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TRADITIONS AND FOLKLORE IN BIRGU

J. Cassar Pullicino

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The growing interest in Malta's cultural heritage is motivated not only by public awareness of the need for the conservation of the natural environment and of historic buildings and monuments, but also by a concern to discover more about traditional customs, beliefs and behaviour which are felt to be characteristic of the people as a whole. This process of discovery normally implies a search for the traditional ways which are often accepted or taken for granted and unconsciously transmitted from one generation to another.¹ Continuity is vital for the preservation of tradition. Destruction or demolition of buildings may affect this continuity even if they are eventually replaced by new edifices. So also does prolonged interruption due to movement or temporary dispersal of the inhabitants of an area, especially if it is small in size.

In our approach to the subject before us, we find that these two elements exist in the case of Birgu and that over a period of more than four decades they have greatly weakened and eroded the tentacles of tradition. One has to remember that tradition as a living expression of folklife, beliefs and customs in this maritime city received a serious setback during the Second World War (1940–45). Situated as it is next to the Dockyard, Birgu was severely damaged by frequent air bombardment; its inhabitants had to leave their home-town hurriedly to seek refuge in less exposed towns and villages, and by the time many of them returned, following years of reconstruction of ruined houses, tradition had been interrupted and several customs and practices all but forgotten. By and large, the generation that came to live in post-War Birgu was not made up of real bearers of tradition, and among them there were outsiders who had no ties whatever with the locality and who had only found their way there to solve their housing problem. In the circumstances, one can easily understand how certain traditional practices that were formerly observed during the year were not revived or resumed.

In some respects, the material presented here depicts the folklore scene of an age that is gone. All the same, the exercise serves a useful purpose, piecing together for record purposes the various facets of traditional life in Birgu in the past. In stressing the historical dimension, our approach may also foster a sense of identity which Birgu shares with its neighbouring cities as part of a wider and common tradition bridging both time and space.

SOME GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

Speech is an important element in determining the language variations peculiar to particular towns or regions. The present inhabitants of Birgu have retained this characteristic. As Prof. Widdowson has observed: "We judge each other by our speech, manners, dress and countless other signifiers . . . The way we speak, whichever social and/or regional accent we have, is instantly recognisable . . . as having certain characteristics which may be used to classify us in some way."² In this respect Sir Harry Luke writes that "the inhabitants of this side of the Grand Harbour have their own well-defined characteristics, by which they are recognised as such by their fellow-Maltese from the other parts of the island. They are known to the people of Valletta as 'those from the other side — *min-naħa l-oħra*,' and even in accent they have preserved an individuality

Plate 10.1
(facing page)

Feast of St Lawrence.
Il-Marċ tat-Te Deum.

1. A. Gailey, "The Nature of Tradition", *Folklore*, 100/ii (1989), 143-161.

2. J.D.A. Widdowson, "English Language and Folklore", *Folklore*, 101/ii (1990), 216.

of their own”.³ M.A. Vassalli was the first scholar to note the existence of a “port dialect”, as he called it, divided into sub-dialects (*dialettini*) one of which was the sub-dialect of Birgu.⁴ Besides peculiar accent, these sub-dialects may retain the use of words that are unknown or but little used in other localities, examples being *tontu*, “stupid”, and *plejtu*, “fuss”, commonly heard in Birgu. This aspect, however, has not been adequately studied so far.

Tradition may perpetuate in various forms the memory of past events and of former trades and occupations long since forgotten or replaced by others. In 1926 the late G. Darmanin Demajo, born in Senglea but no doubt recalling a tradition shared with Birgu and other localities, wrote that “not long ago, the Maltese expressions *Ara jiġi għalik Dragut, narrakhom jehduk it-Torok* and *Jiġu għalik ix-xwieni* were still on the lips of our grandmothers”.⁵ The same may be said of some families’ nicknames surviving in Birgu in his time. “When the Knights came to Malta in 1530,” he wrote, “the shores of Birgu swarmed with traders, mariners, corsairs, labourers and sailors. These last were easily identified by a knife which they carried at their waist, of a kind peculiar to their calling . . . A relic of these men of the sea remains in such nicknames as *Tal-Vaxxell, Tal-Kursar, Tal-Birgantini, Tan-Navi* and others of the same kind which still exist.”⁶

Equally rich in their historical associations are certain popular names of streets and localities at Birgu. Such are *Triq Ta’ Lhud*, “Jews’ Street”, suggestive of a Jewish quarter, officially known up to the last War as *Strada Palazzo antico del Governatore*; *Strada dello Stendardo*, later named *Strada San Giovanni*,



Plate 10.2

Triq il-Majjistral with Auberge d’Angleterre. The streets of Birgu are rich in historical and legendary associations.

3. H. Luke, *Malta: an Account and an Appreciation*, London 1949, 61.
4. E. Fenech, “The Study of Maltese Dialects in the Past”, in: (eds.) J. Aquilina and B.S.J. Isserlin *A Survey of Contemporary Dialectal Maltese*, vol. 1: *Gozo*, Leeds 1981, 2; M.A. Vassalli, *Lexicon*, Rome 1796, p. XVI, para. XVIII.
5. G. Darmanin Demajo, “Stray Leaves from the Naval History of the Order”, *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 9 January 1926, fn. 99.
6. *Idem*, “The Grand Harbour of Malta and its Surroundings in 1530”, *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 28 January 1926.

This opening is known as *Toqba l-Qadima* to distinguish it from another lately constructed.⁹

For many years the sights of Birgu included that of *L-Arbanja*, explained by Prof. J. Aquilina as a sporadic word which “owes its origin to the British frigate HMS Hibernia which was considered very big for its time and which for many years lay out of action in the Grand Harbour. Hence the figurative usage in the phrases: *donnu l-Arbanja*, he is so awkward and uncouth that he is not good for any work, quite a useless person; *daqs l-Arbanja*, very huge, very large; *ghandu mniehru qisu l-pulena ta’ l-Arbanja*, said of someone who has a very big nose.”¹⁰ Temi Zammit specifies that this was a three-masted wooden warship which the British had captured in war and brought over to Malta in about 1870. It was used as a depot-ship in which sailors awaiting transfer from one ship to another were lodged. For many years it lay anchored near St Angelo until it was dismantled in 1912. Zammit recalls nostalgically that “it was a beauty to behold as it lay in port, towering high, painted in white and black stripes, with 80 cannon protruding from its port-holes.”¹¹

LEGENDS

The traditional stories presented in this section are mostly historical in the sense that they refer to historical persons, events, localities or buildings. They often reflect the people’s version of history, not necessarily as it actually happened but as the people would have liked it to be. Strict historical accuracy is not to be expected, or found, in these legends but they do preserve the kernel of historical facts. The Norman Conquest of 1091, the Great Siege of 1565 and the presence of the Inquisition in Birgu stand out as the main elements that have survived in folk-memory. The ghostly apparitions attached to particular buildings are based on the motif that a victim’s ghost will haunt the place where the crime took place. In one case the story betrays recent British influence.

As for the Great Siege of 1565, it is only natural that such an important event in Maltese history should leave its mark on folk-memory, giving rise to various legends and traditions. The part played by children and women hurling slings or pouring molten metal or boiling water on the Turks attempting to scale the walls not only survives as part of oral tradition but is also attested by Bosio and other historians of the Siege. What is surprising is that the brave deeds and events of the Siege, which so impressed contemporary foreign chroniclers and men of letters and provided the theme for popular compositions in Bulgaria¹² do not seem to have inspired any Maltese ballad at all.

Count Roger and the Church of St Lawrence

Count Roger belongs to that class of persons who attract to themselves legends and traditions. Possessed of a strong personality, this folk-hero’s actions have had a great effect on the Maltese and there is a crop of legends about him and his doings, showing how he has been adopted, as it were, by the people.¹³ Grand

9. Darmanin Demajo, *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 27 January 1927.

10. J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, vol. 1, Malta 1987, 17.

11. T. Zammit, Extract from *Tas-Sliema u San Ġiljan*, 1930, reproduced in *Il-Malti*, Diċembru 1935, 135; C.J. Mallia; “The Figurehead of HMS Hibernia”, *STM* 27 December 1992.

12. For an interesting article on the content of Bulgarian songs inspired by the heroic deeds of our forefathers see C. Mallia, “The Great Siege in Bulgarian popular songs”, *The Times (Malta)*, 20 September 1983.

13. J. Cassar Pullicino, “Norman Legends in Malta”, *Scientia (Malta)*, XI, (1945), reproduced in considerably revised version in: A.T. Luttrell (ed.), *Medieval Malta. Studies on Malta before the Knights*, London 1975, 96–103.

Master Jean de la Vallette is another folk-hero whose leadership and courage are enshrined in tradition. Popular belief in the intercession of saints during that trying period is also reflected in some of the legends summarized in this section.

It is a firmly rooted tradition at Birgu that when Count Roger the Norman came to Malta in 1090 and freed it from the yoke of the Saracens he not only re-established and endowed the Cathedral of Mdina but also erected the Parish of Birgu for the spiritual welfare of the people in the south eastern region of Malta. For this reason the Collegiate Church of St Lawrence claims that it is the first parish church on the island after the Mdina Cathedral.¹⁴

According to another tradition, Count Roger came to Malta some days before mid-August, i.e. about the time of the feast of St Lawrence (10 August). After re-establishing the Cathedral he erected the church at Birgu and dedicated it to St Lawrence in thanksgiving for his victory.¹⁵

La Vallette's Rest-house

In 1926 Canon Ġ.M. Farrugia mentioned that along St Ursola's Curtain (*Il-Kortinta' S. Orsla*) there stood a house, in which, according to tradition, La Vallette used to rest while he continued to issue orders and direct operations as necessary during the Siege. This house was already in ruins when Canon Farrugia wrote about it.¹⁶

Plate 10.4

The Birgu fortifications with the Post of Castille known as *Il-Prexxa* to the far left.



14. A. Zammit Gabaretta, *The Church of the Grand Masters and Inquisitors*, Malta 1974, 5–6.
 15. Ġ.M. Farrugia, “Il-Knisja ta’ San Lawrenz tal-Birgu”, *Il-Malti*, 1926, 141.
 16. Farrugia, “Dawra Arkeologika”, 68.

Il-Prexxa

This is the popular name given to the bastion entrusted to the Castilian Knights during the Siege. It refers to a crucial episode when the Turks had actually gained a foothold after their mines had breached the bastion. La Vallette, however, accompanied by some Knights, soon arrived on the scene and led so impetuous a charge that the tide was turned.

Canon G.M. Farrugia, quoting Bosio's account of the Siege, suggests that probably it was on this occasion that the Turkish attackers saw Our Lady, St John and St Lawrence, followed by numerous angels, protecting the walls of Birgu. The enemy mistook these for Christian reinforcements and became so frightened that their hands began to tremble and they could not hold their scimitars firmly. As a result the Turks retired to their boats and hurriedly left the scene of the fighting.¹⁷

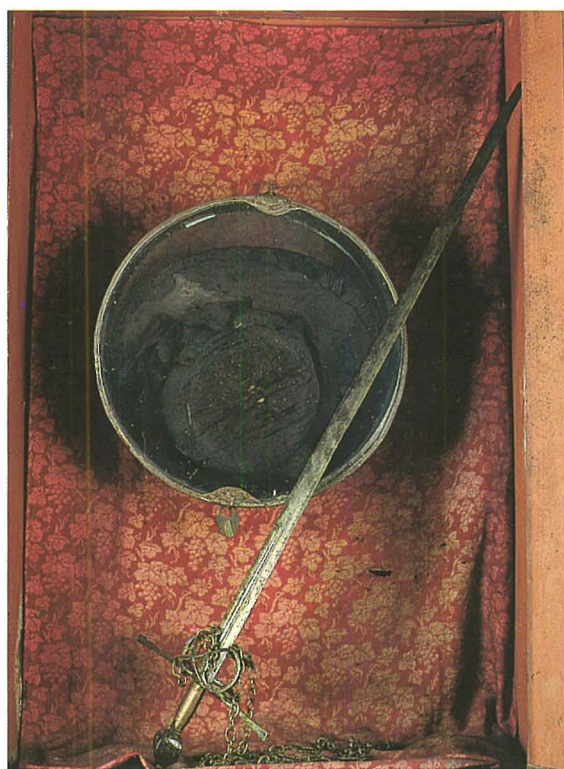


Plate 10.5
La Vallette's Hat and
Sword.

La Vallette's Hat and Sword

These may be seen in the Chapel of Our Lady of Damascus, known also as St Joseph's Oratory. During the Siege this chapel was used by the Greek community in Birgu who had accompanied the Knights in 1530 after the fall of Rhodes. Canon Zammit Gabaretta explains that "tradition has it that the Grand Master La Vallette on his way to St Lawrence Church for the thanksgiving service at the end of the Great Siege put his hat and sword in this chapel as an act of homage to the Virgin Mother of God for her heavenly protection throughout the bitter months of the Siege".¹⁸

17. *Ibid*, 68.

18. Zammit Gabaretta, 68.

The White Dove

Folk-memory recalls that throughout the Siege of 1565 the besieged in Birgu could see a white dove hovering over the church at Żabbar. According to another version of the legend, the dove appeared on the church of St Mary Damascene close to St Lawrence Church. The defenders were greatly encouraged by this, for they interpreted its appearance as a sign of divine help. The dove defied the noise of battle and the whistling of cannon balls until the siege was lifted on the 8 September. Then it flew away, never to return. This tradition is supported by many historians of the Great Siege.¹⁹

Il-Madonna tal-Kandlora

This refers to an old painting on wood, showing Our Lady breast-feeding the Child Jesus, which was held in great veneration in the church of the Annunciation at Birgu. The Confraternity of the same name, to which it belongs, and which was set up in St Angelo long before the Knights came to Malta in 1530, celebrated its feast on 2 February — dedicated to the Purification of Our Lady, known in Maltese as *Il-Kandlora*. When the Dominicans transferred to it some land in 1538 on which to build a chapel adjoining the Church of the Annunciation, members of the Confraternity took with them the wooden image.

Its cult, which was already well-established, grew when, some nine months before the Great Siege, the word spread that droplets of sweat had miraculously come out of the image of Our Lady. The Maltese firmly believed that Our Lady had helped them achieve victory. The Dominican Michele Fontana preached a sermon in Sicily in which he stated that “when the Turks were attacking the Maltese in 1565, the Christians saw the *Madonna tal-Kandlora* coming out of the Church of the Annunciation — she was dressed as a warrior, wearing a helmet, with a shining cuirass and holding a drawn sword in her right hand. She flew through the air like a white cloud and wherever she went she killed and frightened the enemy.”

M. Fsadni (*infra*, Vol. II, Ch. 18) states that “after the victory of the Great Siege of 1565 which took place on 8 September — the feast of the Birth of the Virgin Mary — the celebrations in the Church of the Annunciation began to include a procession through the streets of Birgu during which the icon was carried. Later on, as part of the victory celebrations, the image of Our Lady began to be carried processionally to the church of St Lawrence”.

In modified form, this is still taking place each year. On 7 September the Chapter of the Church of St Lawrence goes in procession to the Church of the Annunciation and carries the miraculous painting — or rather, a reproduction, as the original was destroyed by enemy action in the Second World War — to the Church of St Lawrence, where they keep it until second vespers of 8 September — the day of Our Lady’s Nativity and at the same time the day of the Maltese victory over the Turks. After the solemn procession through the streets of the city it is returned in procession to the Church of the Annunciation.²⁰

19. Vide NLM Lib. MS. 14, p. 557; also A. Ferres, *Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, Malta 1866, 482; E.B. Vella, *Haż-Zabbar bil-Graxja Tieghu*, Malta 1926, 16–17.

20. A. Ferres, *Storia Ecclesiastica di Malta*, Malta 1877, 188–189; also M. Fsadni, *Id-Dummikani fir-Rabat u fil-Birgu sa l-1620*, Malta 1974, 89; A. Vella, “Il-Madonna tal-Kandlora miqjuma fil-Lunzjata tal-Birgu”, *Ir-Rużarju* (Malta), ii/3, 1950, 7–12; Farrugia, “Il-Knisja ta’ San Lawrenz”, 30.

Il-Warda tal-Kavaliieri

This is the name given to the fruit of a wild creeping plant (*Tribulus Terrestris*) commonly believed to grow within the Castle of St Angelo between May and September, and nowhere else. Many people attend the Divine Service held in the Church of the Nativity on 7 and 8 September, the occasion being the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin and the anniversary of the Maltese Victory over the Turks in 1565. People from the Three Cities and from other places used to look for this special plant which, according to tradition, sprang out of the blood shed by the Knights in defence of the Fort. The fruit resembles the eight-pointed Cross of the Order, but two of its points on one side are slightly tilted at an angle with their opposite points.

An interesting parallel with the *motif* of this tradition occurs in the Polydorus episode in Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book III Lines 22–68). Some years ago I came across an interesting reference to “The Pasque Flower”, by Ida M. Whitworth in *The Country Life* of 14 June 1946. The writer says: “In 1937 I found *Anemone Pulsatella* growing not very far from Cambridge. It is said to grow wherever the Danes fought on English soil, hence its local name “Danes’ Blood”.²¹



Plate 10.6

Il-Warda tal-Kavaliieri (*Tribulus Terrestris*) also known as *Ix-Xewkatta' l-Ghatba*. The fruit gives the impression of an eight-pointed cross but has in fact ten spikes. Contrary to popular belief, it is not exclusively found at St Angelo.

The Inquisition

The Inquisition, which flourished in Malta under the Knights, figures also in Maltese tradition. Two palaces are known as *Ta' l-Inkizitur*, one at Birgu and the other on the outskirts of Siggiewi. Rightly or wrongly, in the mind of the folk the name of the Holy Office is synonymous with repression, cruelty and torture. People still refer to a harsh law as inquisitorial, *Din Inkizzjoni!* Of

21. J. Cassar Pullicino, “The Order of St John in Maltese Folk-Memory”, *Scientia* (Malta), xv/4 (1949), 153-154; Pieris [G. Lanfranco], “Outdoor Life”, *Times of Malta*, 12 March 1964.



Plate 10.7

The Inquisitor's
Palace. Detail of cell-
wall showing graffiti.

the tools of torture employed, *il-Kavallett*²² and *il-Bir tas-Skieken*, “the well of knives”, are the ones which are best remembered.

Popular imagination has woven the following legend about Don Matteo Falzon, *is-Sahhar Falzun*, “the wizard Falzon”, denounced and condemned by the Inquisition in 1575. The story runs that while the Inquisitor was at table with some knights and other friends, they called Falzon from his dungeon to amuse the guests. Falzon asked for a cask of water and for a piece of string. Taking the end of the string and giving the clew to a knight, the wizard jumped head foremost into the cask and disappeared. And nothing was heard of him till the Inquisitor received a letter from Sicily in Falzon’s handwriting with the words “Remember me”. Later, Falzon ordered his Sicilian servant to kill him and cut him up into pieces and bury him in the cellar, whence he would arise and become the Anti-Christ. Every week the servant was to send a letter to the Inquisitor at Malta. But it so happened that the servant by mistake sent a letter which he was supposed to send at a much later date, with the result that the Inquisitor grew suspicious and asked the Viceroy to investigate the whole matter. Thus they were able to extract the whole truth from the unfortunate servant, how Falzon had left him a number of letters, carefully dated at weekly intervals, of which he was to send one every week. They took out of the cellar the dead man’s bones, which were already beginning to reunite, and burned the remains. And that was the end of *Sahhar Falzun*.²³

Another legend tells the story of a knight at Birgu who fell in love with a Maltese girl. The latter, acting on her confessor’s advice, rejected his amorous advances. The disappointed knight bribed a woman to accost the same confessor under pretence of confessing and then accuse him of misconduct to the Inquisitor. As a result the innocent priest found his way into prison, where he remained for a number of years. On her death-bed the wicked woman confessed how she had maligned the good priest in order to obtain the reward promised to her by the knight. Thus vindicated, the priest was freed and he returned home in triumph. His triumph, however, was short-lived for he died soon after.²⁴

22. Torture was employed both by the secular law-courts and by the Tribunal of the Inquisition in Malta. Dr P. Cassar explains that the *Cavalletto* “consisted in placing the accused, with weights attached to his feet, in the sitting position on a sort of wooden horse with a sharp back. This torment was made to last up to twelve hours” — *The Castellania Palace: From Law Courts to Guardian of the Nation’s Health*, Malta 1988, 31–32.

23. P.P. Castagna, *L-Istorja ta’ Malta bil-Għejjer tagħha*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, Malta 1888, 99–101.

24. *Ibid.*, 101.

The Abbé in the Palace of Bettina

Various stories are told about Bettina Dorell (1741–1829), a lady of noble birth and sister of Lucrezia, Cardinal Fabrizio Sceberras's mother. Folk memory portrays her as a rich noblewoman who was a Dame in the Court of the Queen of the two Sicilies; possessed of a keen intellect, she was widely travelled, having gone as far North as England — no mean achievement for a Maltese woman in those days! She wanted to bequeath a big bell for the belfry of the Church of St Lawrence at Birgu, where she lived in her big house or Palace, adjacent to the church. However, her offer was made on condition that both on her death and on every anniversary of her death the bell would be tolled in the same way as if it were the death of a Canon. The chapter of Birgu could not accept such conditions and nothing came of it.²⁵

According to legend, the relatives of Baron Gauci had lived in this palace before the Noble Bettina. He had a son, who was an Abbé (*M. Abbati*), his only heir. So long as he lived, the Baron's relatives could never inherit his wealth. Many a time they entreated the Baron to allow his son to leave Mdina and spend a few days with them at Birgu. Finally he accepted their apparently sincere invitation and sent his son and heir to Birgu. The young man dismounted from his mule near a well in the square, knocked at the main door of the Palace and was received by his aunts and uncles.

A day passed, two days . . . a whole week passed without the Baron hearing anything from his son. He sent his servant to find out from his relatives why his son had not yet returned to Mdina. At this they looked very much surprised and said they had not seen the Abbé for a long time. The Baron soon concluded that they had killed his son to ensure that they would come into his (the Baron's) inheritance on his death. To punish them for their evil design he left his wealth to the Church of St Lawrence. Rumour soon spread within the city that the *abbati* had been seized, pushed into the oven and burnt alive.

After that, the Abbé was seen several times coming out of the oven. Among those who saw him there were outsiders who had come to live at Birgu in the vicinity of the Palace. They heard strange noises for which they could not account, and some had to leave the premises during the night. Even a Scottish soldier on night duty — when the place was rented for use as a military hospital — reported that he had seen the Abbé wearing his cassock and surplice. He fell down in a swoon and it took many hours before he recovered. Small wonder that the palace remained unoccupied, as it was said to be ghost-ridden. The old building suffered some damage during the War and was then restored. Since then the *abbé* was not seen any more. Nevertheless, Canon Farrugia assures us, the people of Birgu retained the memory of this gruesome story and, if one were to ask about it, people would reply that in the palace was to be found *il-Forn ta' l-Abbati*, “the Abbé's oven”.²⁶

The Grey Lady in the Castle of St Angelo

The legend about the Grey Lady who haunts the Castle of St Angelo betrays strong English influence and in fact the story has been most popular with the English. Eric Brockman gives a delightful account of this ghost story in his

25. G.M. Farrugia, “Il-Forn ta' l-Abbati”, *Il-Berqa* (Malta), 31 May 1945.

26. G.M. Farrugia, “L-Abbati tal-Palazz tas-Sinjura Bettina”, *Il-Malti*, (1934), 62–64.



book *Last Bastion: Sketches of the Maltese Islands*:²⁷

“The Grey Lady has been heard, seen and her presence felt by people of very different sorts on countless occasions, over the years. She is not bound to a particular room, or to the immediate environs of the Captain’s House; but she does most frequently make her presence known in a particular room, through which she is heard — or felt — to pass, to the accompaniment of all the familiar signs: the cold blast of air, the slowly opening door, the rustle of voluminous skirts, and the light, tapping footfall . . . The Lady has been seen, too, in daylight, walking in the gardens of the

Plate 10.8

Fort St Angelo.
Captain’s House
believed to be haunted
by the Grey Lady.

27. London 1961, 184–186.

Upper Bastion. She wears “a long, grey dress and a sort of tall, pointed head-dress from which hangs a sweeping grey veil”. She is beautiful and sad, but she does not weep, groan, scream or clank chains. She has been seen by very young children who have spoken of “the nice lady who came to say ‘good night’ to us . . .”

“Local tradition identifies the Grey Lady as the light o’ love of the last of the Sicilian-Aragonese Captains of the Rod and Governors of the Fort: one Seigneur de Nava.

“The gallant Captain, whose private demesne was in the capital of Notabile, is supposed to have maintained a second establishment at his place of duty . . . though which of the ladies was his legal consort neither history nor tradition relates; but it is said that the one or the other was observed, by a vigilant Maltese Quartermaster, approaching the Water Gate in a boat at a particularly unsuitable moment. The Seigneur lost his head and intending, it is charitably supposed, merely to hide the superfluous lady, he shouted to his Maltese men-at-arms to “get rid of her” . . . with more discipline than humanity, (they) put an end to her and cast her inconvenient corpse into a convenient *oubliette*. The poor Grey Lady cannot have been popular with the other ranks and was, perhaps, like her lord, a foreigner. . . .

“The story, or variants of it, had been current for many years when some restoration work was undertaken in the rooms through which the Lady most often passed . . . Further examination exposed an arched doorway, immediately beneath the arms of de Nava, and beyond this a narrow stairway terminating in the mouth of a deep *oubliette*. At the bottom were three skeletons — two males (the men-at-arms?) and one female, together with some fabric which might once have been grey.”

FEASTS AND SPECTACLES

A few important dates of the folklore calendar are covered in this section. It will be seen that in some of these traditions, e.g. Carnival, Good Friday, Easter and the Great Siege Commemoration, Birgu has been the motive power for action, initiative or change throughout these islands. Together with its sister-cities of Bormla and L-Isla, it has contributed towards the continued vitality, growth and development of the Regatta, while its titular feast, though conforming to the general pattern of present-day *fešta* celebrations, is linked to certain past usages and beliefs that are peculiar to Birgu and therefore worth recording. For the same reason one is justified in saving from oblivion the memory of the *baċiri* or trays that were carried in procession at Birgu up to 1939 on the occasion of the feast of Our Lady of Charity.

Carnival

Some sort of Carnival festivities used to take place in Malta as far back as the fifteenth century.²⁸ Soon after the coming of the Knights this public entertainment became more popular. Tradition points out the locality known as *Il-Ballett*, at the far end of St Lawrence Street, as the site in Birgu where masked revellers were joined by knights who held jousts with lances and rapiers in 1535, during the Grand Mastership of Fra Pietro del Ponte.

28. S. Fiorini, “Carni per lu Carnivalj”, *MH*, ix/4, no. 4 (1987), 311–314.

Here, too, the local Carnival received a tremendous push onwards in 1560, when Grand Master La Vallette allowed the use of masks in public. The occasion was the presence in harbour of a large Christian Armada directed against Tripoli. The Christian fleet had been held up by unfavourable weather and by disease, and the Genoese Grand Admiral Doria, chafing under his enforced inaction, allowed his men to make merry ashore. This they did all too willingly and for a few days the flower of European chivalry and aristocracy revelled in song and dance and mask such as Malta had never witnessed before.²⁹

The entertainment, so rich in spectacle and amusement, pleased both the Knights and the Maltese, and in time Carnival came to form a characteristic of Maltese national life. The Carnival tradition was especially strong in Birgu and its neighbouring cities L-Isla and Bormla. In fact the eighteenth century diarist I.S. Mifsud records that in 1765 “there was a good number of masks and it was a pleasure to behold such beautiful and costly dresses, especially those worn by the women of Bormla, L-Isla and Birgu, where the menfolk traded mostly with Spain and Portugal and therefore they could provide their wives with really beautiful and rich dresses which not even ladies of rank and members of the rich nobility possess.”³⁰

Viewed with the benefit of hind-sight, it may not be a coincidence that the first philharmonic band that took part in the 1860’s in the Carnival festivities in Valletta was “La Vittoriosa” Band, of Birgu, with a company of *Zingarelli*. In 1886 it participated with two companies, besides contributing to the general merrymaking at Birgu. At that time Carnival had again become very popular in the Three Cities.³¹ One may add that to this day Birgu has retained a lively interest in this folk entertainment.



Good Friday

Like many other localities Birgu stages an imposing spectacle on Good Friday, with a set of statuary groups, representing the main episodes of the Passion and Death of Christ. This tradition goes back to the beginning of the eighteenth century which saw a progressive increase in the number of localities organising

Plate 10.9 a, b, c.

The Agony in the Garden; The High Priests; The Crucifixion. Scenes from the Good Friday Procession winding its way through the narrow streets of the Collacchio.

29. NLM Lib. MS. 1146, vol. 1, 293; also I. Bosio, *Dell’Istoria della Sacra Religione et Ill. ma Militia di San Giovanni Gierosolimitano*, Parte Terza, 2.da Impressione, Naples 1684, 416.
 30. NLM Lib. MS. 14, 413.
 31. L. Zahra, *Il-Banda Vittoriosana San Lawrenz*, 1983, 12, 16.

these processions. The eight statuary groups at Birgu represent the following episodes: (1) the Agony in the Garden, (2) the Scourging at the Pillar, (3) the *Ecce Homo* or Crowning with thorns, (4) Jesus falls under the cross, (5) Veronica, (6) the Crucifixion, (7) Jesus' burial, and (8) Our Lady of Sorrows. Together with Valletta, Senglea, Gharghur in Malta and the parish of St George in Gozo, Birgu has not introduced any new episodes in the procession in recent years.

At Birgu there were originally three processions during Holy Week, the first one on Tenebrae Wednesday (*M. L-Erbgħa t at-Tniebri*) which proceeded from the Church of Our Lady of Carmel and in which the crews of the Order's galleys, including baptized slaves and *forzati*, i.e. persons condemned for various crimes to wear a chain, took part carrying the statuary group representing the Crucifixion. This could have been the origin of the practice which has survived to our times of a number of penitents in the Good Friday processions dragging at each heel a tremendous length and weight of iron chain, so ponderous as to compel them to rest at every twenty or thirty paces. The second procession came out of the Church of the Annunciation on Maundy Thursday, and the third, which was by far the most important, and in which the Jurats of the City took part, proceeded from the parish church of St Lawrence on Good Friday. The Greek *Papas* led another procession in the same city on Good Friday.³²

According to tradition, the idea of having richly dressed lay figures (*Manikini*) in Birgu came directly from Spain. It is held that in the early years of the eighteenth century some merchants and sea captains from Birgu happened to witness a procession in a Spanish town on Good Friday, and so impressed were they that they commissioned a set of statues for the parish church of their home city. And up to within living memory the faces, hands and feet of the various statues were kept in the private homes of the Magris, Camilleris, Lanzons and Gaffieros — all of them rich families who had contributed towards the original expense.³³ Up to 1940 on Wednesday in Holy Week it was customary for these statuary groups to be taken out of the Oratory, in which they were kept during the year, and carried to the parish church.³⁴

These dressed-up figures are unique in Malta, but in Gozo there are no less than three sets of similarly-dressed statues, namely two at Victoria and another at Żebbuġ, which came into being in the nineteenth and the present centuries.³⁵ The inhabitants of Birgu took a special pride in perpetuating this centuries-old tradition, and when they wished to show their appreciation of red velvet material they used to say: *Ahmar u sbejjah daqs il-libsa tar-Redentur*, "Red and beautiful like the robe of the Redeemer".³⁶

Easter

Before the new liturgical arrangements came into effect in 1968, as soon as the *Gloria* was intoned on the morning of Easter Saturday it was customary

32. Personal communication by the late Canon Ġ.M. Farrugia, of Vittoriosa, in 1952. See also C.P.B. in *Lehen is-Sewwa*, 19 April 1940. As regards the procession led by the Greek *Papas* see NLM Lib. MS. 13, f. 776.

33. Personal communication by the late Canon Ġ.M. Farrugia in 1952.

34. Zammit Gabaretta, *Il-Birgu ta' l-Għid: Drawwiet ta' l-Imghoddi*, Malta 1973, 4.

35. J. Grima, "The Iconography of the Maltese Good Friday Processional Statues: Their Development between 1960 and 1984", in: S. Fiorini (ed.), *Proceedings of History Week 1984*, Malta 1986, 142.

36. Zammit Gabaretta, *Il-Birgu fil-Gimgha ta' l-Għid*, , 5.



at Birgu for a drummer to pass through the streets of the City to announce the joyful news of Christ's Resurrection. Children from all parts of Birgu accompanied the drummer singing all the while:

*Tomm, tirli tomm, tirli tiera
Kristu rxoxta bil-bandiera!
Ghax tal-Birgu geru bih
U haddiehor waqa' bih!*

*Tomm, tirli tomm, tirli tiera!
Christ has arisen holding the flag;
The people of Birgu ran with it (the statue)
And others stumbled and fell with it.*

Meanwhile, young men had their first dip of the season while mothers prepared hard-boiled eggs and dyed them red before sticking them on to the *figolla*, which their child was not supposed to eat before the Risen Christ had blessed it as his statue passed by. Nowadays eggs made of chocolate, and covered with red tinsel, have largely replaced real eggs.³⁷

Up to 1962 Birgu retained the old practice whereby at dawn, at noon and in the evening of Easter Sunday a drummer passed through the streets of the parish beating his drum.³⁸

37. *Ibid.*, 13.

38. L. Zahra during interview with the present writer in Radio Broadcast on 24 June 1962. See also Zammit Gabaretta, *Il-Birgu fil-Gimgha ta' l-Ghid*, p. 13.

Plate 10.16

Easter Sunday morning. The traditional run with the statue of the Risen Christ.

The highlight of the Easter tradition at Birgu is undoubtedly the procession on Easter Sunday with the Statue of the Risen Christ. Originally it started very early on Sunday, soon after midnight, and later at the *Pater Noster* (about 5 a.m.). Between 1782 and 1795 it was discontinued on Bishop Labini's order, but in 1796 it was resumed. There was another interruption during the French Occupation (1798–1800) but after 1804 it took place almost uninterruptedly up to the last War. Since 1945 the old custom has been revived with unabated enthusiasm. From Birgu and Bormla, which both have a strong and deeply rooted Easter tradition, the practice of carrying the statue at a run at certain specified spots of the traditional route, has spread to various other localities in recent years.

To this day the statue at Birgu shows the Risen Christ holding the flag of the Order — a red flag with a white cross, popularly called in Maltese *Il-Bandiera tar-Reliġjon*. In the early years of British rule, this flag was replaced by a palm out of deference to the new British rulers, but after a few years the old practice was resumed and has survived to this day.

One notes a decided Greek influence in the Easter customs and traditions. This popular cult may be due to the influx of a considerable number of Greek Rhodiots who followed the Order to Malta in 1530. Some of them later left, but many more stayed and eventually became integrated with Maltese society. They had three churches at Birgu and when they left Birgu for Valletta Bishop Balaguer in 1659 set up the Confraternity of the Risen Christ in their church known as *Ta' l-Erwieh*.³⁹

As an early example of popular devotion towards the feast of the Resurrection in Birgu one may mention that by 1575 the brothers Gerolamo and Antonio Caccialepre, both of them Greek Rhodiots, had erected a chapel in the Church of the Annunciation over whose altar there was an effigy on wood of Christ Arisen, flanked by St Catherine and St Barbara. On Easter Sunday some masses were celebrated in this chapel.⁴⁰

The Feast of St Lawrence

Rooted as it is in antiquity and nurtured by great and important historical events it is natural that the people of Birgu should celebrate the feast of their patron saint with due solemnity and in conformity with established popular taste and local colour. In fact the external festivities nowadays follow the elaborate pattern of band marches, fireworks, street decorations, an outing on the morrow of the feast, etc. that has evolved over the past thirty years or so in practically all the towns and villages of Malta and Gozo.

At a distance of 240 years one can hardly visualize the completely different but most befitting milieu of a spectacle on the waters of the Grand Harbour on the eve of the feast of St Lawrence in 1752. Count G.A. Ciantar has left us a vivid description of the scene: "On the eve of the feast of St Lawrence the nineteen stores newly constructed by Grand Master Pinto were illuminated with innumerable big lanterns beautifully arranged. There was also a harmonious concert of various musical instruments which practically went on all night long. All the nobility, as well as citizens of both sexes were there, mostly on small boats alongside of that stretch of water that laps the mole, to

Plate 10.11
(facing page)

Feast of St Lawrence.
The Church of
St Lawrence
decorated for the
festa.

39. Zammit Gabaretta, *Il-Birgu fil-Ġimgha ta' l-Ghid*, 14–16.

40. Fsadni, 104.



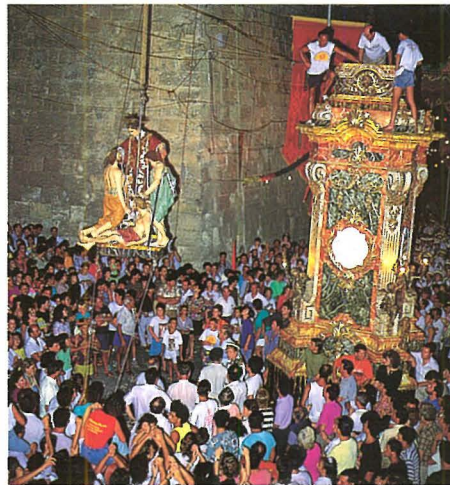
enjoy the beautiful illumination and at the same time to greet the friends and other persons who had assembled there. And it was a lovely sight, with all the boats on the island meeting at one place on a night lit up as if it were daylight.”⁴¹ Mention will be made later on that for some years in the later decades of the eighteenth century boat-races were held on St Lawrence’s Day.

Much nearer to our time, and practically within living memory, the feast presented certain features that were peculiar to Birgu, some of which have been discontinued after the Second World War. For the duration of the feast the city gates were not closed at the firing of the gun (*M. mat-tir*) which in the old days was the signal given for the gates to be closed. Formerly the poor of the parish received some food (loaves) on St Lawrence’s Day. Many Gozitans used to cross over on the eve to enjoy the feast at Birgu, where makeshift sleeping accommodation was provided for them. Tradition has it that the use of flambeaux (*M. fjakkli*) and multi-coloured oil lamps for street illuminations, were first introduced at Birgu. Elderly inhabitants of this historic city recall that formerly a mausoleum used to be erected in St Lawrence Street, representing three personages figuring in an episode in the life of the patron saint. These were Pope Sixtus II, St Lawrence and a Roman soldier. The people soon found a catchy appellation for this group, i.e. *Iċ-Ċorma*, (lit. “the crew”). The neighbouring locality became known as *hdejn iċ-Ċorma* “near the crew”.

Plate 10.12 a, b
The Feast of
St Lawrence

(Left) Statue of
“St Lawrence
Healing the Blind”
being hoisted on to
its ornate plinth.

(Right) St Lawrence
Procession led by the
mace bearer.



A custom that has survived from pre-War days in that on the “antevigilja” i.e. 8 August, the statue known as *San Lawrenz ta d-dawl lill-Ghomi* is carried, accompanied by band-marches, and placed on a wooden pedestal some 20 feet high. The old Victory bell in the Castle of St Angelo, which peals out on 8 September (*Il-Vitorja*), is also rung on the occasion of the feast of St Lawrence. Before the intonation of the *Te Deum*, it is customary at Birgu to deliver a sermon on the events of the Great Siege to commemorate the victory which earned for the city the title of *Città Vittoriosa*, “the Victorious City”. Immediately after the *Te Deum*, and as soon as the church bells stop ringing, a band-march known as *Il-Marċ tat-“Te Deum”* starts along its traditional route. When it reaches the main square, and as soon as the rattle of the *musketterija* comes to an end, a number of birds are released from inside a balloon amidst the merriment and enthusiasm (*waqt il-briju*) of the crowd that gathers in the square.⁴²

41. G.A. Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata*, Not. 3, Malta 1772, 20.

42. L. Zahra during interviews with the present writer broadcast over the Rediffusion system on 24 June and 26 July 1962.



Plate 10.13

Feast of St Lawrence,
Waqt il-Briju.

Elderly people remember that in their younger days the people of Birgu abstained from any baked food out of respect for the saint's suffering during his martyrdom, while he was being roasted on a grid. Instead of baked food, therefore, the townspeople used to eat only fruit — hence the expression *is-sawma tal-Frott*. Luigi Bonelli, who was in Malta in 1894, wrote about this and other related beliefs. He says: “Children believe that if one fasts on the eve of the feast (i.e. 9 August) one is bound to dig up from the soil some pieces of the coal on which the saint was roasted, the reason being that after the saint's death bits and pieces of that coal were scattered all over the world. The fast observed on that day, although called *hobż u frott*, “bread and fruit”, in reality consists only of fruit, thus avoiding — out of respect for the saint's martyrdom — the need of eating bread or any other pastry baked in an oven. Children were also firmly convinced that if the glass *theca* or small case containing the saint's relic were to break, the whole world would be ruined.⁴³

The Feast of St Dominic

The feast of St Dominic in Soriano is celebrated at Birgu on the fourth Sunday in August, when the usual features associated with local *festas* — street decorations and lighting, band marches, illumination of the church façade, fireworks display, etc. — form part of the yearly programme of internal and external festivities organised by the Dominican community in the city.

At the popular level there are two *fešta-partiti* in Birgu, one promoting this feast and the other the feast of St Lawrence. The historian P.P. Castagna states that these factions originated between 1877 and 1880, when the supporters of St Dominic became known as *Ta' l-Istilla*, the star symbolising the Saint, and those of St Lawrence as *Tal-Palma*, the palm being the symbol of that saint's martyrdom.⁴⁴

43. L. Bonelli, *Saggi del Folklore dell'Isola di Malta* con prefazione di G. Pitriè, Palermo 1895, 34.

44. Castagna, ii — *Storja Politika*, 1890, 488.

Within a few years the external festivities in honour of St Dominic reached considerable proportions. In 1886 there are already references to the feast of the Saint's Apparition in Soriano held with "grand magnificence" and "external merriment" at Birgu. Fr. Vincenzo Schembri mentions also "*la religiosa e popolare festa che da un lungo ordine di anni si solennizza in Malta con porripa imponente e magnificenza senza pari*". More specifically the same writer refers to the festivities held in September "*nella turrita Città Vittoriosa*" and to the "*schietta lietezza dei cittadini*", the "*brio popolare*" and the "*splendida varietà dei suoi adornamenti*". At that time these celebrations, "by special privilege granted by the Pope exclusively to the City of Vittoriosa" were held on the Sunday following 15 September.⁴⁵

The Feast of Our Lady of Charity

The feast of Our Lady of Charity was formerly celebrated at Birgu on the first Sunday after Ascension Day (*M. Lapsi*). The Confraternity of the same name organised the feast. Each one of its twenty-four members took part in the procession, carrying a big ornamental tray known as *baçir*, full of small loaves and surmounted by statues representing some episode from the Bible. From the Trinity Church these *baçiri* were taken, to the accompaniment of a band, to St Joseph's Oratory where they could be viewed and admired by the public. Smaller trays with loaves were carried by children. After the procession the loaves were distributed among the poor of the parish. The Capuchin Fathers taking part in the procession also received four of these trays containing bread.⁴⁶

Memory of these *baçiri* survives, and a specimen may be seen, exhibited in the Museum of the Oratory of St Joseph. A curious "trophy" shown on a low pillar in a painting donated by Mrs. Ridley, the painter, to the Church of St Lawrence, gives an idea of what a *baçir* looked like. "It is a relic" writes Canon A. Zammit Gabaretta⁴⁷ "of a former custom when similar 'trophies' — called by the local people *baçiri* — gorgeously painted and decorated with red damask and fringes of golden threads, and with some small statues at the top, used to be carried in procession on the occasion of the feast of Our Lady of Charity."

Great Siege Commemoration

The commemoration of the two sieges (1565 and 1940–43) organized nowadays by the Vittoriosa Historical Society perpetuates, in modified form, a tradition going back to 1888, when a purely civil ceremony began to be held annually to mark the Maltese victory of 8 September 1565 — the National Feast. The celebrations at Birgu, which were held on the second Sunday after the actual date of the feast, were graphically described by Vincenzo Busuttill in 1894:

"The square is most tastefully got up with splendid trophies of arms and red and white flags. From each of the trophies broad red and white sashes are seen hanging, on which the names of those who distinguished themselves by some brave and noble deed in the memorable siege are written in gold letters.

45. P.V. Schembri, *Delle Glorie stupende di S. Domenico in Soriano: Argomento di religiosa e popolare festa in Malta*, Malta 1886, 6–7, 15, 95.

46. L. Zahra during interview with the present writer broadcast on 24 June 1962.

47. Zammit Gabaretta, *The Church of the Grand Masters and Inquisitors*, Malta 1974, 59.



The decorations of the column of Victory, in the middle of the square, are simply magnificent. This column is surrounded by four figures, representing four Grand Masters in full armour; one of these is the immortal La Vallette . . .

During the day the bands playing lively marches parade the principal streets of the town, preceded by large crowds of people with palm leaves and Maltese flags in their hands. In the evening the enthusiasm in the beautifully illuminated square is intense and prolonged.

Large crowds from all parts of the island flock here . . . to witness the grand display of fireworks. These are indeed worth seeing, especially one

Plate 10.14

Great Siege
Commemoration.
The Victory
Monument at the
turn of the century.

set piece. This represents a real fort with the red and white cross banner of the Knights at the top. This fort opens fire and is attacked by several Turkish men-of-war, with sails set and the Crescent flying at the mast head.

As these miniatures of old-fashioned galleys come sailing across the square on wires stretched over the people's head towards the fort, they open fire in great style. One after the other they meet their fate, for the fort peppers them cruelly and finally sets them on fire, so that soon — hulls, sails, masts, yards, crescent flags and all the warlike things about them are in a few seconds, wrapped in flames and destroyed.”⁴⁸

One hopes that with judicious publicity, sufficient public interest will be aroused that will make it possible, with official encouragement, to revive this fireworks display as a tourist attraction, with suitable modifications to recall the aerial battles on Birgu during the Second World War besides the Turkish attacks of 1565.

The Regatta

As a traditional sporting event, these boat races, held on the 8th September, can be traced back to 1824. They were interrupted twice during the present century, i.e. during the First World War (1914–18) when the port was full of warships, and again during and immediately after the Second World War (1939–50), when the racing course was obstructed by sunken wreckage.

Similar races were held at Senglea, as far back as the closing years of the sixteenth century, on 2 July — the Feast of Our Lady's Visitation. They continued to be held until well into the eighteenth century. Other short-lived races are mentioned: at Cospicua, from 1642 onwards, on the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary; at Kalkara on 28 September — St Liberata's Day; and at Birgu on the feast of St Lawrence (10 August). These races, however, were discontinued and merged with the 8th September races when these began to be held in 1824.⁴⁹

In 1894 V. Busuttil described the essential features of the scene as follows:

“The Valletta harbour quays, from the new extension, right up to the old *Barriera*, and all the overlooking lines of walls and batteries, on both sides of the harbour, are early taken possession of by thousands of spectators who take great delight in this exciting annual regatta.

The course is from Ras *Hanzir* to the Custom House, the whole length of which is always crowded with thousands of picturesquely painted boats, yachts and small craft with living cargo. The race course in the centre channel is always well kept clear by a couple of steam launches, and the Port Department gondolas . . .

The boats used for racing on this special day are always very gaily painted and gilt, being also of a much lighter and sharper build than the others of the same kind, and the best stalwart men are always selected for racing.

When the victory prizes are awarded, the beaten racers return crest-fallen in silence to their creeks, whilst the victors, cheered by the immense crowds of spectators, keep ploughing the deep, with the prize flags tied up at the prow end of the boat waving in the breeze.”⁵⁰

Plate 10.15a, b.

(Top) The Regatta.
Boat race in action.

(Bottom) The Victory
palio.

48. V. Busuttil, *Holiday Customs in Malta*, 1894, 6th ed., 1922, 88–91.

49. J. Serracino, *L-Istorja tat-Tigrija tal-Vitorja* — *It-Tieni Parti: 1951–69*, Malta s.d., 1–4; also A. Bonnici, *L-Isla fi ġrajjet il-Bażilka-Santwarju ta' Marija Bambina*, ii, Malta 1986, 41, 124, 147, 265–266.

50. Busuttil, 82–84.



Various modifications have been made over the last century or so, and the number of events has been increased from four to five and sometimes six. However, the same spirit of emulation and the keen rivalry of the crews representing the various harbour towns and neighbouring localities have remained unabated and, if anything, have increased.

Throughout this development Birgu has participated in these races along with the other cities of Bormla and L-Isla. Formerly open to the oarsmen of the Three Cities and Marsamxett, the localities represented nowadays include also Kalkara, Marsa, Marsaxlokk, Raħal Ġdid and Birżebbuġa. Since 1983 the Regatta has not been organized by the Customs Department but by the *Għaqda Regatta ta' Settembru u Qdif Ieħor*, with the cooperation of the Ministry for Sport.⁵¹

We have seen that since the very beginning Birgu has been associated with the growth of this tradition, which it has consistently sustained by participating in various events flying its traditional red colour, more often than not with distinction.

BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF THE PAST

The material included in this section belongs to the field of superstitious beliefs and magico-religious practices which are found among unlettered folks in all countries. Some of these beliefs, like the fear of the waterspout (*M. tromba*) have their counterpart among the people bordering the Mediterranean and may be considered as characteristic of a maritime community. The ancient cult of popular saints like St Blaise, Saints Cosmas and Damiam and St Calogero points to Birgu, together with Rabat, as instrumental in spreading their cult to other localities in these islands. Though few in number, the cases of persons from this city denounced to the Inquisition between 1646 and 1649 bear witness to the influence of Sicilian residents and of Moslem slaves in the shaping of folk-beliefs and practices.

Fear of Waterspout (M. Tromba)

Maltese fisherfolk when out at sea dread the perils of being hit by the force of the waterspout (*M. tromba*), defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as “phenomenon in which whirling clouds form a funnel-shaped pendant, which descends towards sea and draws up corresponding volume of whirling water, the whole forming a pillar uniting sea and cloud.” When Maltese fishermen see the *tromba* approaching one of the crew, generally the oldest man on board, kneels down near the prow and secretly utters some prayers or formulas to counteract the effects or, as they say, “cut” the waterspout (“*biex jaqta' t-tromba*”). No one else knows the mysterious words and he himself is not supposed to recite the verse without just cause, e.g. before an approaching storm, because if he does so the prayer-charm or exorcism loses its efficacy in a real emergency. Only once during the year, at midnight on Christmas eve, can he communicate the words to someone else.⁵²

51. Serracino, 104.

52. J. Cassar Pullicino, “Some Maltese Traditions about the Sea”, in: (eds.), M. Galley and L. Ladjimi Sebai *The Mediterranean Man and the Sea: Proceedings of the Third International Congress of Studies on Cultures of the Western Mediterranean (Jerba, April 1981)*. Tunis 1985, 450–452.

Because of this superstition the prayer-charms are strictly guarded as a secret and I have not been able to take down the words from any informant since I first started collecting such texts during the last War. In 1894 Luigi Bonelli recounted to Giuseppe Pitrè his experience with the fishermen of Birgu when he tried to inquire about this prayer-charm. I reproduce the relevant part of Bonelli's letter:

*“. . . Ieri alla Vittoriosa poco mancò non facessi nascere una rivoluzione fra i pescatori della piazza, perchè aveva chiesto ad uno di essi quali fossero le **arazioni** (le orazioni) o parole sacre e quasi magiche che pronunciano i marinai per calmare la bufera in mare e più precisamente id-dag' bien (turbine) . . . Fuvvi una sollevazione generale in quella buona gente e tutti si unirono nel protestare che non le avrebbero rivelate a nessuno al mondo: solo al punto della mezzanotte di Natale chi le conosce le può rivelare ai compagni.”⁵³*

Magical Practices

Under this heading one may include charms, mysterious formulas and exorcisms to ward off the evil eye. We read that in the seventeenth century — and, we may add, in the two succeeding centuries and even later — “the Maltese quite often used philtres and mixtures, procured love and lucky charms for themselves and for others and wore written amulets.”

After examining 209 denunciations before the Tribunal of the Inquisition during the period of Antonio Pignatelli as Inquisitor (1646–49), Fr A. Bonnici concluded that “throughout the islands, without any distinction between cities and villages, one could scarcely successfully hope to uproot the evil resulting from superstitions. A closer examination of Pignatelli's period conclusively proves that the majority of cases came from the cities of Valletta, Vittoriosa and Senglea; that is, from those places which were feeling the greatest influence of Moslem slaves.”

The following inhabitants of Birgu appeared for trial before the Inquisition Tribunal during the above period: Barberica Gregh, who practised exorcisms to regain her lover; Filippo Bonnici and Vincenzo Mangion, both of whom experimented for the sake of love with the recipes found in a manuscript; Clara Delia, who administered potions to restore another person to health; Antonia Lati, who poured salt over the fire and whispered some magic words to regain her lover; Catharinuzza Napulù, who, in order to regain her lover, wrote his name on a paper and burned it over the fire together with three magical scripts; Sperantia Ruggier, who wore a magical script as a precaution against the danger of being murdered; and Mariuzza Spiteri, for throwing salt in the fire to make her lover return to her. No doubt many more such cases came before the other Inquisitors until the Holy Office was abolished by Napoleon in 1798.⁵⁴

53. Bonelli, 16. Further on in his booklet (p. 30) Bonelli specifies that “i marinai per spezzare la tromba marina (chiamata *daghbien* o *dragonara*) usano recitare il Credo invertendo l'ordine degli articoli (*jghidu l-Kredu bil-maqlub*). At San Lawrenz, in Gozo, I was told that the prayer-charm used is known as *Is-Salve Regina ta' fuq il-baħar*.”

54. A. Bonnici, “Superstitions in Malta towards the Middle of the Seventeenth Century in the light of the Inquisition Trials”. *MH*, iv/3 (1966), Appendix VII, 163, 166, 180–183; also A. Vella, *The Tribunal of the Inquisition in Malta*, Malta 1964, 42.

POPULAR CULT OF SAINTS

Only three Saints are included here, whose cult has survived in prayer-charms or in folk-medicine. These are:

St Blaise

The cult of this saint is very old. From the eighth century it spread rapidly in East and West. Apart from the perpetuation of his memory in the local place name *Ta' San Blas*, both in Malta and Gozo, expectant mothers used to invoke his help thus to ease the throes of childbirth:

<i>San Blas,</i>	St Blaise,
<i>Wessa' t-toqba</i>	Make the opening large
<i>Ċekken ir-ras</i>	And the head small. ⁵⁵

The old church in the Castle of St Angelo is known as *Il-Knisja t'Isfel*. Hewn out of the rock, it was, according to legend, chosen by Count Roger as the parish church for Birgu and the neighbouring localities. Writing in 1925, Canon Ġ.M. Farrugia stated that there were frescoes in this church representing various popular saints, including one showing St Blaise, patron saint of throat ailments, in the act of protecting a maiden with his hand. Farrugia went on to explain that this presumably testifies to the observance there of the Blessing of St Blaise against affections of the throat.⁵⁶

Saints Cosmas and Damian

In his monograph on the cult of these two saints Dr P. Cassar wrote that “in the Maltese Islands the veneration of the two saints found expression in the erection of a church in Gozo, the dedication of several altars in various churches, the foundation of a hospital, the naming of hospital wards, the production of paintings and statues, the veneration of relics and the formulation of prayers.”

Birgu figures in this general picture. In 1538 a certain Paul Fiteni founded an altar dedicated to these two saints at the Church of the Annunciation at Birgu. A small painting or *sottoquadro* of the two saints was placed in the side-chapel of St Nicholas erected by Dr Nicholas Cilia in 1641. Though “devoid of any artistic merit”, this painting was of a “very ancient date” and had been held in great veneration by Dr Cilia’s forbears. The *sottoquadro* perished when the church and its adjacent Dominican Priory were destroyed during the last War. Although both the Priory and the church have been reconstructed, Dr Cassar says that “there is now no trace of the cult and iconography of Saints Cosmas and Damian”.⁵⁷

Their cult seems to have struck deep roots in Birgu. In the report of his pastoral visit Bishop Cagliares in 1615 mentioned an altar dedicated to

55. J. Cassar Pullicino, “Malta in 1575: Social Aspects of an Apostolic Visit”, *MH*, ii/1 (1956), 38.

56. Ġ.M. Farrugia, “Il-Kastell Sant’ Anglu”, *Il-Malti*, (1925), 70.

57. P. Cassar, “The Cult and Iconography of Saints Cosmas and Damian in the Maltese Islands”, *MH*, vi/1 (1972), 25–27; also M. Fsadni, *Id-Dumnikani fir-Rabat u fil-Birgu sa l-1620*, Malta:1974, 99.

the two saints at the Parish Church of St Lawrence. The altar-piece showing the saints was destroyed during the Second World War.⁵⁸ Worth adding is the fact that in the north transept of the Church of St Lawrence “the altar piece representing the Holy Trinity and the two Saints Cosmas and Damian is by an unknown hand of Venetian school . . . Since they stand at the lower corners of the picture on each side of the effigy of Jesus Christ dead, popular imagination has bestowed on them the no mean honour of being “the two doctors of Christ”.⁵⁹

By this name (*it-tobba ta' Kristu*) the two saints figure in various prayer-charms against the evil eye surviving up to the last War and of which the present writer heard variants from a Birgu woman. The following is an example of an old exorcism recited during fumigation with burned olive leaves:

<p><i>F'g'ieh San Guzman u San Damjan!</i></p> <p><i>'K hawn xi ghajn tohroġ</i> <i>Minn fuq kulsivolja ta' bniedem</i> <i>U kulsivolja t'animal!</i> <i>Kienu t-tobba ta' Kristu,</i> <i>Ikunu t-tobba tar-ruh taghna!</i></p>	<p>In the name of Saints Cosmas and Damian!</p> <p>If there is an (evil) eye let it get out Let it depart from any man Or any animal!</p> <p>They were the doctors of Christ, May they be the doctors of our soul!⁶⁰</p>
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St Calogero

Since the early decades of the seventeenth century there was a popular devotion towards the statue of St Calogero in the Church of the Annunciation at Birgu. His cult was sustained and promoted mostly by the Congregation of the Slaves (M. *tas-Suwed*), by people suffering from some fracture and by expectant mothers. Each year, members of the Congregation carried processionally the wooden statue of the Saint. During labour, mothers held the Saint's staff in their hands. After delivery, they adorned it with a silk ribbon as an expression of gratitude before returning it to the church.⁶¹

Boatmen's Initiation Ceremony

The expression *Tal-Barklori*, which we can still hear in everyday conversation, refers to a sort of initiation ceremony formerly observed for new entrants to the class of boatmen (M. *barklori*). It was mainly practised among boatmen in the Three Cities (Birgu, Bormla and I-Isla), who earned their living carrying passengers to and from Valletta.

Details of the rough treatment meted out to a new recruit at Birgu may be read in an interesting article, signed “Folk-Lore”, which appeared in *Il-Berqa* of 21 May 1938. On reaching the strand the young recruit was greeted by two strongly built *barklori* and then suddenly lifted and forced to sit down on the top step of the quay. Taking hold of his legs, they dragged him roughly down some twenty stone steps, whereupon they each seized an arm and a leg, carried him to the nearest boat and knocked his buttocks three times against

58. Cassar, 33.

59. Zammit Gabaretta, *The Church of the Grand Masters and Inquisitors*, 56.

60. Cassar Pulicino, “Malta in 1575”, 59.

61. Fsadni, 264.



Plate 10.16

Statue of San Calogero venerated in the Friary of the Annunciation.

the prow. Finally they took him back to the mole, where they swung him three times and then threw him into the water amid the cries and jokes of the other boatmen.

News of Returning Seamen

More than a century ago Malta's mercantile marine was considerable and its barques set out for long voyages lasting six or more months, to England, the Black Sea, Odessa, Constantinople, Greece, Alexandria, etc. Their return was an occasion for rejoicing by the families of those on board.

For many years St Louis Bastion, overlooking St Lawrence Cemetery and Fort St Salvatore, was popularly known as *Is-Sur tal-Pażan*.

All day long Pażan "Tal-Bxajjar" (the harbinger) — as he was known throughout the Three Cities — could be seen pacing up and down and stopping every now and then on this observation post to scan the horizon with his spy-glass, always on the lookout for the return of a galley, schooner, barque or brigantine.

Pażan would identify from afar the returning vessels and he would know whether they had among the crew people from Birgu, or Bormla, or L-Isla. He would hastily make his way to the square at Birgu and thence proceed on foot to give the glad tidings to the families concerned, or else arrange for the message to be carried by someone else he knew. He would also advise *Il-Musu*, the leader of a popular group consisting of some four musicians (*Il-Banda tal-Musu*), so that they could be in time for the home-coming and greet the returning seaman with a polka and a few other well-known pieces.

Pażan used to get a *skud* (8c3) or half a crown (12c4) for his trouble.

Fortifying himself with a drink and a smoke, Pażan would hurry back to his observation post on St Louis Bastion, for other seacraft may be approaching, schooners from Sicily, barques from Cyprus or the Pireus or Prevesa, keeping him busy carrying good news to many a household anxiously awaiting the return of the dear ones on board — father, son, fiancé, relative, or friend.⁶²

Blason Populaire — Parish Boundaries

Under this heading fall the popular sayings, often jocular but sometimes satirical, which define the character of the inhabitants of the various towns and villages. More often than not they reflect parochial or out-of-date rivalries. Nevertheless, though they tend to disappear in our time, they are still of some importance because, as Prof. Toschi says of this aspect of folklore, “*rimane il suo interesse storico e demopsicologico, che è veramente notevole per una storia del nostro costume e della nostra cultura.*”⁶³

A few examples are given hereunder:

The last two lines of the following quatrain seem to suggest that Birgu and Bormla enjoy a superior status vis-a-vis Birkirkara, whose inhabitants depended mostly on work at the salt-pans and on pottery manufacture for a living:

<i>San Lawrenz tal-Birgu taghna</i>	St Lawrence is our titular feast at Birgu
<i>Il-Kuncizzjoni tal-Bormliżi,</i>	Our Lady's Immaculate Conception is the titular feast at Bormla;
<i>Li ma kienx il-melħ u t-tafal</i>	Were it not for salt and for clay
<i>Imsejknin il-Karkariżi!</i>	The people of Birkirkara would be really pitiable.

Luigi Bonelli, who heard this quatrain in 1894,⁶⁴ explains that the lines refer to the two principal callings at Birkirkara, i.e. salt production, which costs practically nothing, and the manufacture of earthenware household utensils. There is also an indirect reference here to the sobriquet *Il-Fahħarin*, the braggarts, applied to the *Karkariżi*, or people of Birkirkara, through a play on words, for *fuhħarin*, “the potters”.

In the “blason populaire” centring on the Three Cities, the people of Senglea and Bormla used to refer to those of Birgu as *Ġerbin* or *Ġerbizi*, inhabitants of Jerba. This sobriquet is explained by Bonelli as “*abitanti di Gerba, città della costa Africana, di una povertà e bruttezza estrema.*”

We have already mentioned that the two *festa-partiti* at Birgu are known by the sobriquets *Tal-Palma*, i.e. the St Lawrence faction, and *Ta' l-Istilla*, i.e. the supporters of St Dominic. The rivalry between the two parties and their respective band clubs is reflected in various rhymes that have survived in the memory of old inhabitants. The two saints, the churches which serve as centres for their cult and the way in which the respective feasts are celebrated form the subject of many of these rhymes. On analysis, one notices that jibes are sometimes used interchangeably by the rival factions, and uncomplimentary references are often found to balance one another, as the following examples show:

62. “Tal-Bxajar”, by “Folklore”, in *Il-Berqa* of 8 June 1938; also for a similar practice at Senglea, A. Bonnici, *L-Isla fi ġrajjet il-Bażilka-Santwarju ta' Marija Bambina*, iii, Malta 1991, 94.

63. P. Toschi, *Guida allo studio delle tradizioni popolari*, Roma 1945, 174.

64. Bonelli, 35.

<i>Evviva Lorenzu tagħna, X'warda għandna f'nofs is-suq!</i>	Long live our Lawrence, What a beautiful rose in the midst of the market!
<i>Avolja garawlu l-ġebel 'il Lorenzu ma laqtuhx.</i>	Though they have stoned him Yet they did not hit our Lawrence.
<i>Evviva Duminku tagħna Għaliex ahna inhobbuh; Indawruh mal-Birgu kollu F'nofs ta' pjazza inqegħduh.</i>	Long live our Dominic, Because we all love him: We take him round the whole of Birgu And place him in the midst of the square.
<i>Evviva Lorenzu tagħna Minn tal-Birgu il-Patron; Indawruh bil-purçissjoni F'nofs ta' pjazza inqegħduh.</i>	Long live our Lawrence The patron of the city of Birgu; We take him round in procession And place him in the midst of the square.
<i>X'festa għandna ġewwa l-Birgu, Il-Ġimgħa, s-Sibt u l-Hadd; Kulhadd jgħajjat vuçi waħda: Evviva d-Dumnikan!</i>	What a feast we have at Birgu On Friday, Saturday and Sunday! Everyone shouts in unison: "Long live the Dominican".
<i>Tal-Palma (Ta' l-Istilla) marru jdoqqu Kemmm tefgħulhom ġizimin!</i>	The <i>Palma (Stilla)</i> Band went to play, They were greeted with showers of jasmine;
<i>Ta' l-Istilla (Tal-Palma) marru wrajhom Kemmm tefgħulhom qara' twil!</i>	The <i>Stilla (Palma)</i> followed afterwards, They were greeted with vegetable marrows!
<i>Ta' L-Isla għamlu pranzu, Ta' L-Istilla mistednin: Tal-Palma taħt il-mejda Ilaqqtu l-għadam tal-mejtin.</i>	The Senglea Band held a dinner party The <i>Stilla</i> Band were invited; The <i>Palma</i> Band under the table Picking the bones of the dead.

The Blackfriars supporters, known to their *Palma* rivals as *Tal-Loqom*, "of the morsels", criticised a new set of street decorations for the feast of St Lawrence, affirming their superiority by reciting the following verse:

<i>Għalxejn tagħmlu l-festuni, Kuruni u pavaljuni; Ma tagħmlu xejn! Ma tagħmlu xejn! Mal-"Loqom" ma tagħmlu xejn.</i>	It's no use hanging up festoons, Crowns and other cloth decorations You won't succeed! You won't succeed! You are no match for the "morsels".
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In their turn the *Palma* supporters belittled the worth and importance of a new silver frontal (M. *ventaltar*) in the Dominicans' church:

<i>Tar-ram! Tar-ram! Il-ventaltar tar-ram! Habba lumija, daqsxejn irmied, Aktar ma thokk aktar jiswied!</i>	It's copper! It's copper! It's a copper frontal! A grain's worth of lemon, a pinch of ashes, The more you rub the blacker it gets.
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Professor Wayland Hand has observed that "the folklore of boundaries is found

wherever people live and carry on”, and that these boundaries “become the focus of actions to remind and mark the separation of towns and villages”.⁶⁵ In the case of Birgu this has taken a curious turn. Darmanin Demajo writes that “before the building of the Cities of Senglea and Bormla, the Parish Priest of St Lawrence enjoyed the privilege of blessing new ships, but the privilege was curtailed with the rising of these two cities and their conversion into parishes. The delineation of parochial jurisdiction became a source of dissension on questions of rights and privileges, of which the blessing of new ships, generally performed two hours before sunrise, when the workmen usually started work, was not the least.”⁶⁶

One particular Easter Sunday observance involving Bormla and Birgu falls within the category of what has been called “rites of separation and rites of binding and cohesion”. Originally forming part of Birgu, Bormla was set up as a separate parish in 1584. We have already mentioned that in both localities at certain places along the processional route the statue of Christ Arisen is carried at a run. When the Cospicua statue reaches Vittoriosa Gate, which marks the parish boundary between the two cities, it is raised three times and its face turned towards Birgu as a sign of recognition of the fact that originally Bormla formed part of the parish of Birgu. However, should those carrying the Birgu statue come out of the Gate, the people of Bormla will have the right to seize the statue.⁶⁷

FOLK-MUSIC AND ORAL POETRY

As far as is known Birgu has not produced any outstanding folk-singer since the folk-song revival started in the fifties. However, it has contributed to our knowledge of the primitive Maltese bagpipe (M. *Żaqq*). The present writer recalls that at the “*Imnarja*” *Folksong Competition* organised at Buskett in 1955, one of the competitors in the Bagpipes section came from Birgu. He was Ausonio Bugeja, popularly known as *Is-Sonu*. Born at Żurrieq but for most of his life resident in Birgu, he was well-known throughout the island as a nougat vendor who set up his stand at practically every feast in Malta. His performance with the *Żaqq*, to the accompaniment of his son’s drum, delighted the crowds at Buskett, and he was later invited to play his bagpipe on other occasions, including an appearance in a T.V. programme. There are people who recall that years ago *Is-Sonu* used to pass through the streets of Birgu playing his bagpipe at Christmastime.

The Maltese *żaqq* has been on the decline for more than a century. However, *żaqq*-players were still quite common in various localities up to the last War. Their decline was precipitated in the fifties “with the appearance of the radio, television and accordions”. In 1977 Partridge and Deal reported that “a fairly thorough investigation revealed a total of nine living players of the Maltese bagpipe, all on Malta itself. We could find no players at all remaining on Gozo.”⁶⁸

65. W.D. Hand, *Boundaries, Portals and other Magical Spots in Folklore* — Katharine Briggs, Lecture no. 2 delivered 2 November 1982, London, The Folklore Society, 1983, 3–5.

66. G. Darmanin Demajo, “The Grand Harbour of Malta and its Surroundings in 1530”, *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 26 January 1927.

67. C. G[alea] S[cannura], “L-Ghid il-Kbir fil-Parroċċa Taghna”, *Cospicua*, no. 72, April 1962.

68. J.K. Partridge and F. Deal, “The Maltese *Żaqq*”, reprinted from *The Galpin Society Journal*, xxx, 1977, 136.

Folk-memory records that *żaqq*-playing was formerly closely associated with the major folk-festivals of the Maltese calendar, i.e. Christmas, the New Year, Carnival, Easter and, in particular, *l-Imnarja*. The judging panel of the *Imnarja* competition in 1955 reported that the way in which the *żaqq* and *tanbur* players dance and the contortions of the body made by them “varies from one player to another and this variation is much appreciated and should be encouraged”.⁶⁹ This is what they write about the Birgu players in this competitive event: “The *żaqq*-player, though more limited, also moves rhythmically, retiring from and advancing towards the *tanbur*, and occasionally playing the horn into the back of the *tanbur*, possibly increasing the reverberation of the sound. One *żaqq* player, Ausonjo Bugeja, used to go down onto one knee, and, still playing, rise up again, then go down on his other knee and, presently, he would rise up again and continue dancing and playing.”⁷⁰

Although the instrument is generally referred to as *żaqq*, it is interesting to note that the Bugeja players from Birgu always refer to it as a *żokra*, which immediately links up with Arabic *zukra*, the Tunisian bagpipe, “to which”, Partridge and Deal stress, “the Maltese *żaqq* shows some degree of resemblance.”⁷¹

As regards other popular instruments used in the past we read, for example, of four musicians who, on Christmas Eve of 1603, called at the homes of their friends at Birgu, playing the zither, the flute, the tambourine and the lute before they made their way to the Church of the Annunciation to hear the Midnight Mass.⁷² One may add that to this day a traditional tune is played on a drum and flute at the head of the Good Friday procession.

Very few quatrains from Birgu have been written down or recorded so far. However, the art of improvising four-line stanzas, mostly octosyllabic and rhyming *abcb* or *abca*, must have been as prevalent as in other localities in the past, as the following quatrain collected by the present writer shows:

<i>Meta mort ghand il-kunjata</i> <i>Sibtha taghmel ir-ravjul;</i> <i>Ghedtilha ttini wahda,</i> Qaltli: “ <i>Ghadu m’hux misjur</i> ”.	When I went to my mother-in-law I found her preparing ravioli; I asked her to let me taste one, She replied: “It’s not cooked yet”.
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Another two quatrains containing references to Birgu were heard at Birkirkara during the War. They are as follows:

<i>Bejn il-Birgu, Bormla u l-Isla</i> <i>Sibt tuffieha, ma rfajthiex;</i> <i>Jekk ittini Malta u Ghawdex</i>	Somewhere between Birgu, Bormla and l-Isla I found an apple but didn’t pick it up; If you offer me the whole of Malta and Gozo
<i>’Il bintek ma nehodhiex.</i> <i>Bhal tal-Belt irrid inghanni,</i> <i>Bhal ta’ l-Isla rrid indoqq;</i> <i>Bhal tal-Birgu rrid ninnamra,</i> <i>Bhal tar-Rabat irrid inhobb.</i>	I’ll not marry your daughter. I want to sing like the people of Valetta, And to play like the people of Senglea; I want to flirt like the people of Birgu, And to make love like the people of Rabat.

69. *Ibid*, 129.

70. *Ibid.*, 131.

71. *Ibid.*, 113.

72. M. Fsadni, “Ġrajja ta’ Erba’ Daqqaqa fil-Milied tas-sena 1603”, *Riflessi*, Jannar 1972.

The following *starza*, also heard at Birkirkara, refers to the titular feast of Birgu and of three other localities:

<i>San Lawrenz tal-Birgu tagħna,</i>	St Lawrence is our patron at Birgu,
<i>Santa Marija tal-Għawdxin,</i>	St Mary is Gozo's protecting saint,
<i>Il-Kunċizzjoni tal-Bormliżi,</i>	The people of Bormla have the Immaculate Conception as their patron,
<i>Tal-Grazzja taż-Żabbarin.</i>	Our Lady of Grace protects the people of Żabbar.

RIDDLES AND GAMES

The riddle (M. *haġa mohġaġa*) as a form of popular entertainment is of great antiquity. Riddles are to be found in all countries, even among the most primitive peoples. The present writer's *Haġa Mohġaġa u Tahbil il-Mohh Iehor* (Parts I-IV, 1957-1959) is the most representative collection so far of the enigmatic lore of the people of Malta. It includes 187 riddles, with 137 variants, taken down mostly from oral tradition. These riddles take their inspiration from the home, from everyday life and occupations as well as from common-place experience, domestic implements and animals, and natural phenomena. They reflect a primitive society following a traditional set of callings or occupations that are now rapidly changing, if they have not been superseded already by modern habits of life.

The enigmatic tradition at Birgu survived the ravages of the last War and the present writer included in his collection 33 riddles (or variants) which he heard at Birgu between 1940 and 1949. Of these, 17 texts were noted down exclusively from this city, viz:

<i>IL-BNIEDEM</i> (No. 1, var. iii)* <i>Muntanja bajda,</i> <i>Il-magna thassret</i> <i>U flok tnejn tlieta.</i>	<i>MAN</i> A white mountain (i.e. hair) The machine (i.e. teeth) out of order And three instead of two (i.e. using a walking stick in old age).
<i>KURDAR</i> (No. 27) <i>Haġa Mohġaġa:</i> <i>Aktar ma jimxi lura</i> <i>Aktar jasal kmieni.</i>	<i>THE ROPE-MAKER</i> Me riddle, me riddle: The further back he walks The earlier he arrives.
<i>RAS IT-TRAVU</i> (No. 35) <i>Haġa Mohġaġa:</i> <i>Taqtagħlha rasha</i> <i>U tiġi ras oħra.</i>	<i>HEAD OF A BEAM</i> Me riddle, me riddle: Cut off its head Another head appears.
<i>TAR-RITRATTI</i> (No. 28) <i>Haġa Mohġaġa:</i> <i>Biex itihulek</i> <i>Irid johodhuiek.</i>	<i>PHOTOGRAPHER</i> Me riddle, me riddle: He can only give it to you If he takes it first.

*The numbers given here follow the enumeration of the riddles in my collection — Ġ.C.P.

ĊINETTA TAT-TOROK

(No. 67)

*Hawn haġa:
Skutella mimlija demm,
Taqlibha rasha 'l isfel
U ma tixxerridx.*

FEZ (Turkish Cap)

There is a thing:
A bowl full of blood,
You turn it upside down
And it doesn't spill on the floor.

IMQASS

(No. 77, var. i)

*Par ghajnejn,
Par widnejn,
Żewġ żokriet
Minn fejn jgħaddi jagħmel
triq.*

SCISSORS

A pair of eyes,
A pair of ears,
Two navels
He makes a road wherever he passes.

IS-SENA

(No. 105)

*Haġa mohġaġa:
Tletin xebba,
Tnax-il ġuvni,
U omm waħda.*

THE YEAR

Me riddle, me riddle:
Thirty maidens,
Twelve young men,
And one mother.

KARAWETTA

(No. 117, var. i)

*Haġa Mohġaġa:
Żewġ suldati f'tebut wieħed.*

PEANUT

Me riddle, me riddle:
Two soldiers in one coffin.

QASBA

(No. 123, var. i)

*Torri fuq torri
La twieqi lanqas bibien.*

REED

A tower upon a tower
Without windows or doors.

RUMMIENA

(No. 126, var. (iv))

*Kaxxa bir-rubini
Fiha l-affarijiet fini
Min jinduna kaċċatur*

POMEGRANATE

A box of rubies
With many fine things inside
He who guesses correctly is a real huntsman.

BAQRA

(No. 130)

*Erbgħa tluppi tluppi,
Tnejn kristallini
Imrewħa trewwaħ
U tmexxini.*

COW

Four (feet) walking very slowly,
Two crystals (i.e. eyes),
A fan (i.e. tail)
And I follow.

SERDUQ

(No. 134)

*Haġa Mohġaġa:
Bil-kuruna u m'hux sultan,
Bil-pjuma u m'hux ġeneral,
Ikanta l-matutin
U m'huwiex Kapuċċin.*

COCK

Me riddle, me riddle:
He has a crown but is not a king,
He has a plume but is not a general,
He sings at matins
But is not a Capuchin friar.

RIZZA

(No. 150, var. (ii))

*Haġa Haġa:**Minn waħda tarmi tnejn**U tiekol hamsa**SEA URCHIN*

Me riddle, me riddle:

From one you throw away two

And eat five.

TEBUT

(No. 156, var. (iii))

*Ma jridu hadd,**U jidhol fih kulhadd.**COFFIN*

No one wants it

(But) everyone goes into it.

BOLLA

(No. 160)

*Haga Mohġaġa:**Bis-snien u ma tigdimx**Bla lsien u ma titkellimx**Imma twassal ir-risposti.**POSTAGE STAMP*

Me riddle, me riddle:

It has teeth but does not bite

No tongue and doesn't talk

And yet it delivers replies.

ILSIEN TA' QANPIENA

(No. 162, var. (ii))

*Haġa haġa:**Ilsien bintha jsawwat 'l**ommha.**BELL'S CLAPPER*

Me riddle, me riddle:

Her daughter's tongue beats her

mother.

HOFRA

(No. 164, var. (i))

*Haġa, haġa:**Aktar ma tneħħi minnha**Aktar tiżdied.**HOLE*

Me riddle, me riddle:

The more you take of it

The larger it gets.

Children's Games

No attempt has hitherto been made at a systematic survey or collection of games practised in Malta. A. Attard's *Logħob Folkloristiku ta' Ghawdex* (1969) has not been matched by a corresponding volume devoted to Malta. Ideally such a survey should indicate the source or localities where the games have been noted, together with the name, terms, sayings or rhymes used, where and when played, the number of players, the materials used, how played, the actions employed, the penalties and rewards. During the academic year 1972–73 a suitable questionnaire covering most of these aspects was tentatively used among a small number of students reading for the B.A. (Hons.) degree in Maltese of the University of Malta. The idea was to identify the broad lines of the coverage of the more popular Maltese games. The nine games from Birgu described by respondent Miss Maria Ciappara, although by no means enough to enable us to reach any definite conclusions, indicated that the tradition was still alive there, and that these games with certain variations are similar to those practised by children from other localities. It was noted, however, that the names of the popular games tend to vary in different towns or villages. The games are generally played out of doors, in an open space, or on the roof, some of them in summer. Most games could be played daily, before or after school. *Tal-Kantunieri*, "Four Crossroads", necessarily had to be staged at a cross-road.

A detailed analysis of these games is not possible here; suffice it to say that we find among them games with stones, balls, a piece of wood or a handkerchief; others are games of elimination based on the use of counting-out rhymes. In one guessing game, *Ara Ġejja l-Mewt Ghalik*, a blindfolded player has to guess who has touched his/her back, while in others two groups of players compete for the possession of a handkerchief, or of a ball before it touches the ground.

Of particular interest is the game known as *Tal-Pasturi*, in which the players seem to be re-enacting what must have been a frequent scene under the Knights — the sale of slaves. One player impersonates the Buyer, and another the Seller. The others, six or more in number, are lined up against the wall, at the same time holding out one hand. These are the *pasturi*, a term used here in the sense of dummies, present only for show and taking no real part unless called to do so — in other words, they are the slaves being put up for sale. The Buyer comes along and tells the Seller that he wants to do business with him. The Seller points out one of the *pasturi*, who comes forward and makes certain movements — in the Birgu version these are funny movements — in front of the Buyer. If the Buyer is satisfied he buys this *pastur*; if not, he tries to choose another one, and the scene is repeated all over again.⁷³

In suggesting this interpretation the present writer has kept in mind that the memory of such transactions may well have been retained and kept alive in Birgu and elsewhere by returning emigrants from North Africa, where the practice of selling slaves continued until well into the nineteenth century. Be it as it may, this is only a tentative interpretation, and the whole subject of popular games in Malta calls for systematic study.

MISCELLANEOUS

A few customs and traditions that do not easily fit under the previous sections are included here.

Old Marriage Custom

Writing in 1908 about the feast of St Lawrence, A. Lucchese states that “in olden times the bridegroom used to stipulate in the marriage contract that he would take his bride to the three principal feasts of Malta — the feast St Lawrence, the feast of St Gregory and the feast of Sts Peter and Paul which falls on 29 June.”⁷⁴

This is the only instance where such a usage has been linked to the titular feast of Birgu. Although Lucchese purports to be basing himself on written material — “*naqraw infatti*”, he says — he does not in any way support his statement, and perhaps one should not give it any credence, not even as part of oral tradition. As for the stipulation in the marriage contracts, repeated by various writers, I have mentioned elsewhere that “in spite of a careful perusal

73. Lorenza Bonnici-Cali describes a more elaborate game, known by the same name *Il-Pasturi*, which was very popular in Tarxien up to 1940 (*L-Imnara*, 5 (1982), 143–144). There is an obvious moralizing intent in this version. The players taking part represent both religious characters, e.g. an Angel, St Anne, Mary Magdalen, St Catherine, and evil ones such as the Devil and the deceitful shopkeeper (using false weights). The interpretation suggested above does not apply to the Tarxien game.

74. Vide *Is-Salib*, 8 August 1908.

of a number of marriage contracts preserved in the Notarial Archives in Valletta I have not been able so far to trace any such condition”.

Christmas Cards

The use of commercially produced Christmas Cards in Malta can be traced back to the last years of the nineteenth century. From the information available it appears that stationers in the Three Cities, especially Birgu, were among the pioneers in popularizing the use of these cards. The ones put on sale at Birgu in 1901 were made of ivory, or of cellophane covered with silk on which were inscribed suitable verses.⁷⁵

Bonfires on St John's Eve

The bonfires formerly lit on the night of the 23 June in the streets, squares and market places of our towns and villages belong to the past now. This custom had received official encouragement at the time of the Knights, when “the Grand Master himself, soon after the *Angelus*, used to leave his palace, accompanied by the Grand Prior, the Bishop and two bailiffs, to set fire to some pitch barrels which were placed for the occasion in the square facing the sacred Hospital.”⁷⁶

Few people ever pause to think how or where this official ceremony originated in Malta. The historian Bosio has left us a description which shows that, soon after the Order's arrival in Malta in 1530, the Grand Masters were already observing this yearly usage at Birgu. Describing the scene on the night of 23 June 1544, Bosio mentions the “*gran solennità de' bellissimi giuochi, & artificij di fuochi di gioia, che l Convento suol far ogni anno in Mare, & in Terra; sparando oltra di ciò tutte l'artiglierie, in honore di San Giovanni Battista, Padrone di questa Sacra Religione, la sera della Vigilia della Natività sua; e nell'istesso punto, che'l Gran Maestro, per dar buon principio alla Festa, senza berretta in capo, con gran riverenza, e devotione, tenendo una torcia bianca accesa in mano. girando prima tre volte intorno alle botte, che stanno apparecchiate, e colocate per abbruciarsi dinanzi alla porta del suo Magistral Palagio, suole di propria mano accender fuoco alle botte sopradette . . .*”. The same writer adds that refreshments consisting of fruit and sweetmeats were served to the members of the Order's Council on that day.⁷⁷

This is yet another case where an already established tradition was transferred from Birgu to Valletta after the Order transferred its seat to the capital.

75. See *Malta Taghna*, 21 December 1901.

76. Busuttil, 57–59.

77. Bosio, 1684, 233.

ABBREVIATIONS

AACM	Archives of the Archpriest of the Cathedral, Mdina
AAF	Archiepiscopal Archives, Floriana
ACM	Archivum Cathedralis Melitae
ACCV	Archivum Coll. Canonicorum Victoriosae
AGPV	Archivio Gran Priorato, Venezia
AIM	Archivum Inquisitoris Melitae
AOM	Archivum Ordinis Melitae
ASM	<i>Archivio Storico di Malta</i>
ASP	Archivio di Stato, Palermo
CEM	Curia Episcopalis Melitae
CR	Conservatoria di Registro (Palermo)
CM	Consolato del Mare
DMC	<i>Daily Malta Chronicle</i>
FL	Fondo Lanzon
Lib.	Library
LV	Lettere Viceregie (Palermo)
MC	<i>Malta Chronicle</i>
MCM	Museum of the Cathedral, Mdina
MGG	<i>Malta Government Gazette</i>
MH	<i>Melita Historica</i>
Misc.	Miscellanea
MM	<i>Mariners' Mirror</i>
MML	Maritime Museum Library, Birgu
MS.	Manuscript
NAM	National Archives, Mdina
NAR	National Archives, Rabat
NAV	Notarial Archives, Valletta
NEP	<i>Neptunia</i>
NLM	National Library of Malta
OLA	<i>Orientalia Loraniensia Analecta</i>
P.	Protonotaro (Palermo)
PA	Parish Archives
R	Registrum (register, registro)
RC	Regia Cancelleria (Palermo)
RDC	Registro delle Deliberazioni Capitolari
STM	<i>Sunday Times of Malta</i>
TRP	Tribunale del Real Patrimonio (Palermo)
WMAV	War Museum Association, Valletta

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