



IT'S MALTA, but not as you know it

PHOTOS: JONATHAN BORG

Iggy Fenech meets Claude Micallef Attard, one of Malta's foremost antique map collectors, to discover the magic behind these fragile and priceless interpretations of the perimeter of our islands.

FOR MANY of us, the map of the Maltese Islands is as familiar as the sight of our local village church. The elongated fish-like outline is something we learn about in school from our early years and one we automatically search for every time we see a map that includes the Mediterranean Sea.

Yet the shape and the details we are so accustomed to haven't always been there; they are the result of hundreds of maps that have been designed and redesigned over the centuries.

This quickly becomes apparent when I meet Claude Micallef Attard, an avid collector and researcher of Melitensia maps, views and books, as well as the honorary treasurer and co-founder, along with Dr Albert Ganado, of the Malta Map Society. Indeed, as he shows me a few dozen maps from his collection, the first thing that strikes me is how thwarted the shape of our islands used to be.

Maps of the past, it turns out, weren't always meant to serve the same purpose as they do now [i.e. that of getting someone from point A to point B]. For a start, present and past collide in them as certain scenes are played out.

The Great Siege of 1565 is a recurring theme in many of the maps created in the decades that followed, and the carnage can be relived through the re-enactment: taking place in the map: ships are drawn entering the Grand Harbour, knights are depicted defending the fortified cities, and the Ottomans are shown camping in Marsa. In one particular map, you can even see houses burning in the aftermath of the event.

"In the past, maps also had a very commercial purpose; probably more so than they do today," says Claude, who co-authored *The Brocktorff Mapmakers* in 2012 and whose advice on Melitensia maps is sought by the British Museum and Sotheby's auctioneers.

"Back in the 16th and 17th centuries, books had to offer something beyond the obvious and maps were a sure way of getting people interested. Maps of Malta also helped sell the island, ensuring people knew where we were and what we had done."

We inevitably go into the whole process of how they were created, and Claude explains that many of Europe's top mapmakers would have had people on the ground



wherever they wanted to map next. Indeed, while the shapes of the Maltese Islands in some of the maps is not what we are accustomed to, they are relatively accurate, considering they were drawn by hand with very little technology to help.

"Someone would have had to go to the highest points on the islands to draw the outline," he explains. "The different areas were then compiled into a full map and the final one would then be turned into a woodblock, a copper engraving, a steel engraving, or later, a lithograph. All of these would have created a black-and-white print, and the ones that are in colour would have had that added in by hand."

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Today, these antique maps help us build a picture of how Malta was perceived in the past. That's why, on top of being financially valuable, they are also historically, socially and anthropologically priceless. Hailing out of atlases and books, the maps range quite dramatically in size, but I'm surprised to find out that Claude's favourite is the smallest of the lot.

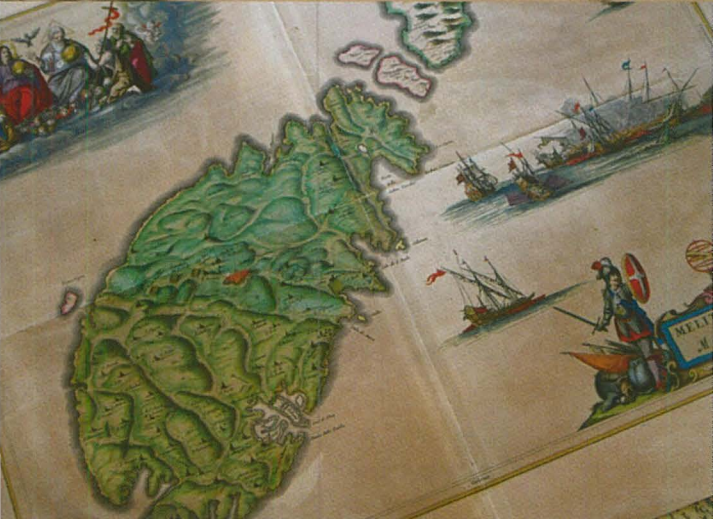
"This tiny map of Malta is exceptionally rare," he says as he picks up a medium-sized frame holding a tiny sheet of parchment, measuring five by five centimeters.

"Only two are known to exist, with the second one being in Venice. The map is from a board game dating back to the mid-17th century, which was done by one of the most important engravers in Italy at the time, Anton Francesco Lucini.

"The one in Venice is actually the complete sheet and, in it, we see that Malta is referred to as 'the African island of the Knights Defenders of the Faith'. Lucini was a prominent figure, who had quite a few connections to Malta. In 1631, he copied the paintings at the Grandmaster's

Palace in Valletta, which were done by Matteo Perez D'Aleccio, and created 16 plates that covered the events of the Great Siege."

Dotted around the many maps of Malta, I notice numerous views of the island. The scenes range from the quotidian life of the peasantry to rather grand ones showing public squares and ports around Malta. These,



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I come to discover, were often 'zoom-ins' of the map, as is the case with *Malta y Gozo*, a book published in Spain in 1840 by Federico Lacroix, which starts with a map of Malta, moves on to smaller, more detailed maps of the ports, and finally goes to views of buildings people and landmarks like Ġgantija.

"The beauty of Melitensia is that, every other day we find material we had no idea existed in libraries museums and universities all across Europe," Claude gushes. "Finding these old maps and views helps us shed light on things we don't know enough about – from the fashions of the time to names of places."

Indeed, for Claude, his work is not complete when he acquires a map he's always coveted, or after having discovered a new one. His passion would never allow that; which is why, 20 years ago, he undertook the monumental task of cataloguing not just all his maps views and books, but also all known maps of Malta dating from the 16th century up to the beginning of the 1900s.

The information has to include author, title engraver, cartographer and where the map is derived from, with all this information then used by historians and other enthusiasts to understand the maps at hand

As I make my way out of the interview and walk back through the corridors lined with relics of Malta's cartographic history, it's hard not to feel moved. The sum of knowledge from these fragile pieces of paper is vast.

Thankfully, Claude, and many other collectors, help preserve them, ensuring that we can continue to study and appreciate them for years to come. ■

For more information on antique maps, visit icquantum.com; or send an e-mail to claudemicallefattard@gmail.com. For more information on the Malta Map Society, visit maltamapsociety.mt