

From cover to cover: the *Programm tal-Festa* as a rich resource for the Maltese researcher

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Maltese religious feasts are a popular topic of discussion and research. Aspects being discussed usually include history, fireworks, band clubs and music, rivalry, politics, religion, ethnography, folklore and much more. However, a particular staple in Maltese feasts is rarely mentioned, let alone discussed – *il-Programm tal-Festa*.

This type of annual publication is published by societies closely associated with the village feast such as the band clubs, fireworks societies, and the parish office. Previously relegated to the lower echelons of what is considered *Melitensia*, these publications have lately risen in popularity within academic circles due to the nature of their content – information written about and at the local level, or microhistory.

The schedule for activities, both liturgical and secular (*festi ta' ġewwa u ta' barra*) can be usually found in the centrefold of these publications – hence the name 'programme'. Nowadays, to reach a larger audience, these programmes are also being disseminated online through popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Yet, the publication of these *Programmi* prevails, with around 200 being published on a yearly basis, including some connected to the smaller secondary feasts.

This article shall take into consideration and promote the importance of these *Programmi tal-Festa* in a microhistorical context. This shall be illustrated with a short history of how feasts were described and then a comparison of three examples from the 1930s follows. All three examples are in essence a *programm tal-festa*,

however each is presented in a different way.¹ The information that these programmes contain is varied and therefore provides for diverse research opportunities of the local scene.

Early accounts of how feasts were celebrated can be found in such works as these of Pietru Pawl Castagna, *Malta bil ghzejer tahha u li ghadda min ghaluha*² - in two volumes published in 1865, and George Percy Badger, *Description of Malta and Gozo*³ published in 1838. The former gives a more historical account of a possible origin of Maltese feasts as we know them today, recounting that Grandmaster de Rohan used feasts as leverage to distract locals from the state of affairs at the start of his reign.⁴ This statement is further consolidated by S. Ciappara who argued that this move was done "*per mire politiche*"⁵ (for political purposes). Percy Badger's account gives a more descriptive account of how feasts were celebrated, focusing on some of the major celebrations such as Good Friday, *l-Imnarja* (Feast of St Peter and St Paul) and the feast of St Gregory. In fact, Percy Badger lists feasts under 'Amusements' and seems to focus on the theatricality and entertainment value⁶ that these events held during the late 19th century.

These two accounts are based on what the respective authors have observed, however, a contemporaneous publication gives a firsthand description of how feasts were celebrated both inside and outside the church. This publication of 1898 is an early example of the *Programm tal-Festa* – published especially to commemorate the 3rd centenary of the building of the church of the rural village of l-Imqabba.⁷

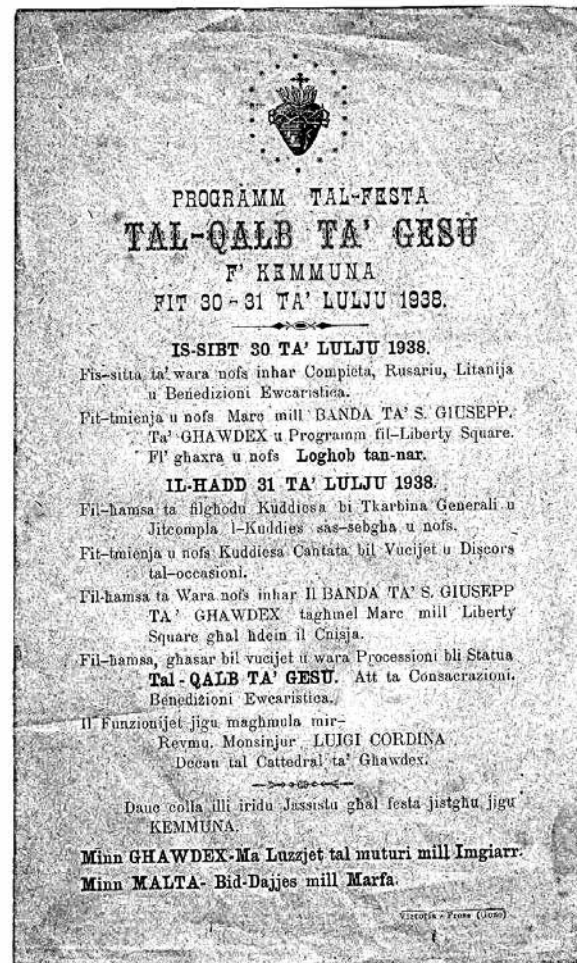


A page from the 1-Imqabba festa programme of 1898

The evolution of these publications in their own historical context must be first appreciated. The village feast was the highlight of the year for many towns and villages, both from a liturgical perspective as also for the entertainment it created. Additionally, one might consider that the village feast brought about a sense of art patronage, whether this concerned paintings, sculpture or musical compositions amongst others. Feasts were also the social event of the year, with many participating to assist in the event but also to be seen by their neighbours and friends. It is therefore of no surprise that these feasts were marketed through the publication of leaflets and pamphlets.

The 1898 booklet of 1-Imqabba can be considered a precursor of the modern-day *Programmi tal-Festa*. Written entirely in Maltese it contains historical information about the parish together with the programme of activities and ends with a hymn/prayer dedicated to the Virgin. The hymn/prayer also has the Curia's seal of approval through the *nihil obstat* granted in July 1898.

As previously indicated, the three programmes being discussed in this article belong to the mid-



The Comino festa programme

to late 1930s. Each programme differs from the others with respect to presentation and content, with the common element being the programme of events.

Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Comino, 1938

The souvenir programme for the feast of the Sacred Heart celebrated on the island of Comino in 1938 consists of a simple, pink coloured card, printed on one side.⁸ The information presented includes the dates of the festivities and the time when the various holy masses were being celebrated and the name of the priest. Additionally, there is information on the band that was to be present to provide the musical accompaniment and the time when fireworks were to be displayed.

This simple yet informative souvenir programme provided information about Comino itself, mentioning Liberty Square, the

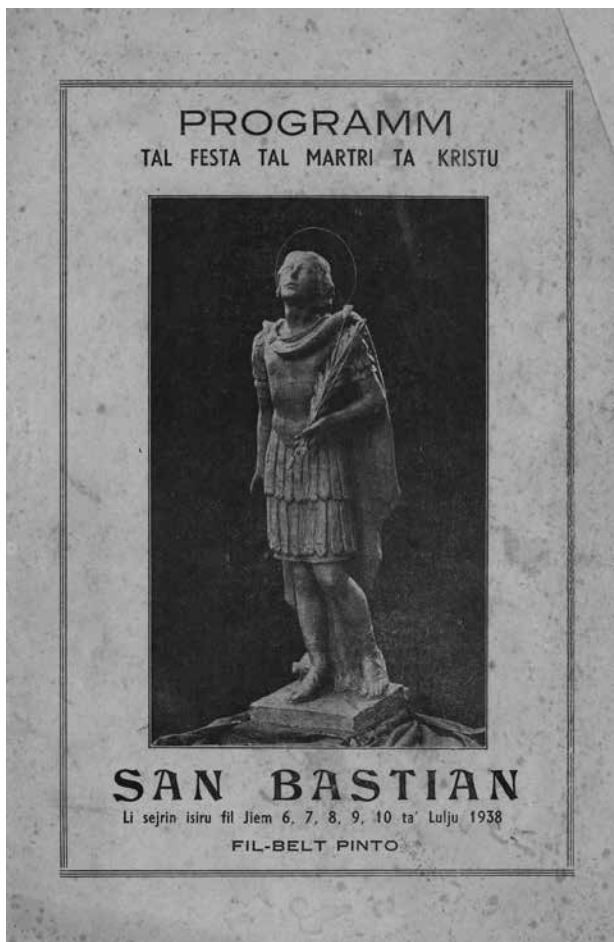
only public square of the island at a time when it was home to a larger community. Moreover, the reader was guided on how to travel to Comino so as to be able to participate in the festivities. One could either catch a *luzzjet* (*luzzu* – a type of fishing boat) from Mġarr, Gozo, or else take a *dġħajsa* (small ferryboat) from Mtarfa, Malta.

At the bottom right corner there is the name of the printing press – Victoria Press – Gozo – while the souvenir programme is decorated with a small vignette depicting the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Feast of St Sebastian, Hal Qormi, 1938

Another example from the year 1938 is that issued for the feast of St Sebastian in Hal Qormi.⁹ This is an eight-page pamphlet, printed at Ebejer’s Press. This parish had been established on 25 October 1935 by Archbishop Mauro Caruana and was carved out from the parish of St George of the same locality.¹⁰

The front page of the pamphlet includes a black and white image of the processional statue of St Sebastian and the dates when the feast was being held. Hal Qormi is referred to as Belt Pinto (the City of Pinto / Città Pinto), as it was Grandmaster Pinto who elevated this village to the status of *città*. The programme of both the internal (liturgical) and external festivities can be found on the centre pages of this pamphlet. One notes a good number of adverts of local brands. Moreover, there are the lyrics of the ‘official’ hymn dedicated to St Sebastian, written by F. Abela and which was sung to music composed by Mro Vincenzo Bugeja. This hymn also includes the *nihil obstat*, showing that it had been approved by the Curia’s censors and thus deemed suitable for public consumption. With the *nihil obstat* there is the name of the censor and the date on which permission was granted: ‘*Nihil Obstat Datum Melitae, die 30 Aprilis 1937 F. Ant. Tonna Barthet O.S.A. Cens Theol’*





Feast of St Paul's Shipwreck, Valletta, 1935

Another example from the same period is a 35-page booklet, printed at Bonnici's Press, and published for the feast of St Paul's Shipwreck in Valletta.¹¹ Expanding upon the first two examples, this publication equally dedicates space for the internal and external celebrations. The musical programme by the Soc. Fil. La Valette is highlighted prominently in the centrefold of the booklet. This philharmonic society or band club is intrinsically linked with the Parish of St Paul's Shipwreck. Founded in December 1874 by Pawlu Darmanin together with a group of parishioners, the aim of this band club was to elevate the feast of St Paul's Shipwreck through music.¹²

Additionally, since this is a national feast, several programmes are listed, organised by the several band clubs invited to perform during the festivities. This publication is also filled with a larger number of advertisements of local brands.

What distinguishes this publication from the previous two is that there is historical information about the Collegiate Church of St Paul's Shipwreck together with two portraits of prominent musicians of the time; namely Licinio Refice and Cardenio Botti. The latter is an important figure in the Soc. Fil. Nazionale La Valette's history. Botti is responsible for the composition of *Inno San Paolo* in 1925¹³ besides La Valette winning several prestigious musical competitions, most notably that of Como in 1927, when under his direction.¹⁴ Most notably, however, is the distinguished use of language. This publication includes the use of three languages: Maltese, Italian and English. This publication also has a cover page in a different type of paper and although largely monochromatic, some dual tone is used for the portraits.

The following are some observations from the comparison of the three programmes listed above.



The hymn to St Sebastian in Maltese as featured in the festa programme in honour of his feast day



Wasal iz-zmien ta' nteress
ghal dawh l'ihobbu jisimghu
L'ahhar Ahbarijet
L'R.A.P. jergu johorgu rebbieha.
Dawn ir-Radijiet huma mficcija min-nies bhala:-
l'ahjar, l'izjed fini, u moderni, li ghandhom il
"Waves" kollha: "2 Short", "Medium" u "Long"
Dawk li jixtiequ jkollhom set ta' din il-kwalita' ghandhom
jixtru min dawn ta' 5, jew 8 "Valves"
B'dawn is-settijiet tircievu programmi, qawwijin u cari, kemm
ta' musika u kemm ta' diskorsi.
L'R.A.P. ghandhom kabinetti zbieh, u moderni.
Ghal xi informazionijiet morru ghand l-agent
THE JOHNSON COMP. LTD.
GENERAL RADIO ENGINEERING SERVICE
153, Sda. Reale - Hamrun.
Fl'istess ditta inthom issibu stock gdid, ta' Valves Inglixi u Amerikani;
Muturi ghar-Radio-Gram tal-ahjar ditti Inglixi "GARRARD" G. E. C. etc.
mahdumin speccjali ghal-kurrent ta' Malta, 105 v. - 205 v. u 100 Cycles.
Jaccettaw kull tiswijsa ta' Radijiet ta' kull xorta.
Ix-xoghol kollu l-isir jigi ezaminat mid-Direttur Tekniku ta
li stess Kumpanija is-Sur JOHN FARRUGIA M.I.R.E., A.M.I.E.T.
RADIO ENGINEER.

CISK
Standard Ale
Red Label

AGENTS
Bonaci
Premier
— VALLETTA —

Liturgical celebrations

Celebrations to commemorate certain feast days were very different from our definition of a *fešta*. Even the liturgical aspects or *festi ta' gewwa* underwent their own evolution. Early feasts were limited to one day and strictly a liturgical affair. Eventually, these started to evolve to include High Mass, singing of vespers, interior church decorations, musicians playing specially composed music and guest preachers invited especially to deliver the panegyric.¹⁵ From a liturgical point of view, all of these publications provide the list of activities being held in the running-up to and on the day of the feast. This can be useful in the tracking of any changes in liturgical practices along the years and from feast to feast. In fact, when comparing these three programmes, the liturgical celebrations of the Comino feast are spread over two days whilst those of the Qormi and Valletta are spread over several days. Moreover, the Qormi and Valletta feasts include the *Triduum* in their respective celebrations, which could be because they are

the titular feasts of the parish. The difference in celebrations could also indicate how much the parish or church could afford to spend.

Advertisements

Consumerism during this period is evident as two of these publications, Hal Qormi and Valletta, provide excellent examples of advertising in this period. Advertising is an element which is still very much present in the modern-day *fešta* publications. The products or businesses being marketed include alcohol importers, mirror manufacturers, radio sellers, printing presses, dairy products, dentistry services, cosmetics, fashion and accessories, and furniture among others. These advertisements are almost all local, and many include the address of where their establishment could be found. The design of these advertisements also varies; some include pictures or photographs of the products and / or fancy typefaces to increase the attractiveness for potential customers.

Much like modern advertising, these too were most probably collected as one way of sponsoring the printing of the booklet. Due to the number of advertisements present, it comes as no surprise that the Valletta book is more elaborate in its printing style than the other two. These advertisements provide the details and histories of the businesses and entrepreneurs of the day – some of which are still extant such as Farsons, Darmanin Footwear and Carmelo Delia amongst others.

External festivities: Music

Music has always been an integral part of religious celebrations in Malta. In fact, as previously stated, early liturgical celebrations included singing and later on musical compositions. Processions, religious and secular, were accompanied by the *piccola banda*, usually consisting of a “hand drum, bagpipe and flute.”¹⁶ Influenced by British military marching bands present on the islands, the genesis of civilian marching bands in support of their patron saint or locality started to form in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁷

All three programmes being studied mention at least one band participating during the festivities (see Table 1, p. 52).

The Comino and Hal Qormi programmes mention that *marci* (band marches) were to be played in the locality. This is also true for the Valletta programme with the added information of which marches would be played and by which band. The musical programmes being played throughout the streets of Valletta included concerts of classical music with works spanning Verdi, Bizet, Rossini and Puccini. Of note is the fact that all concerts ended with the Band Club’s own anthem and the anthem *God Save the King*. Local compositions were also played, and these included pieces by Miruzzi, Ciappara and T. Galea.

External festivities: Fireworks

Another staple of Maltese feasts are the fireworks displays, inherited from the time of the Knights and usually associated with a special event such as the election of a new Pope or Grand Master,

or important ecclesiastical anniversaries¹⁸. Early forms of fireworks connected with a saint consisted of a celebratory volley of shots by the local bombardiers in honour of their patron saint, St Barbara.¹⁹ Other primitive types of fireworks included the *maskli* (mortals) which were usually set off at the beginning and end of the processions.²⁰ By the twentieth century, Maltese fireworks factories were in full swing with both ground and aerial fireworks being produced to the delight of the festa enthusiasts.²¹

Firework displays are also mentioned as part of the festivities in the Hal Qormi and Comino programmes. The types of fireworks that were set off include “*musketterija, musketterija spanjola, bombi, and lghob [sic] kbir tan-nar*”. The manufacturers for the Hal Qormi feast are listed as S. Mamo and Carmelo Bondin *taż-Zurriek*. For the Valletta feast there is no reference to any type of fireworks displays but there is mention of a partial and a full illumination of the church.

Local Printing Presses

While the history of the press in Malta has been tackled to a good extent, there does not seem to be much in the local literature about the small printing companies that were established in the twentieth century.

Hereunder is some information regarding the printing presses responsible for the printing of the three *festa* programmes being studied in this article.

1. Victoria Press: Inactive. Considered as the first Gozitan printing press, it started operating in 1884 and was owned by a certain Salvatore Grech.²² It remained active until at least 1938, when the souvenir programme of Comino was published. Other known publications from this press include:

Vox: macte nova virtute, puer, sic itur ad astra. Newspaper published monthly. Publication aimed at students.²³

2. Ebejer Press: Inactive. Was located in Santa Venera. Active in the first half of the twentieth century. Books printed at this press include:

Band name as printed on the programme	Modern-day Band name and location	Occasion for which the musical service was done
Banda ta' San Giusepp ta' Ghawdex	Għaqda Muzikali San Ġużepp (Għajnsielem, Gozo)	Musical service for the Comino feast.
Soc. Fil. Pinto	Socjetà Filarmonika Pinto – Banda San Sebastjan (Hal Qormi, Malta)	Band club associated with the feast of St Sebastian participated during the days of said feast.
Banda San Giuseppe Hamrun	Socjetà Muzikali San Ġużepp (il-Hamrun, Malta)	Participated on the eve (9 July) and on the feast day of St Sebastian (10 July 1938)
Banda Fil. 'La Valette'	Socjetà Filarmonica Nazionale 'La Valette' (Valletta, Malta)	Participated on the day of the feast of St Sebastian (10 July 1938) Participated on the eve and on the feast day of St Paul's Shipwreck (10 February 1935)
Banda Fil. 'King's Own'	Socjetà Filarmonika 'King's Own' (Valletta, Malta)	Participated on the feast day of St Sebastian (10 July 1938)
Banda Fil. 'Santa Marija' Għaxak	Għaqda Muzikali Santa Marija (Hal Għaxaq, Malta)	Participated on the feast day of St Sebastian (10 July 1938)
Fil. Conte Ruggiero, Rabat, Malta	Socjetà San Pawl Banda Konti Ruġġieru (ir-Rabat, Malta) Republic Square, Valletta	Participated on the feast day of St Paul's Shipwreck (10 February 1935) in Piazza Tesoreria, Valletta
Fil. La Vittoria, Mellieħa	Società Filarmonica La Vittoria (il-Mellieħa, Malta) St. John's Square, Valletta	Participated on the feast day of St Paul's Shipwreck (10 February 1935) in Piazza San Giovanni
Fil. Sliema	Socjetà Filarmonika 'Sliema' (Tas-Sliema, Malta) St Lucy Street, Valletta	Participated on the feast day of St Paul's Shipwreck (10 February 1935) in Sda Santa Lucia
Filarmonica 'Duke of Connaught's Own', B'Kara	Każin Santa Liena Banda Duke of Connaught's Own (Birkirkara, Malta) St. John Street, Valletta	Participated on the eve of the feast of St Paul's Shipwreck (9 February 1935) in Sda San Giovanni
Filarmonica De Rohan, Żebbuġ, Malta	Każin San Ġużepp u Banda 'De Rohan' (Haż-Żebbuġ, Malta) St. John Street, Valletta	Participated on the feast day of St Paul's Shipwreck (10 February 1935) in Sda San Giovanni
Filarmonica Nicolo Isouard, Musta	Socjetà Filarmonika Nicoló Isouard (il-Mosta, Malta). Great Siege Square, Valletta	Participated on the feast day of St Paul's Shipwreck (10 February 1935) in Piazza Otto Settembre.

Table 1: Participation of band clubs as featured in the three festa programmes being studied

Agius, S., *L-Imghallem tal-Koki, I Ktieb*²⁴
 Caruana, Anastasio, 1940, *Is-Santwarju u ix-xbiha Nkurunata ta' Marija SS. tal-Herba*²⁵
 V.E.K.A. 1937. *Nofs siegħa ħolm fit-tieni genna tal-art*²⁶
 Vassallo, Karmenu, 1937, *Mastru Rjus, jew Dak li studja ras ghajru spicca biex tilef rasu!*²⁷
 Vella Haber, Kelinu, 1938. *Is-Santwarju tal-Qala u r-Rahab Qaddis Sirrew*²⁸
*Santa ta' Santa Venera V.M.*²⁹

3. Bonnici's Press: Established 1924. Still active. Located in St Paul's Street, Valletta. Curiously, the only *nihil obstat* from this sample is found in the Qormi pamphlet – specifically on the page where there is the hymn.

Language

Another important feature of these publications is the use of language. The languages used in these three publications should be taken within the context of this period in the history of the Maltese language. The fight for a national identity under British rule took the guise of what language should be used, with factions being either pro-British (and anti-Maltese) or else pro-Italian (and pro-nationalist).³⁰ These sentiments trickled down to the newly formed band clubs, which, even though in essence these were there to cultivate musical talent, they could also be considered as prototypes of the modern political clubs.³¹

The Maltese language question is also reflected in the publications being reviewed. In fact, the use of Maltese is found in all three publications and is used to convey information such as the history of the church (Valletta), the programme of events (Comino and Hal Qormi) and in some advertisements (Hal Qormi, Valletta). One can note the difference in Maltese orthography, even though the official spelling standard put forward by the *Għaqda tal-Malti* was officially recognised in 1934.³²

Notes and References

- 1 All of the *Programmi tal-Festa* discussed can be found on OAR@UM in Open Access. Links in reference list.
- 2 Castagna, P.P., *Malta bil ghzejer tahha u li ghadda minn għaliha* (Malta, 1865).
- 3 Badger, G.P., *Description of Malta and Gozo* (Malta, 1838).
- 4 Farrugia, C.J., 'Introduzzjoni mill-editor', in, C.J. Farrugia (ed.) *Il-Festi: kultura u identità: Rapport dwar is-Seminar Nazzjonali li ġie organizzat mis-Socjetà Mużikali Madonna tal-Gilju, 31 ta' Marzu 2011* (Malta: 2011), 4; Galea, M., *Grand Master Emanuel De Rohan 1775-1797* (Malta, 1996), xi-xii.

Italian is used prominently in the Valletta publication, especially in the programmes of events. This comes as no surprise since the La Valette band club carried pro-nationalist sentiments.³³ English is used for advertisements only, which speaks volumes. Religion and by default religious feasts, is considered an integral part of Malta's national identity,³⁴ and is ingrained in the collective roots,³⁵ therefore it made sense to leave the language of the coloniser out of these programmes. In fact, in modern publications, Maltese is still the main language used, with English left for advertisements and a one-off article aimed at any foreigners that may be interested in going through these publications.

Festa publications are as much part of the local parish feasts as are fireworks and band clubs. This article aims to highlight their importance not only regarding their value for researchers but also for their rightful place in Maltese heritage and tradition. Even though these publications were widely disseminated, because of their ephemeral nature many were discarded and therefore little is known about them.³⁶

These three examples of Maltese ephemera from the first half of the twentieth century are not to be overlooked by researchers because of their humble origins. All three examples provide a glimpse into both the religious and secular lives of our forebears. Moreover, they provide a unique ethnographic perspective not only in how religious feasts were celebrated, but also in the micro historical spheres of transport, advertisement, design, publishing, recreation, musical entertainment, language and politics. Therefore, it is argued that these publications should be regarded as important primary sources of information for research on the many aspects of what is considered *Melitensia*.

- 5 Ciappara, S., *Storia del Żebbuġ e sua parroccia* (Malta, 1882), 70.
- 6 Cremona, V.A., 'Ostentation and celebration at the Maltese outdoor festa', in G. Farrugia & P.J. Fenech (eds), *The Maltese village festa: a traditional yearly ritual* (Malta, 2016), 57-66.
- 7 Parroċċa Mqabba, *Għat-tielet centenariju tal erezzioni tal enisia parrocciali tal Imkabba fil festa solenni tal Gloriosa Assunzioni tal Beata Vergni Maria fis-sena tal 1898: gabra ta notizie* (Malta, 1898), <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/103524>
- 8 Cathedral of the Assumption (Victoria, Malta), *Programm tal-Festa tal-Qalb ta' Ġesù f'Kemmuna fit-30-31 ta' Lulju 1938* (Malta, 1938), <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/106571>
- 9 Parish of St Sebastian, *Programm tal festa tal martri ta Kristu San Bastian li sejr in isiru fil jiem 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 ta' Lulju 1938 fil-Belt Pinto* (Malta, 1938), <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/103526>
- 10 Peresso, V., 'Storja tal-Parroċċa', *Parroċċa San Sebastjan*, <https://qormisbparish.org/storja-tal-parrocca/>.
- 11 Collegiate Church of St Paul's Shipwreck, *Programma in occasione della Festa di San Paolo Naufrago: 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, Febbraio 1935* (Malta, 1935), <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/101837>
- 12 Ciarlo, J., *Soċjetà Filarmonika Nazzjonali La Valette: l-ewwel mitt sena storja* (Malta, 1994), 6.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 173.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 204-11.
- 15 Cassar, G., 'The Maltese festa: a crossover of traditional and contemporary cultural realities', in A. Azzopardi (ed.), *Young people and the 'festa' in Malta* (Malta, 2015), 3.
- 16 Lanfranco, G., 'Meaning of Maltese Festa', in S.J.A. Clews (ed.), *The Malta Year Book 1996* (Malta, 1996), 507.
- 17 Cassar, 5.
- 18 Grima, C., 'Studju soċjolingwistiku fuq ir-registru tal-piroteknika Maltija' (unpublished Masters' dissertation, University of Malta, 2015), 11.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 20 Lanfranco, 506.
- 21 Grima, 14-5.
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- 24 Grech, S., 'Introduzzjoni għas-Sensiela L-Imghallem tal-Koki ta' Salvu Agius', *L-Imnara*, 11(41), (2018), [8], https://www.academia.edu/39573300/Introduzzjoni_g%C4%A7as_Sensiela_L_Img%C4%A7allem_tal_Koki_ta_Salvu_Agius
- 25 Sammut, E., 'A handlist of writings of art in Malta', *Melita Historica*, 4(1), (1964), 36.
- 26 Għaqda tal-Malti, 'Kotba ġodda', *Lehen il-Malti*, 81, (Malta, 1937), 136.
- 27 Vassallo, K., *Mastru Rjus, jew Dak li studja ras ghajru spicca biex tilefrasu!* (Malta, 1937).
- 28 Għaqda tal-Malti, 'Kotba ġodda', *Lehen il-Malti*, 86, (Malta, 1938), 31-2.
- 29 Colnect, 'Santa ta' Santa Venera V.M.' [n.d., c.1930s], https://colnect.com/en/holy_cards/holy_card/15428-Venera_Veneranda_Parasceve_Virgin_and_Martyr_Santa_Venera_Ebejer_Press_-_Santa_Venera_MT_SaintsF-SaintsF-Malta
- 30 Friggieri, O., 'The language question in Malta: the consciousness of a national identity', in Bro. Hilary (ed.), *The Malta Year Book 1988* (Malta, 1988), 410.
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- 32 Cremona, N., *A historical review of the Maltese language* (Malta, 1945), 26.
- 33 Farrugia, 58.
- 34 Vassallo, M., 'Local community, identity and problems of ultimate meaning', *Humanitas: Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, 2 (2003), 61-71.
- 35 Boissevain, J., 'Ritual, play and identity: changing patterns of celebration in Maltese villages', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 1(1), (1991), 87-100.
- 36 Zammit, W., 'Towards a bibliographical understanding. The Maltese printed product 1642-1839', *Storja* (Malta, 2001), 32.

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