Buried in Malta: a glance at history and tradition

by Samantha Lorenz

A B S T R A C T

Through the examination of the manner in which a culture buries and relates to its dead, it is possible to uncover deeply rooted beliefs. In some instances the burials are all that remain of a culture, and when this is the case the burials then become not only proof of existence but also the only gateway into the lives of the people buried there. Changes that occur in burial practices themselves can be indicative of significant events and of resulting shifts in cultural and social values. It is, therefore, important to identify those shifts and examine their causes. This is what I hoped to do on the Island of Gozo, Malta in the summer of 2011. Through interviews, literature and many cemetery visits I tried to determine what aspects of today's Maltese are a direct result of who they have been in the past and what caused some things to change and others to remain. I found, however, that this is a difficult task to accomplish within a month's time. What I left with was some historical information concerning burials, as well as a better understanding of some Maltese traditions.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Keywords

bekkajja, burial practices, cave-tombs, common graves, cremation, familial graves, plague

Introduction

Last July I travelled to the island of Gozo, one of three main islands that makes up the Maltese Archipelago. The island, having been occupied throughout history by a number of cultural groups, is an intricate blend of cultures that have influenced many aspects of Maltese life. The island is now overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. Every parish has its own church and patron saint. Devotion to the saints is a competitive activity that, through the festas held to honor a community's saint, generate community pride. I went to the island with questions about one particular aspect of Maltese religion and culture: burial practices. I was specifically looking for the reasons for changes in burial practices. I wanted to understand what these changes could mean about the Maltese as a people. Why are some rituals and practices held onto while others are not?

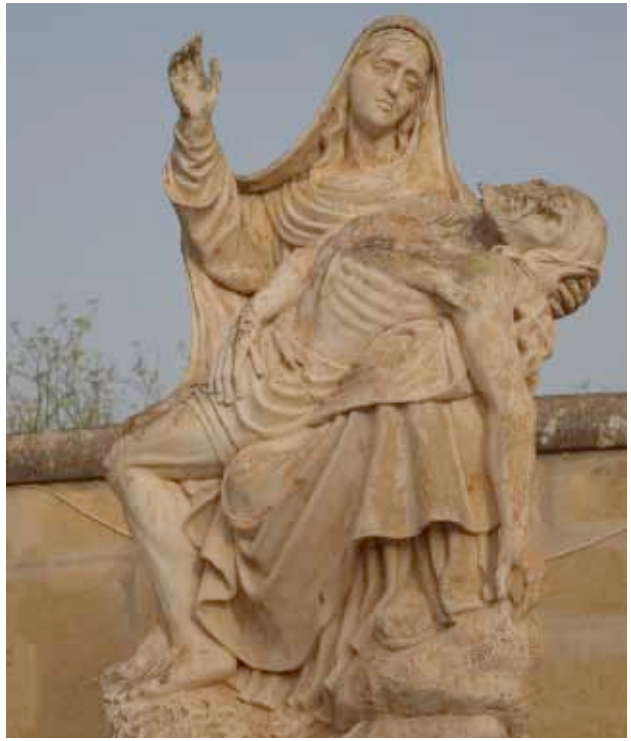

Figure 1: Photo taken at Ta'Birbuba, Gharb on the island of Gozo, Malta.

At first I was curious about the effect of disease in some of these changes, as the islands had been hit by plagues in the 15th, 18th and 20th centuries. Disease, as I discovered, was influential, but it was not the only factor. Burial practices had been changing with each influx of new inhabitants since the first settlers traveled sixty miles south from Sicily and landed on the islands shores. Disease only became a factor after the Romans, who came after the Bronze Age settlers and the Phoenicians, gave the islands religious cohesion. My thought then was to track the main changes throughout time and try to understand how they related to modern Maltese.

Faces often went hard or crumpled in slight disgust, when I told them I was there to research burial practices. One man told me that "It is not nice to speak about death" (Maylean 2011). He was right. It is not nice to speak about death. It reminds us of losses we have experienced and instills trepidation in our souls about our own inevitable departures. It forces us to face an unavoidable reality about which most of us have very complicated emotions. We do not have answers about death. People cannot scientifically study what happens after they die. Faith gives some relief, but does not lessen the loss felt with another's passing. I will say though, that I believe it is important to talk about death, and in the case of this paper it was necessary.

This paper begins with a background addressing changes that resulted from foreign immigration to Malta, followed by a discussion on the role of disease on changing burial practices. Traditions in Malta that have changed over time, as discussed by interviewees, possible reasons for the causes of those changes and how the Maltese dealt with these shifts in tradition follows.

Habitation and conquest

The first tombs on Malta appear to be created from shallow pits or natural caves (Kummerly 1965:9-10). They later became oval shaped, rock cut chambers(Kummerly 1965: 9-10). These chambers had domed roofs and doorways entered from a vertical side shaft (Kummerly 1965: 9-10). The temples erected at this time were similar in form. The first Sicilian immigrants were known to honor the Earth Mother. Walter Kummerly believed that the similarity in form between the two was representative of the dual power of life and death symbolized by the Earth Mother (1965:11-13). The Hypogeum at Pawla is contemporary with these temples and is a perfect representation of this duality. The bodies of over 7,000 people were found in this structure ("The Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni" 2011:1). The manner in which they were packed together suggests that they were already fully decomposed before they were placed there ("The Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni" 2011:1). There were also round, ritual cubicles intended for the living ("The Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni" 2011:1). Within these chambers traces of ergot, a fungi that can have the physical effect of constricting bodily muscles, were found ("The Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni" 2011:1). These chambers were most likely meant to symbolize a womb, possibly of the Earth Mother. During rituals, forced into an ergot induced fetal position within these chambers, people would have been able to hear echoes from the 'speaking' chamber which reverberates "into a rhythm that is similar to the human heartbeat" ("The Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni" 2011:1).

The Bronze Age brought settlers from the north-east. Radio-carbon tests date their arrival to 2000 B.C. (Kummerly 1965:13-15). Their pottery styles and weaponry varied from the previous, temple building inhabitants (Kummerly 1965:13-15). They settled atop isolated hills and turned the existing temples into cemeteries (Kummerly 1965:13-15). They burned their dead, then buried the remains in jars or under dolmens (Kummerly 1965:15). Like the inhabitants before them, the graves they left behind are virtually all the evidence we have of their existence on the islands.

'Malta' comes from a Phoenician word meaning 'anchorage' or 'refuge' (Kummerly 1965:15). Around 1450 B.C. the Phoenician trading ships used Malta for both these reasons (Kummerly 1965:15). In this case, remnants of the Phoenician language, like "Malta," and the tombs, represent the only remaining evidence from this time period. The tombs were numerous and similar in form to the prehistoric tombs, except that they had a square shaft rather than an oval one (Kummerly 1965:15-16). As in the Bronze Age, both burial and cremation were practiced during this time:

The dead man was laid on his back inside the chamber, with a jug and bowl by his side, a wine-jar near the door, and a lamp left burning in a niche above his head. If he had been cremated, his ashes were placed in an urn with a saucer for a lid, on which stood the lamp. As tombs were frequently used over and over again, the earlier contents were simply pushed to the back (Kummerly 1965:15-16).

The "jug and bow" by the dead man's side are indicative of a people who believed that material possessions could be taken with them into the afterlife. The wine-jar near the door may have been for the dead, or as an offering for spirits that could in some way injure the dead. Although their forms have changed over time, the acts of leaving fire above the body (nowadays through candles) and reusing tombs are both practices used in Malta today.

In 216 B.C. the Romans seized Malta (Kummerly 1965:15).

Thereafter, both the shaft and the chamber on tombs became rectangular (Kummerly 1965:16-17). Pottery and glass found within the tombs became more distinctly Roman, and the mark of Christianity later displayed itself in catacombs, which can still be found on Malta today (Kummerly 1965:16-17). Under the Romans the Maltese became Christians and were so faithful to their new religion that, when the Arabs conquered Malta in 870 A.D., they chose to pay a tribute rather than renounce it (Kummerly 1965:19). The Maltese have held onto their Christian belief since this time, and the religion has become a large part of Maltese identity--98% of the country still practices faithfully today (Goodwin 2011:p.8).

Christianity and the importance of bones

Cremation was not a practice that was compatible with the belief of resurrection that arose with Roman occupation. With the Romans' Christian religion came a desire to bury the dead so that they might be resurrected on Judgment Day. Cremation was "abandoned and replaced by the integral preservation of the corpse" (Cassar 1964:339). Cremation was criminalized by Charlemagne in 789 C.E. and was not accepted again by the Roman Catholic Church until the 1960s (Davies 2012:2-3). The change in Maltese practices, albeit triggered by a change in religious belief, is not unique. Throughout history there has been a belief that bones can be reanimated. This belief is seen "among people in northern Eurasia as well as in parts of Asia and can also be found in the myths of Germany, the Caucasus, Africa, South America, Oceania, and Australia" (Taylor 2007/2008:1). According to Taylor (2007/2008:1) "Ancient civilizations in Iran, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Ugarit also believed in the reanimation of bones". Bones are what remains of us when all else is gone. It is easy to understand why there would be a fear about that final piece of a personality disappearing. It is also easy to understand why people with strong Christian beliefs would want their loved ones buried below or near Churches, on consecrated ground. But, as disease swept through Malta this type of burial became a problem for the Maltese.

Role of disease

Up until this point the changes discussed in Maltese burial practices were the direct result of foreign immigrants bringing their traditions and religions to the islands. Malta's geographical location made it an ideal place to regularly pick up diseases from abroad, and these diseases brought about new changes. When the plague hit Malta in the 15th century, as with other plague ridden countries, disposing of dead bodies became an urgent problem. Bodies would pile up faster than they could be buried. Church burial was prohibited during epidemics (Cassar 1964:339). Bodies from Valetta and the Three Cities were buried on Manoel Island at first, but soon open air cemeteries had to be created on the periphery of these towns as well (Scerri 2011:1 Cemeteries). Villages used old ruined chapels as burial places. In places that did not have chapels, or were lacking the space, fields were appropriated for use as cemeteries (Scerri 2011:1 Cemeteries). The earliest known extra-mural cemetery dates back to 1592 (Cassar 1964:339). Other cemeteries followed in "the plague of 1675-76 and of 1813, in the smallpox of 1830 and in the cholera of 1837, 1865 and 1887" (Cassar 1964:339).

Many of these cemeteries created as a result of plagues are dedicated to St. Rogue, a man believed to have been cured of the plague when a dog licked his wounds in the woods. Others do not have dedications, a result and indication of the manner in which they were created.

The plague that struck in May of 1813 through January of 1814 resulted in a death count of nearly 5,000 people (Luke 1949:102). Trade was suspended, leaving the government impoverished (Luke 1949:102). People were quarantined and the death penalty was invoked for anyone who broke sanitation laws (Luke 1949:102; and Calvert 1815:15-17). Bodies needed to be moved out of peoples' houses quickly and put into the ground.

Though this change in burial practice was being done out of necessity, the Maltese people struggled with it. Up until this point they had buried their dead under churches, a practice that was no longer practical but which was, by this time, deeply rooted in tradition. The adjustment could not have been an easy one. Sanitation laws were often broken as people tried to hold onto old traditions such as keeping the deceased in the house, rather than allowing them to be directly taken to the cemetery.

When the plague of 1813 hit, it hit Malta first, and ties from Malta and Gozo were completely cut off for an extended period (Calvert 1815). People were forced to stay within their own villages and eventually their own homes. It would be interesting to investigate whether or not this had any influence on the strong ties and sense of community that each parish has, as demonstrated through their festas. Traveling between Malta and Gozo I became aware of a strong competition that exists between the two islands. It would be interesting as well to see if the roots of this competition are to be found in these circumstances.

In 1936 the Plague once again visited Malta; however, it does not seem to be strongly remembered by the Maltese people. Seventy-five years is recent past historically, but

when asked about the plague the most common comments I received from people concerned its antiquity. It seems that the disease that ravaged the islands during this time may not have been as strongly felt in the collective conscious as the fear felt as WWII approached. Nonetheless, plague victims were again being taken to Manoel Island and quarantined at the Lazzaretto (Attard 2011:1). They were also praying to St. Rogue and on "the feast of St. Rogue, August 16, which in 1936 fell on a Sunday, people were asked to attend a special evening Mass held at the church dedicated to the saint in Valetta" (Attard 2011:3).

Lost traditions

St. Rogue is still a recognized saint in Maltese eyes, but there is no longer a feast in his honor. The plague is no longer perceived as a threat to the islands and, therefore, the saint that protected them from it is no longer needed. St. Rogue is not alone in his abandonment. In the next section I will discuss traditions and people that have lost their place in Malta.

Cave-tombs and Premature Burials

There is a Maltese folktale that begins: "Once upon a time there was a peasant who loved his father as the light of his eyes. When the father became very old and decrepit, the son was obliged to do as everyone else did; he had to put his father into a cave-tomb" (Pullicin 2000:121). The son puts his father in a cave-tomb, but unable to leave him to die he drills holes in the rock through which his father eats and drinks. The King then puts the son through a series of tests, which he manages only through the aid of his concealed father. The son eventually is forced to reveal the truth to the King who proclaims: "From this day forward no-one shall bury either father or mother alive in a cave; for though the old man may be useless for some things, yet they are always of use to give advice" (Pullicin 2000:124)). The folktale goes on to state:

And his wise words were passed into a proverb. The peasant took his father out, and from that day no-one has buried either father or mother alive in a cave in Malta (Pullicin 2000:124).

According to Brockman (1938:98-99) there is no reason to doubt that people in Malta once did just as the folklore states: buried their relatives alive in cave-tombs. He states that respect for "the wisdom and experience of the old men and women whose advice was sufficiently valuable to justify the inconvenience of caring for them is a lesson which had to be learned" (Brockman 1938:98-99). There is a common saying "Ghalec ma tridx tmut l'ghagiusa, ghax actar ma ticber izjed titghallem", which means "The old woman does not want to die for the older she grows the more she learns" (Brockman 1938:98-99).

In many Maltese folktales the protagonist must encounter three wise elders on a journey, each older than the last. When the hero says hello to them they respond that it is good that he said hello or else they would have gobbled him up and digested him (this in varying synonyms). This anecdote may be added to the stories as a reminder to respect your elders.

The 'Wailing Women'

Until about eighty years ago the bekkajja (I've also seen it written as neuuieha and newwieha) were an important part of Maltese funerals. They were women who were hired to mourn. Unrelated to the family of the deceased, they would show the most grief. They dressed in long mourning cloaks and would enter the house of the dead singing in low, sorrowful voices (Brockman 1938:83). These songs consisted of both "praise for the deceased's virtues and rebuke for his having left them" (Brockman 1938:123-124). They would throw tantrums, smashing vases and overturning flowerpots which they then mixed with soot and ashes (Brockman 1938:123-124). This they smeared on the doors of the house. They cut vine branches, their hair (which they would place in the coffin) and the manes of animals that the deceased may have owned (Brockman 1938:123-124).

The "wailing women" only exist linguistically anymore. Their name means "the one who constantly complains" (Brockman 1938:123-124; and Galea 2011). However, they are not forgotten. How the bekkajja both found and lost their place in Maltese society is not completely clear. Why they were at one point needed is something that definitely piqued my interest. According to Arnold van Gennep (1960:151), the Kol of India assemble relatives and neighbors who utter pitiable cries in an attempt to scare away spirits who might hinder the soul from making its journey. It is possible that this is also why the bekkajja wailed.

Arnold van Gennep discusses the "sacrifice of the hair" in The Rites of Passage (1960:166-167). He argues that it is logical that a rite of separation should involve the hair because in "its form, color, length, and arrangement it is a characteristic distinguishing an individual as much as a group, and is easily recognized" (Gennep 1960:167). He discusses how cutting the hair could be done in an attempt to bind oneself to the sacred world, or in an attempt to break a bond. The cutting of vine branches and hair may simply be sacrificial, it may be binding or breaking, or it

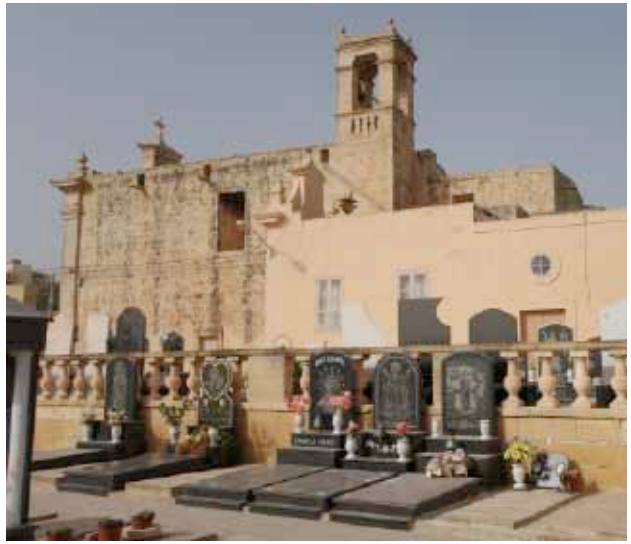

Figure 2: Ave Maria, Hondoq on the island of Gozo, Malta.

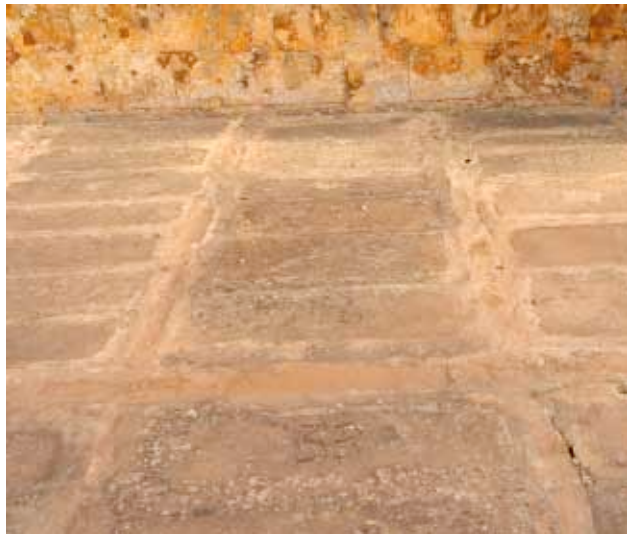

Figure 3: Ta'Birbuba, Gharb on the island of Gozo, Malta.

may merely be an attempt to physically cut out time that had been tainted by death.

Mourning Period

Three days after a person had passed, no fire would be lit in the kitchen of the deceased (Brockman, 1938:83). The female members of the family would remain indoors for forty days, while the men could go out, unshaven, on the eighth day (Brockman 1936:83). The mourning period would last one to two years (Brockman 1938:83). Interestingly, Brockman (1936:83) notes that "the general practice of these ceremonies was not resumed after the plague of 1676. It is likely that the quarantine imposed on people disrupted this ceremony enough to break its presence in the culture. With no fire in the kitchen the family would need to rely on neighbors and friends for food. But during the plague those neighbors would all be restricted to their own houses. The men would also not have been allowed out on the eighth day, divesting the eighth day of its significance. Most importantly, with a large number of people dying at the same time, this practice would have begun to overlap itself with each new body.

Once this practice had been abandoned it was considered appropriate for women to wear black for the two to three years after a death (Galea 2011). Although this is still common, now it is also acceptable to wear black for only a couple of weeks (Galea 2011).

Remaining traditions

As some traditions are lost, others have remained in the culture. These may have remained for obvious sanitary reasons, as in the case of open air cemeteries and quick burials. Other may seem the result of mere tradition, but I would argue that the tradition itself is demonstrative of current cultural beliefs and that it remains out of necessity for the collective consciousness.

Familial and Common Graves

When a person dies in Malta they end up either in a family or a communal grave. Family graves are seen as more respectable. Common graves (qabar komuni) are for people of a lower socio-economy class (it costs 200 euro/1000 Maltese pounds for a family grave), or for those who are not religious (Galea 2011). A family grave will normally have compartments for four or five coffins, but it can hold up to six bodies. There is space below for bones, which are put into plastic bags during "cleaning" by cemetery workers (Sean 2011). In the past flour bags were used instead. Each set of bones is then put into a box which is stored in the family grave. The boxes used to be wooden or tin, but now they use plastic (Victor 2011; and Vincent 2011).

From the Hypogeum to the catacombs, communal graves have been a part of Maltese history. Graves of this nature seem to make the most sense in urbanized areas where space creates an issue. Although this is the case in cities such as Valetta, it does not apply to all of Malta, and is even less relevant in Gozo. It must therefore hold importance in the collective conscious of the people. One explanation is that a burial of this nature delivers the dead from "the isolation in which he was plunged since his death, and reunites his body with those of his ancestors" (Hertz 1960:54). Hertz is referring to a body's transition from a temporary to a final burial place, but I believe that this is also relevant when discussing communal, at least familial, burials. Common graves may not be as respected as family graves because they contain the bodies of the poor and secular, but it may also be a result of the subconscious idea that the dead buried there are alone. This may be why, after two years, the bones from common graves may be removed and stored in crypts, or thrown down wells located on the cemetery grounds, while the bones from family graves cannot.

Two Year Burials

Some sources asserted that it is two years before any bones, family or common, can be moved. Others said just one. If a son were to die a month after his mother he would not be allowed to be buried in the family grave for one-two years after his mother's death, at which point the grave could be reopened (Galea 2011). Until that time his body would be placed in another tomb. In Maltese cemeteries these tombs are situated next to the rows of large marble headstones, beautifully decorated with iconic imagery. Like their neighboring gravestones they have numbers inscribed on them, but are otherwise plain and appear empty. Walking across them feels like a violation, but the dead are not yet in their final resting place. They are in waiting.

In Death and the Right Hand Robert Hertz discusses the reasons that certain ritually imposed time periods exist concerning the dead. According to Hertz, death "is fully consummated only when decomposition has ended; only then does the deceased cease to belong to this world so as to enter another life" (1960:47). The proper two year waiting period to unbury the death may be the length of time needed for the body to fully decompose. In Malta they do not embalm and although decomposition periods vary from region to region, it is possible that this length of time was originally imposed for that reason. It is also interesting that the mourning period in past as well as present times was of the same length. Hertz states that "mourning is merely the direct consequence in the living

of the actual state of the deceased"(1960:51). If this is true then the mourning period being the same as the proper burial period would make sense. Once only the bones remained, the character of the body could no longer change. The body would be in a stable place and moving it would no longer disturb the dead. At this point the living would also have to recognize the person as deceased. They could permit themselves to stop mourning and to move on with the rest of the living.

Wake

There are references to wakes in the time of the 'wailing women' so we know that they were being practiced by then, although the tradition may go back further. Funeral cakes and boiled wheat were eaten at these events (Brockman 1938:123-124). The purpose of a wake is to watch over the dead. In Malta they would put bells next to the dead (Galea 2011). If the person moved, the bell would ring and they were not truly dead. This is why in the past the dead bodies would remain with the family for a time before they were buried. The plague changed this tradition, as it was no longer safe to keep infected dead bodies in the house. However, wakes are still practiced in Malta. Before the deceased is buried, the body is displayed to the family. Since the Maltese do not embalm make-up is used for the occasion (Victor 2011; and Vincent 2011).

I would argue that while the original purpose of the wake is no longer applicable, there remains in the Maltese people, as I believe in all people, a desire for a final glimpse at the dead to ensure that they are in fact truly dead. In the past it was possible that they were not, and on occasions people were buried alive. With modern medicine it is now just the hope for resurrection that I believe people look for in those last moments with loved ones. There is a Maltese song that goes:

Here, by your moonlit tomb, I kneel and pray
And yet, you are not dead.
You are a bird, who,
From the broken cage which was my heart,
Is fled (Brockman 1938:132).

Current changes in practice

With Ninety-eight percent of the country practicing Roman Catholics it seems unlikely that burials will change in any significant way. It also seems improbable that cremation would enter into practice on these islands. Despite the fact that locals are against it, the government is trying to organize a crematorium at the largest cemetery on Malta (Galea 2011). Cremation may be preferable for some because it eliminates the waiting period; it "forestalls the spontaneous alteration of the corpse with rapid and almost complete destruction" (Hertz 1960:41). Hertz (1960:41) states that "it is enough for the survivors to have developed a desire to consign to the final grave a body as little changed as possible". This refers back to the idea that the living is forced to mourn as long as the body is changing states. Through cremation the body of the deceased quickly reaches this final state without having to go through a drawn out decomposition process. If this practice becomes more popular in Malta I believe it will have been strongly influenced by this fact.

I know more people each year who express a preference for cremation. If this preference continues to spread outside factors could once again influence Malta. Every year Malta attracts "tourists equal to almost three times its population and television sets receive programming from abroad, making foreign cultural influences constant" (Goodwin 2011:4). A young man from Xlendi Bay expressed his preference for cremation stating that he doesn't like the idea of "bodies rotting in the ground" (Victor 2011). I would expect that, if the change comes, it will be in the younger generation to which this man belongs, not in more traditionally rooted generations, who are not so likely to be influenced by cultures foreign to them. However, I believe that even if cremation gains some popularity, the current burial practices and traditions will not be easy to uproot.

Methodology

The interviews I conducted with people on the island structured the literary research that followed. Some people were interviewed only once, while others were interviewed up to four times. I also visited cemeteries on both Gozo and Malta. The information in the section Habitation and Conquest was collected entirely from historical literature. Information in the Role of Disease also came mostly from literature, although much of the information was corroborated by Chris Galea. The sections on Traditions take into account the traditions which were mentioned by all interviewed for these seemed to represent, at least to me, a Maltese identity.

Conclusion

The information in this paper is in no way complete, but it exemplifies what I learned about a culture about which I had no prior knowledge before July of 2011. By participating in this research I discovered many avenues for further research and hope that in the future I will have a chance to follow them. What I took away was an unexpected understanding. Not long after I returned home my grandmother passed

away. When asked about her passing I felt annoyed. I was reminded of the Gozitan who told me that it is not nice to talk about death. Robert Hertz explained: "when a man dies, society loses in him much more than a unit; it is stricken in the very principle of its life, in the faith it has in itself" (1960:78). I began to wonder if the hesitance I had felt in Malta when approaching people to discuss the subject of burials stemmed from my own discomfort with the topic. For me death, like birth, is a sacred moment and deserves respect. I think I have always been curious about how people and cultures show that respect, and pained by the instances in which they do not.

From the earliest cave-tombs to the modern cemeteries scattered through Maltese parishes, it is apparent that the Maltese respect their dead and believe in the soul's continuance after death. They may no longer have the 'wailing women' to see them off, but at least most can rest assured that they will be united with their families in a familial grave. Come November their surviving family members will come to their graves in celebration of All Saints Day and All Souls Day. Family members will clean their graves, leaving flowers and lighting candles, and they will not be forgotten.

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