

"TAGLIA" AND "TACCA"

THE MARKETING OF FARM PRODUCE IN THE PAST

By Prof. J. GALEA

The Maltese farmer is a hardworking, industrious soul who toils from early morning to night; he is frugal in his habits and thrifty by nature; with patience and perseverance he ekes a modest living from the poorest of soils. He is generous and simple in his ways and he is generally happy with his lot; he is attached to his fields and he is a lover of animals. Like their kin in other lands, the Maltese farmers are well versed in the lore of nature and they are very conservative in their outlook. Some of them spurn modern machinery and prefer archaic implements of biblical times.

A curious aspect of the farmer's life in Malta was the way in which he marketed the produce of his fields; it was both odd and primitive. Fruits and vegetables were gathered in the afternoon, the fruit being collected in wicker baskets of two sizes: the *mezza* or *qoffa* measuring about 18 x 14 inches and the *qartalla* about 24 x 18 inches. In the *mezza* small size fruits were placed, such as plums, peaches, tomatoes, whilst the *qartalla* contained the larger produce: melons, cabbage, lettuce. Strawberries and blackberries were carried in small narrow baskets called *qaleb* (pl. *qwieleb*) about 12 x 3 inches in size. Certain vegetables, such as turnips, celery, spinach were tied into sheafs or bundles and dipped in the water of the cistern to keep them cool and fresh. Late in the afternoon the produce was loaded on a horse-cart and prepared for carrying to market.

Before the War there were four main markets established at B'Kara, Cospicua, Marsa and Rabat, and two smaller ones at Mosta and at Zebbug. Each market was owned and managed by a person known as *Pitkal* (It. *bottegale*); he acted as adviser and broker to the farmers who entrusted him with the sale of their crops. He usually rendered account once or twice a year about *Santa Marija* (the Feast of the Assumption) in mid-August and at Christmas-tide when farm rents usually became due.








In season the farmers drove their carts loaded with fruit and vegetables to market. Some came from nearby villages, others drove from outlying hamlets and isolated farmsteads, such as Girgenti, Dingli, Imtahleb, Bahrija, Ghajn Tuffieha and Mellieha which lie miles away from the nearest market. It took the farmer six, sometimes even eight hours to drive his slow-going horse or mule to market and return back home.

Farmers started early after midnight to escape the broiling heat of the summer days. Those living in distant areas left their farm about one or two in the morning and either perched on the left shaft of the cart or, trudging by the side of the horse, drove at a leisurely pace to Rabat, Marsa, Cospicua or Birkirkara; on the way they met other farmers and together they joined in convoys of four or more carts. Each cart had an oil or candle lamp fixed to the right shaft which in the darkness of the night gave to the convoy an eerie sight when seen from a distance. Residents living in the main streets of towns or villages on the route to markets, were accustomed to hear in the stillness

of the night the creaking of the big cartwheels, the clattering of the hoofs on the hard macadam surface of the roads and the tinkling of the bells hung round the neck of the beasts of burden, which sounds were not altogether unpleasant. Those nocturnal drives were such a characteristic feature of life in old Malta that they earned a descriptive reference in an old manuscript history of this island. The author wrote: “...*Malta fornisce grande abbondanza di vegetabili e frutti. Infatti ella sarebbe una vista sorprendente per un forestiere lo star fuori di Porta Bombe la mattina prima della levata del sole nella stagione dei frutti, come pure in tempo d’Inverno, e vedere i numerosi carri carichi dei menzionati articoli che aspettano l’apertura della Porta per entrare in città.* Il mercato in tali tempi è ben provvisto di fragole, fichi, pomegranati, uva, mele, peri, persiche, nocipresche, albicocchi, prune, meloni e fichi d’India . . .*”

Most of the farmers arrived about four in the morning when business at the market was liveliest, hundreds of buyers vieing with each other to bid for the pick of the crops; there were yells and shouts and other noises creating wild confusion and an amazing din. The market and its surroundings were closely covered with baskets of luscious fruits and bundles of fresh vegetables filling the air with that pleasant sight and smell of the yield of the good earth.

Bidding was brisk; it was done in whispers in the ear of the *pitkal* who said nothing but simply bended his head forward or backward in accordance with whether the price offered was accepted or not.

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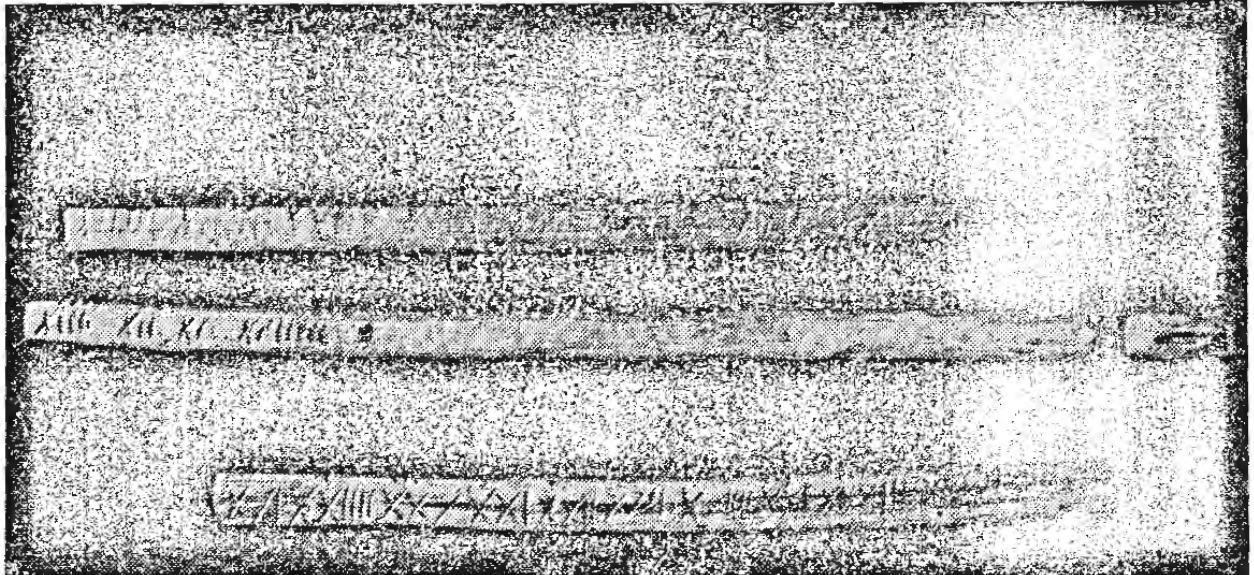
System of notches recording sales of farm produce.

After unloading his cart each farmer repaired to the clerk’s desk to record the various items brought by him to the market and to receive account

* When this manuscript history was written about a hundred years ago, the gates of the city used to be closed during the night and farmers arriving early in the morning had to wait until the gates were opened at dawn to take their produce to the market which then existed in Valletta.

of the sale of the last delivery. This transaction was the most quaint and characteristic of the whole business. Accounts were rendered in *skudi* (one *scudo*=20 pence), *rbghajja* (three *rbghajja*=5 pence) and *karlini* (one *karlin*=10 farthings). All these were currencies during the rule of the Grand Masters in Malta.

Sales were recorded on the *taglia*, which was made from a species of cane called *virga* belonging to the Juncaceae family. The cane, which has a soft texture, was cut into pieces, each piece being split into two halves; each half, between fifteen and twenty inches in length, had a smooth surface on one side and a convex one on the other forming a thin edge where both surfaces met. Sales were entered by a system of notches cut on both surfaces and edges of the *taglia*. Notches were of different shapes and sizes each representing a particular amount. The *skudi* were notched on the surfaces; the *rbghajja* and *karlini* were cut on the edges. A vertical notch on the



Sales recorded on the 'Taglia'.

surface was equivalent to one *skud*, a notch cut slantwise was equivalent to five *skudi*; two notches cut crosswise were equivalent to ten *skudi*; an unnotched cut represented half a *skud*. A vertical notch cut on the edge of the *taglia* meant one *rbieghi*; if cut slantwise it represented half an *rbieghi* whilst an unnotched cut on the edge was equivalent to one *karlin*. A line on the surface separated the sale of one whole lot from another.

Rarely sales were recorded on the *tacca* instead of the *taglia*, in which the various values instead of being cut on the surface of one *taglia* were notched on the surfaces of two *taglias* placed side by side. One *taglia* was kept by the farmer, the other was retained by the *pitkal* and both *taglias* had to be produced to determine the amount. The *tacca* system was meant to prevent tampering with figures on one *taglia*.

When both surfaces were covered with notches, the *taglias* were stowed in the old chest at the farm and left there to accumulate until Easter, St. Mary's Day or Christmas when all the *taglias* were collected and taken by the farmer to the *Pitkal*, who added the notches on all the *taglias*, checked with his ledgers, converted the total into English money and paid the account in sterling. That was a happy day for the farmer who after finishing his business with the *pitkal* proceeded to town to buy some trinket for the family.

The *taglia* and *tacca* systems of reckoning sales were recognised by the Law as legal documents of business transaction, their validity being confirmed by many pertinent sentences delivered in the Commercial section of Her Majesty's Courts of Law. The system lingered on up to a few years ago. It was prevalent at the Pitkali market before the First World War, but then, in between the wars, with the spread of education, many a farmer's son and daughter were able to read and write and they preferred to have written accounts of the sale of their products. Such accounts were rendered on sheets of paper called *kunter*; each sheet was like a leaf of a ledger, only it was narrower, 14 x 4½ inches, and was divided into three columns. In the left hand column were indicated the month and the days of the month when deliveries were made, in the middle column the number of items of each delivery was recorded, whilst on the right hand column the sale of each delivery was entered in *skudi*, *rbghajja* and farthings, ten farthings making one *karlin*.

The *pitkal*, after notching the sale of the previous day on the *taglia* or writing it on the *kunter*, used to give to the farmer two pence which were afterwards deducted from the day's sale. The farmer then loaded the empty baskets on his cart, placed some fodder in a basket before his horse or mule and afterwards he repaired to the nearest shop for a cup of black coffee or a glass of tea with lemon; there he spent a little while exchanging gossip with his cronies and discussing prices and crops. He then joined other farmers from the same area and together they started to return home. Those who had a long way to drive never forgot to water their animals at the public water troughs which at that time were scattered on the high roads; and when they were away from towns and villages driving in convoys, sometimes the driver of the first cart led whilst the others took a nap on their cart leaving the animals to follow the leader. This leading was taken in turn so as to give all farmers a chance to relax and rest a little on their way back, such relaxation being most welcome during the whole journey sometimes lasting for well over eight hours.

The farmers arrived back at the farm when the sun had already risen and the day's work had begun. Each farmer unharnessed his tired animal and led it to the stable, he then washed in the cool water of the spring, took a frugal meal and was ready for another fruitful day.

Today both the *taglia* and the *kunter* systems are no more. Their end came when the Farmers' Cooperatives and Government-controlled Pitkali Markets were established. Now farmers are given vouchers of sales or cheques which may be cashed at any time. Gone also are the long night drives, the mule carts, the tinkling bells. Farmers nowadays take their produce to market during daytime and the colourful old horse carts have been replaced by motor vehicles running at breakneck speed.