumes. Vol. I. London: 1846*

[iii] *Memoir of Mrs. Sarah Lanman Smith, Boston, 1839*

[iv] Maurizio Albahari, "Between Mediterranean Centrality and European Periphery: Migration and Heritage In Southern Italy," *International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies*, Vol. 1 No.2, 2008: <http://www.emunl.sl/press/ISSN/1855-3362/1-2.html>



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