



THE MALTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
Researching, propagating and safeguarding  
Malta's historical heritage since 1950



# Proceedings of History Week 2011

Edited by  
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Proceedings of  
History Week  
2011

Malta Historical Society

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## Editorial

Love or loath them, anniversaries tend to serve as useful focal points for reflection, generating all kinds of activities from publications to exhibitions. It was during a Committee meeting of the Malta Historical Society that Albert Ganado suggested that during History Week 2011 mention should be made of the fact that this coincided with the 450th year since the passing away of Jean Quintin d'Autun (often referred to simply as Quintinus), author of the renowned *Insulae Melitae Descriptio* (Lyons, 1536). The intention was to pay tribute to a man whose work – as the first published treatise on Malta – has been of significant influence in the centuries since its first appearance. Moreover, History Week and the published proceedings to which it bears fruit, follow in the footsteps of Quintinus in the sense that at its basis, History Week is about a quest for, and indeed a love of, knowledge and understanding in their widest possible forms.

By a happy coincidence, 2011 also marked the 30th anniversary from the *Proceedings of History Week 1981*, the first to be published. Prior to this, there were History Weeks in 1979 and 1980, but due to financial constraints, these could not be published. Fortunately, the Proceedings of 1981 saw the light of day under the editorship of Mario Buhagiar, thereby instituting a tradition which has continued over three decades to bring together women and men interested in Malta's past with all its hues and complexities. In the Introduction (p.v) to the Proceedings of 1981, the then President of the Malta Historical Society, Mgr Vincent Borg stated:

The writing of history is alien to all flights of fancy and sectarian influences. Man's achievements in time and space are brought to life through the historian's dedication to the search of truth. In this work he has to enjoy full freedom from all forms of encroachment which, otherwise, would shackle the unbiased accounts that have to result from the historian's work.

Such a vast and confident statement in the power of history to shine like a beacon of light amid darkness is fascinating in that its tone is particular and

universal at the same time. The unquestioning assumption that the male historian studies 'man's achievements' in 'search of truth' reads somewhat anachronistically in a post-feminist and post-modernist age which has become aware that *his-tory* makes little sense without *her-story* and that 'truth' is in itself a highly unstable, problematic category of analysis. Nonetheless, the appeal for 'freedom from all encroachment' in the historian's work remains as valid as ever and the Malta Historical Society, by providing a variety of fora and means for the dissemination and discussion of ideas, plays a seminal role in the continued fostering of such a freedom.

In *Proceedings of History Week 1982*, the editor, again Mario Buhagiar, set the tone for later volumes: the published Proceedings were 'offered as a contribution towards the study of the history and culture of the Maltese islands', while the meetings that constitute History Week itself, were – and still are – 'rallying point[s] for Maltese scholars to come together and share the fruits of their research (p.v)'. A commitment to these salient points can be traced across the various volumes of Proceedings which have now appeared (listed below). Indeed, in her editorial preface to the Proceedings of 2009, Charlene Vella (incidentally the first female editor of this series) stated that: 'The publication of the papers ensures that the important new material they contain becomes available to students, researchers and all those with a love and interest for Malta and its variegated historical and cultural heritage.' The present editors, in presenting the current set of Proceedings, renew their and the Society's commitment to the research, propagation and safeguarding of Malta's historical heritage as a past which is pluralistic and belongs to all. The present volume, in line with its immediate predecessor, has adopted a more modern format that fits our digitally-enhanced era, while still putting forward a high quality of scholarship.

Year of Proceedings	Year of Publication	Editor
1981	1982	Mario Buhagiar
1982	1983	Mario Buhagiar
1983	1984	Mario Buhagiar
1984	1986	Stanley Fiorini
1986	1992	Joseph F. Grima
1992	1994	Stanley Fiorini
1993	1997	Keith Sciberras
1994	1996	Stanley Fiorini
1999		
(Aspects of Maltese History during French rule 1798-1800)	2002	William Zammit
2003	2004	Toni Cortis
2005		
(Malta and Mazzini)	2007	Simon Mercieca
2009	2012	Charlene Vella

List of published *Proceedings of History Week* to-date

History Week 2011 was held between 29 November – 2 December in the elegant setting of Palazzo de la Salle in Valletta, the historic seat of the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, to whom we are grateful for their co-operation and assistance in making this event a successful and enjoyable one. As ever, two features stand out in the Proceedings of History Week. First, their eclectic character, ranging across time and space and delving into all kinds of subjects from a multiplicity of methodological angles. Chronologically, the papers range from the early sixteenth century to the first half of the twentieth. Second, the proceedings offer a space for both established and emerging scholars to put forward the results of their labours. It is worth noting that a good number of the contributions in this volume trace their origins to dissertations submitted to the University of Malta. All too often, and regrettably, such works, which are full of original insights into themes and sources, end up largely forgotten in the vaults of the University library. The Malta Historical Society is therefore providing a great service in bringing forth such studies and ensuring they are accessible to a much wider readership.

The present volume contains a strong contribution from the art historical and architectural side in the papers by Roger Vella Bonavita, David Mallia and Valentina Lupo. As the architectural gem which is Valletta looks to the future with a variety of projects that are intended to take it forward, Vella Bonavita's paper draws us back to the genesis of the city, the details of which are still surprisingly open to discussion and debate. He provides an intimate insight into Francesco Laparelli, the man, the engineer and the arch-organiser / diplomat. We bear witness through this paper to the birth pangs of a Renaissance city and the character compatibilities and clashes of Laparelli and Grand Master Jean de Valette, all of which played a part in shaping Valletta, particularly in its earlier stages. With David Mallia, the reader is invited to cross over south, to the city of Tripoli in Libya, the scene of many dramatic events over the last couple of months. Tripoli's connections to Malta go back over the centuries, including a short-lived (1530-1551) political union of sorts between these two outposts. Mallia's paper focuses on the fortunes of the church of the Order in Tripoli, especially after the Hospitaller period came to an end. In highlighting the long-term evolution of this building, Mallia presents the formidable Turgut Reis (better known locally as Dragut) not so much as the feared corsair familiar to many Maltese, but as a skilful statesman and administrator within the complex world of Ottoman politics. Returning to Malta, Valentina Lupo's paper takes us to the village of Had Dingli, where a little known artistic treasure, the polychrome wooden statue of St John the Baptist is preserved in the parish church. Lupo's paper is technical in nature, but presented in an accessible and enjoyable form so that a non-specialist audience can understand the intricacies of a detailed and technical study of a work of art prior to the conservation and restoration process. It reminds us of the 'life-cycle' of objects, in this case a devotional statue, which despite being an inanimate object, 'travelled' extensively and experienced various changes in its life at the

hands of both nature and humans; the most extensive change being, as indicated by Lupo, the transformation from a polychrome to a monochrome statue.

This volume can boast a rich and varied selection of papers on the early modern period. Paul Catania offers a case-study of a priest, Don Juliano Borg and his parish, Naxxar, in the late sixteenth / early seventeenth centuries. This paper provides a snapshot of the local church at a moment when the tenets of the Council of Trent (1545-64) had barely begun making themselves felt in Malta. Father Borg was certainly an enterprising individual, though possibly not the best specimen of a clergyman. In a sense, he represented the last of the 'old school' of clerics who were gradually replaced by the more rigorously trained clergy demanded by the Counter-Reformation Church. The papers by Aleks Farrugia and Adrian Scerri take us forward into the seventeenth century and deal with issues of sovereignty, and the relevance and reputation of the Order in early modern Europe. Farrugia's contribution is a theoretically-rich piece which highlights the importance of the relevance and the adaption of discourse in history and in primary sources. In this way, the paper attempts a more 'complex' and ultimately more fruitful discussion and 'answer' to the long-debated question of the decline of the Order of St John. Scerri, on the other hand, offers a glimpse into the career of Frà Marcello Sacchetti, who for many years was ambassador of the Order to the Holy See, a most complex posting. The paper delves into what – for the Order – was the all important issue of 'immunity' and the need to safeguard the special position of the Order within Christendom. In practice, the safeguarding of privileges was a lifeline for the Order and the Ambassador's diplomatic 'battles' were every bit as tough and as important as the bloody battles at sea. Different but complimentary aspects of the eighteenth century are dealt with by Carmel Vassallo and Liam Gauci. Vassallo's use of Żejtun as a case-study provides a concise tour-de-force of the history of Malta's commerce and of Maltese merchants. By using the concept of 'Diaspora Entrepreneurial Networks' he explores the role of Maltese migrants and merchants in Spain (with a special emphasis on the significant contribution from Żejtun natives), whose key feature was liminality, 'the occupation of a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold.' Gauci's contribution, is also, to an extent, about a category of people who led liminal lives, that is, the corsairs. This is an ever popular subject, but precisely because it is so popular, it is often prone in the minds of many to fantastical journeys. Gauci does not fall in this trap for his work is based on a creative use of documentation originating from the Notarial Archives in Valletta, an extremely rich depository where generations of researchers to come will find plenty to do. The author here offers a very human story with protagonists ranging from corsairs to mothers, wives, and the sea itself. It is a work which revisits and questions the assumption of the decline of corsairing activities in the late eighteenth century; in this sense, it opens up the way for further questioning of generally-accepted 'truths'.

The nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries were, for Malta, the British period, a time of crown / fortress colony existence. Fascinating original insights into



this phase are to be found in the papers by Michael Refalo and Dominic Fenech. Refalo's paper is underscored by an engagement with Antonio's Gramsci's theory of the 'integral state' and the interaction between coercive and hegemonic exercises of power in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The two key protagonists here were the British colonial administration and the Roman Catholic Church, which Refalo describes as 'the main institution of civil society'. The paper deals with both the big political questions, such as issues of taxation and expenditure, as well as with issues of material culture, such as the visibility of liturgical vestments. In a sense it is a 'known story' of the overlap and divergence of the interests of the colonial power and the colonised, but Refalo here enriches this story through an approach which is theoretically enhancing, offers new insights and goes beyond standard 'nationalistic' narratives. Many of these issues can be seen carried over into the early 1930s, the period with which Fenech is concerned here. The British colonial administration and the Roman Catholic Church were now joined by a 'new', significant and – as it turns out from an administrative point of view, both colonial and ecclesiastical – disruptive player, that is, the local political class, which by this time was firmly organised into formal political parties. Fenech offers a fascinating, detailed insight not only into a turbulent moment in local political history, but also into the wider fabric of imperial thoughts and European politics. He deftly weaves together a multiplicity of layers and players: the local situation, the regional-international-imperial situation and the London environment consisting of competing ministers and civil servants, which all together, helped to give a variety of twists to the tale of Maltese self-government.

To conclude, it is fitting to end this editorial by acknowledging all those who played a role in ensuring the success of History Week 2011 and the publication of these Proceedings. First and foremost, we need to thank the main sponsor, Computime Business Systems Engineering, as well as the two other sponsors, Bank of Valletta and the Janatha Stubbs Trust. Their financial assistance is very much appreciated. Again, we need to thank the Malta Society of Arts and Manufactures for providing a congenial place where History Week could take place. We are also grateful to all those who generously offered their time to chair a session during History Week: Giovanni Bonello, George Cassar, Charles Farrugia, Sandro Debono and William Zammit. A word of appreciation must also go to all the contributors who were always friendly and diligent in heeding our instructions. We thank the Committee of the Malta Historical Society for their faith in entrusting us with the responsibility for History Week and the Proceedings and for the support which the same Committee gave us throughout. Finally, we thank our loved ones for patiently putting up with many hours of talk and work about History Week.

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