

Patrolling society's borders: slavery, apostasy and the Inquisition

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Walter Benjamin once famously remarked that we write books because we wish to read them. Not being able to read them, as they have never been written, we write them. In the case of history, we write books perhaps because we wish someone had then written an account of what we now wish to explore. Lacking that, we write such books for the people of, and from, the past. At least we can give them a voice their contemporaries and time had denied them.

Imagine that as historians we were to be offered an opportunity to be presented with a mass of undreamt of data from, say the Malta National Archives. Let us take the period when the Order of St John ruled Malta between 1530 and 1798 as an example. We are sure that each one of us could imagine an ideal text, which would shed light on some particular aspect of their research. One could even imagine writing a history of unwritten histories. It is precisely when we begin to pose these types of questions that we realize only too uncomfortably that the mass of data that we possess deriving as they do from legal records, notarial archives, and other written sources, rich as they are, clearly deal with matters that concerned the economy, the elite, trade, booty, the church, family properties, and such like information. These are all very important, but let us imagine some hypothetical text that could have been useful to highlight the life and times of the mass of the population, or even of some particularly underprivileged group of Maltese society. One immediately thinks of slaves. They were clearly the most underprivileged group in Maltese society, they were on the margins, their lives were apparently 'nasty, brutish and short'.¹ Yet they were central for the economy, both in their capture and in the labour they performed, and by the end of the sixteenth century, a mere two generations after the knights set foot in Malta, they constituted some ten percent of the population.



A representation of a Moorish slave who served on galleys

We know very well that, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, Malta was a slave-based society. We know that slaves were obtained from corsairing and coastal raids, and to a certain extent, where and how they were utilized. But the sources are silent on a huge number of topics. For example, we do not know the precise number of slaves. Godfrey Wettinger, whose recent monograph devotes 600 pages of written text on the theme, provides some clues to their role within the economy, and also discusses how they were integrated and freed (baptism, manumission, and so on).² In a more recent publication, Wettinger has suggested that the numbers of slaves varied from five hundred in the early sixteenth century to perhaps over three thousand in the early decades of the eighteenth century – a not insubstantial proportion of the total population.³ Other areas have been touched but need to be looked into in more detail, like the role of slaves as an important source for magic, divination and other popular cures in which the masses of the population

1 Cf. Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* [first published 1651] (Harmondsworth, 1968 edition).

2 A detailed account of slavery in Malta can be found in the monograph by G. Wettinger, *Slavery in the islands of Malta and Gozo ca. 1000-1812* (Malta, 2002). See also his more recent 'Black African Slaves in Malta', in S. Mercieca (ed.), *Mediterranean Seascapes* (Malta, 2006)

3 Wettinger (2006), 65.

believed.⁴ Wettinger suggests that slaves could be divided in three broad categories: namely, oarsmen on the Orders' galleys; labourers in the Order's institutions like the law courts, the magisterial palace, the hospital, and the auberges, and the fortifications; and domestic slaves, of whom an uncertain proportion were black slaves.⁵

Clearly the distinctions were not watertight. For example, during winter months when the galleys were inoperative, slaves were put to work on jobs on land. In contrast to slavery elsewhere, such as in landed estates, there seem to be few sporadic references to married slaves. Indeed permission to marry was only granted to baptized slaves. This was perhaps the most coveted privilege among slaves as it gave them the right to live with their family in their own home for the rest of their lives.⁶ Slaves in Malta were mostly Muslims from the Maghreb or from the Ottoman Levant, commonly referred to as 'Turks', captured either during warlike expeditions or during the regular corsairing operations. The primary purpose of capturing such slaves was precisely that of having the more-able bodied of them chained to the oar benches.⁷ Thus the grand majority of slaves were men caught during corsairing activities; very few of them were females.⁸ The source of slavery was, as everywhere else in the Mediterranean, raiding. After all one must not forget that although corsairing sustained the Mediterranean economy, its principal victims were the people of the Mediterranean themselves.⁹ Like all other Mediterranean navies of the time the Order's galley squadron had an insatiable appetite for slavery. Although some oarsmen were either *buonavoglia* – voluntary galley rowers, or

forzati – criminals condemned to a sentence on the galleys, a considerable number of rowers were slaves. The *Capitana*, the largest galley, had some 600 men. Oarsmen slaves apparently lived a short life.¹⁰ Other slaves were owned by individual knights and private corsairs, so that even members of the crew were not averse to owning a few slaves, who could then be sold locally. Corsairing was evidently a very lucrative business.¹¹

Many Maltese, particularly the elite classes (including the aristocracy, chaplains, priests, lawyers and doctors), also possessed slaves in their retinue. So did the knights, and although they were forbidden from owning female slaves below the ages of fifty (presumably not to incite concupiscence), this regulation Wettinger¹² tells us, were sometimes infringed. Maltese owners were not subject to such restrictions, a fact that clearly had some bearing on the number of offspring born to such women. The gap between a domestic black slave and a concubine could have been a fine one. Unfortunately slaves were not individuated – except in such cases when they achieve visibility through sales, or through the baptism of their offspring. We do know that there was a slave market but such appears to be our ignorance that we do not know where it was sited. Nor do we know much about slavery in the countryside.¹³ What we can hazard is that there was probably not a great demand for slaves in agricultural work – there were no *latifundia* nor a heavy demand for agricultural labour. So it appears that they were both important symbols of prestige and important means for the knights to build up the island's defences. Female slaves were

4 C. Cassar, 'Witchcraft beliefs and social control in seventeenth century Malta', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, iii/2 (1993), 316-34; C. Cassar, *Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition: A Study of Cultural Values in Early Modern Malta* (Malta, 1996); C. Cassar, *Daughters of Eve: Women, Gender Roles, and the Impact of the Council of Trent in Catholic Malta* (Malta, 2002), esp. ch. 5; F. Ciappara, *Society and the Inquisition in Early Modern Malta* (Malta, 2001), esp. ch. 6; A. Camenzuli, 'Maltese social and cultural values in perspective: Confessions, accusations and the Inquisition Tribunal: 1771-1798' (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Malta, 1999); J. Debono, 'Women, the sacred and the Inquisition: A study of female religious perceptions, values and behaviour' (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Malta, 1999); K. Gambin, 'Fabio Chigi: Inquisitor-Missionary and Tridentine Reformer' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Malta, 1997).

5 Wettinger (2002), 295-409. See also Wettinger (2006) for additional sources on black slaves. The 'Moorish' Boy *pass-partout* sculpture found in old households often at the foot of staircases in a representation of a permanent state of potential service must surely derive its origins from this category.

6 Wettinger (2002), 469.

7 Slaves ranged from 10-15 to 25-30 per cent of the total number of galley rowers. S. Bono, 'Naval exploits and privateering', in V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.), *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798: Studies on early modern Malta and the Order of St John of Jerusalem* (Malta, 1993), 386.

8 Wettinger published two tables of auction sales of slaves sold in Malta for the period 1779-1784. During this period the number of male slaves sold amounted to 317 while female slaves reached a total of 84. In short at the end of the eighteenth century women slaves sold on the open market constituted roughly a fourth of the total number of slaves sold. Wettinger (2002), 250-51. On the more open slave market for domestics, however, female slaves not unsurprisingly could fetch as much as male slaves, perhaps because of their greater propensity for docility and nobility.

9 M. Fonteney & A. Tenenti, 'Course et piraterie méditerranéenne de la fin du moyen-âge au début du XIX^e siècle', in *Course et piraterie - XV^e Colloque internationale d'histoire maritime, San Francisco, 1975* (Paris, 1975), 18.

10 During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries galleys carried an enormous complement, not infrequently approaching five hundred men, sometimes reaching even the six hundred mark. Apart from a nucleus of about twenty-five knights and serving brothers, each galley of the Order carried a mixed complement of sailors, rowers and *homini d'armamento* (soldiers). The *galera Capitana*, as a rule, carried more men than other galleys including some thirty knights; its complement of both sailors and *homini d'armamento* varied with time. In 1618 the *Capitana* carried a crew of one hundred and eighty men together with one hundred sixty *homini d'armamento*. NLM Libr. ms 746, f. 29 (12.xi.1618).

11 P. Earle, *Corsairs of Malta and Barbary* (London, 1970).

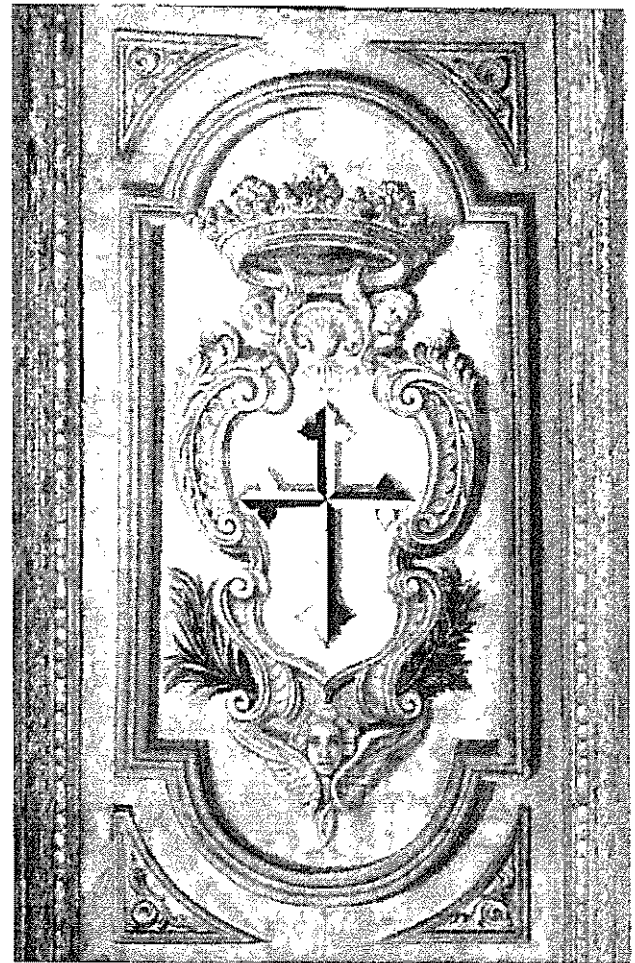
12 Wettinger (2006), 72.

13 Wettinger asserts that references to a slave market in Valletta and elsewhere 'are extremely rare and contradictory', Wettinger (2002), 173.

almost exclusively domestic, and some illustrations, such as those by the French mid-eighteenth century painter and member of the Order, Antoine Favray, show local ladies surrounded by their slaves, usually depicted as black. Courtesans of the knights appear to have been endowed with female slaves. One early seventeenth century Valletta courtesan of Greek origin, Sperantia de Lango, had no less than sixteen domestic slaves – clearly a grand dame.¹⁴ It could also be safely surmised that private owners of slaves were reluctant to see their slaves become Christian. That would have meant a diminution of their power over slaves, and a corresponding increase in the rights of their slaves, although it was considered meritorious to convert a Muslim. Wettinger¹⁵ mentions baptisms of slaves, but more pronounced were baptisms of their offspring. In his recent work, Ciappara shows that there was a resistance to the acceptance of Christianization of slaves as this meant that they could not be ransomed, and hence would make their masters lose money. He suggests that slaves were treated well because they were an ‘investment’.¹⁶ Slave owners may also have obtained religious merit from encouraging or sponsoring Christianization – especially so when the putative (biological) male genitor became the spiritual sponsor of the child born to him by a sub-Saharan female slave.

Yet even slaves had their rights. They could carry out part-time jobs in their free time. Indeed slaves performed all sorts of jobs.¹⁷ There is evidence for the seventeenth century, in the Inquisition records, that despite the publication of edicts that banned hawking activities by slaves it was common to meet slaves selling food in the streets of Valletta. They normally sold fresh bread during the winter months and fruit of the season in the summer months. They also performed other tasks like that of rope-maker, basket-maker and many odd jobs.¹⁸ Then there were slaves who performed magical activities as part-time work. These often performed love magic for the multitude of courtesans of the harbour towns, particularly in Valletta. But they were also much in demand by many sectors of Maltese society, in both towns and countryside, for the preparation of medicaments to relieve a long list of ailments and diseases, and to ward off the evil-eye.¹⁹

The presence of a multitude of non-Christian slaves



The emblem of the Inquisition

who wandered freely in both town and countryside, mixing with the local population, induced the Inquisitors and ecclesiastical authorities to keep a wary eye over them and treat slaves with contempt. The inhabitants who resorted to their medicaments often willingly denounced them to the Holy Office especially when the medical intervention failed to achieve the desired effect. We know very little about them and what we know comes from their contact with the state and societal institutions that were concerned to control, monitor and repress them, such as was the case with the Inquisition – which clearly influences our picture. We know even less about what happened to them: their integration into Maltese society, how conversion took place, and their contacts and exchanges with other segments of the population such as the urban poor with whom they apparently shared much – such as a common patois, marginality, even religious beliefs. The fact that the majority of slaves

14 C. Cassar, *Sex, Magic and the Periwinkle: A Trial at the Malta Inquisition Tribunal, 1617* (Malta, 2000).

15 Cf. Wettinger (2006).

16 Cf. Ciappara, *passim*.

17 Wettinger devotes a chapter on this issue. Wettinger (2002), 411-38.

18 Cassar (2002), 156-7.

19 *Ibid.*, 176.

hailed from the Maghreb territories of North Africa, where the locals spoke a form of Arabic, made it easy for them to communicate with the Maltese. It was thus possible for the Muslim slaves to mingle freely with the locals who spoke a dialect of Arabic origin. This may have made it easier for Muslim slaves to frequent Christian Maltese girls, and have intimate relations with them, despite the strict prohibitions by Church and State.²⁰

In this paper we are interested in exploring some topics that might have been answered had we been fortunate to discover some diary written by an educated slave with a keen eye for observation. The memoirs of captivity of the Ottoman Judge (Kadi) Ma'cuncu-zade Mustafâ Efendi, recently summarised in a newspaper article by T.M.P. Duggan, are most revealing on the activities of the Order's galley squadron and the way Muslim captives were kept, treated and ransomed in Malta.²¹ However there seems to be no evidence that Ma'cuncu-zade Mustafâ Efendi was fluent in Arabic as spoken in North Africa and his main language was Ottoman. Had he spoken North African Arabic we would have had the advantage of an account written by an outsider, by someone who spoke the language of the local population (for the language of the mass of the Maltese was surely closer to North African Arabic as spoken then than it is today), and was thus probably closer to the population than the local and foreign elite, and possessed a different religion (and therefore might have been more inclined to notice things accepted without question by the local society).²² These would have made great anthropological observations, for they would have been made by a professional stranger. We do not have this diary, so let us try to sketch it out for him and for us. Knowledge comes from questioning, so let us pose some questions.

We are interested in posing some questions about the past through problematizing the present. Some of these questions are: Why did ethnic and religious diversities not emerge in Malta in spite of a large slave population and massive immigration? Why were there

no crypto-Muslims in Malta certainly by the sixteenth century? Why has there not been any residual stigma attached to such different ethnic and religious origins if slaves were integrated through manumission? Why did the urban population of Valletta resort to popular medicine and magic peddled by North African slaves in spite of the often heard boast that the Knights had among the best hospitals and advanced medicine in Europe? If one were to glance elsewhere throughout the Mediterranean, one would realize that collective memories can go back centuries. The Jews certainly retained their distinctiveness in certain parts of the Mediterranean world and not in others. So why not Muslim slaves in Malta?

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Maltese had the obsession, then common even in southern Italy and elsewhere, to search for hidden treasure. As early as the 1530s some Maltese notables were granted a government license to search for treasure. It was believed that in the area of Rabat, Mdina, and particularly in other areas with land that had previously belonged to the Jews – expelled from Malta as part of the Spanish Empire, in January 1493 – were all searched for hidden treasure.²³ Vittorio Cassar, son of the Maltese military engineer Gerolamo, and a notorious expert of learned magic, resorted to complicated rituals in order to search for hidden treasure.²⁴ There were crypto-Christians known as *linovamvaki* in Cyprus under Ottoman domination.²⁵ Why were there no crypto-Muslims in Malta? Finally why has there been no residual stigmas attached to ethnic or religious origins in Malta? In certain places in the Mediterranean, surnames identify and sometimes stigmatize individuals as having been of Muslim, or 'Turkish' versus Christian origin, even after conversion. A partial answer is to note that one of the most significant and characteristic features of the Western Mediterranean in contrast to the Eastern Mediterranean is that there is much greater religious and ethnic homogeneity in the West than in the East. The Western Mediterranean state is based on the *reconquista* model: a centralized, stratified state, which

20 Ibid., 170-71.

21 The memoirs are recorded in the work entitled *Baz Kest-i Hakiri-i Malta Sergüzess-i Esiri-i Malta* which contains the surviving memoirs of Mustafâ Efendi, an expert on Islamic jurisprudence and an educated man. Mustafâ Efendi was held captive on the island of Malta for two years until the ransom demanded by his captors – the Hospitaller Knights of St John of Jerusalem – was paid at the end of 1599. The summary of the text, translated by T.M.P. Duggan, 'Ma'cuncu-zade Mustafâ Efendi: Ottoman Judge, Poet and Prisoner for Ransom', was published in the *Turkish Probe* (issue no. 436), p.10. We are told that the handwritten Ottoman Manuscript was made by Omer, the scribe, in April 1602, and is a copy of Mustafâ Efendi's manuscript which seems to have been written in 1600 from notes and poems composed in prison in Malta during his incarceration. The document is registered as manuscript no 438, pp. 132-57, in the Kermankes Emir Hoca section of the Selim Aga Library, Uskudar, Istanbul. A full version of the Ottoman text was published by W. Schmucker, 'Die Maltesischen gefangenschaftserinnerungen eines Türkischen kadi von 1599', pp.191-251. (Information kindly brought to our attention by Mr Mario Cassar.)

22 O. Vella, 'L-Ghejjun ta' l-Istorja ta' L-Ilsien Malti. Gabra ta' dokumenti bil-Malti mill-bidu sa Vassalli' (unpublished M.A. theses, University of Malta, 2006), 24-75.

23 G. Wettinger, *The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages* (Malta, 1985), 152-3.

24 Cassar (1996), 73-6.

25 R.C. Jennings, *Christians and Muslims in Ottoman Cyprus and the Mediterranean World, 1571-1640* (New York, 1993).



Grandmaster Pinto

aspires to ethnic and religious, and finally linguistic homogeneity.²⁶ In this schema, minority groups were seen as threats and as dangerous. The state first used military force wielded by a caste-like group of warriors, then various vertically oriented institutions such as the Inquisition, to weld the various strata together and exact compliance and religious homogeneity at the grassroots. Finally, it heralded an expanding absolutism through other less intrusive means: rituals of power (including massive architectural displays) to anchor its legitimacy. This effort was admittedly not always successful. In the East, a different model prevailed. This was the Ottoman millet system. Here, different groups coexisted, including religious groups. There was an ethnic, even a religious division of labour, the state lacking a scribal class under its control relied on local power holders (including the Orthodox Church) to collect its taxes. The top dogs relied on a ruthless game, playing off one group against another. Eventually in an age of nationalism, religious minorities were expelled as in post-Ottoman Turkey.²⁷ The moral is clear. It was probably easier to be a Christian renegade in the Eastern Mediterranean than a Muslim convert to Christianity in the West. Indeed we

know more about the former than about the latter. We know that individually and collectively Christians and other ethnic or religious groups could enter sideways as it were and claim high status. Thus the intrepid sixteenth century corsair Khayr al-Din, Barbarossa, *Beylerbeyi* (Governor) of Algiers and Admiral of the Ottoman fleet, was of Christian birth. Likewise most of the *Yeniçeri* (Janissary) corps – the Sultan's standing infantry corps recruited from the *devshirme* – the levy of Christian children to be trained for posts in the Palace of the Sultan, the administration or the military corps, and thus avoid paying hefty taxes. Such renegades could and did become soldiers of fortune in Ottoman controlled or dominated territories. Some also converted to Islam and attained high prestige by so doing.²⁸ But this does not seem at all possible in the West. Conversion seems to have led neither to high status, nor were 'infidels' necessarily encouraged to convert. Christian renegades had more positive prospects than Muslim converts.

In places along the periphery, as in Malta, we come across an interesting case. Two blocks face each other – they are not monolithic to be sure – but as it is in the western sphere of influence it follows the western state model. However, as it lies on the periphery, it has additional problems: what about the population, and what about two threats – the Protestants and the Muslims? Here the policing of belief is critical – indeed what is of interest is that on the periphery there is little diversity. Perhaps the two facts may be related.

Slaves represented a serious social internal threat on two counts: they were potentially a threat to public order, and they were also in contact with the mass of the urban population where they might influence popular beliefs, a concern the Inquisition took seriously. During the rule of Grandmaster Garzes (1595-1601) there was a serious fear that slaves might organize a revolt. Indeed during the reign of Grandmaster Pinto (1741-1772), and more precisely in 1749, partly out of desperation or partly out of confidence in their own numerical strength, they actually thought they could take over the island. Repression was swift and brutal. The ring leaders were quartered by boats, a classic example of Foucauldian state power.²⁹

Slave contact with the population, especially the

26 Following the conquest of Granada by Ferdinand II and his wife Isabella in 1492, the Spanish zest for the *reconquista* had over-spilled onto the Mediterranean shores of North Africa. Reduction of the Muslim stronghold of Granada in 1492 bolstered the prestige of the Catholic kings, permitting them to implement new policies aimed at creating a strong centralized state.

27 T. Scheben, 'A State with an Army – An Army with a State? – The Ottoman Power Machine', in A. Cassola, with I. Bostan & T. Scheben, *The 1565 Ottoman Malta Campaign Register* (Malta, 1998).

28 C. Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650. The Structure of Power* (Basingstoke & New York, 2002).

29 C. Testa, *The Life and Times of Grand Master Pinto 1741-1773* (Malta, 1989), 117-27.

urban poor, was a source of concern to the religious authorities. Indeed, as pointed out earlier, perhaps there was not a great deal of difference between the language and beliefs of captured slaves and the urban poor. The Maltese archival records provide many examples of local people interacting with slaves with apparently little social unease, and experiencing few difficulties in communication. This was viewed with some degree of apprehension by the authorities. The Inquisitors and Apostolic Delegates in Malta often aired their concern with the Holy See that the mass of the Catholic population was not quite certain what formal Catholicism meant – at least in terms of practices. Here was elite literate Catholicism, and there was popular religion, and much of this appears from the evidence to have been easily influenced by popular beliefs elsewhere. Indeed that was a standard feature of much popular religion throughout the Mediterranean. In Cyprus, for example, it was not uncommon for Greeks to visit Muslim shrines and vice-versa until very recently. In Malta it appears that one major charge brought before the authorities was the popular use of “love magic”, resorted to by women.³⁰ Unfortunately none of the Inquisitors were generous enough to transcribe the spells for the use of subsequent generations, or even for subsequent tourist marketing alongside *figolli*.³¹ In reality there are a number of spells included in the archival documentation dating back to the early days of the Inquisition, and more precisely until the early decades of the seventeenth century. Lucky charms used for spells were often attached to the case and then transcribed in the document itself. Later many spells, historiolas, prayers and the like were transcribed in the court case by the clerk of the tribunal. But given the suggestion that the biggest problem for populations then was not so much the enhancement of fertility, but its control, it would not be unreasonable to assume that perhaps some of these preparations were designed to control conception.³² We do know that Islam has less resistance to birth control than Christianity – indeed there were many popular texts and local knowledge available from the fifteenth century onwards. It would not be unreasonable to assume that poor urban women liable to be giving birth to large numbers of children, were much more concerned with limiting their number of children, than obtaining an early version of Viagra

for their men folk.

Slaves were thus heavily involved in the local informal economy. Lacking resources, they could try to supplement their incomes through such services, which could be used towards purchasing their freedom. Once baptized, slaves could take on the names of their masters.

Malta both thrived upon, and was threatened by, being a frontline society. As a frontline society, the elite, and the population to a lesser extent, thrived upon booty, raiding, and slavery and its multiplier effects. But the large mass of potentially unruly, clearly resentful and sometimes desperate men, threatened the social order. They could not be integrated easily for both economic and religious reasons. Individuals caught in between were in a precarious position. Once people were moved from one politico-religious context to the other – as happened in Maltese society with slavery – they were both without friends and protection, and vulnerable.

Marginality was suspect, and apostasy or conversion, could be a powerful, but risky, weapon to ameliorate one's position. It was risky because both Christianity and Islam only issued one-way entry tickets to outsiders, and Christianity had by far the greater penalties. Yet interestingly there seems to have been little stigma attached to religious origins in Malta, or at least we have not come across any evidence of people making social distinctions based upon religious origins.³³ We do know, too, that Muslim slaves were manumitted and Christianized and entered society at the grassroots, and in particular for the offspring of (black and other) female Muslim slaves.³⁴ In short there was no self-reproducing class of slaves, and most of the reproduction was Christian (male-owner) “assisted”. We should therefore like to chance the suggestion that Christianization was a major means for the integration of a substantial number of slaves into Maltese society, given that there may have not been substantial cultural and linguistic differences between them and the urban poor. The Inquisition functioned as an instrument of control in the policing of a potentially unruly, ‘dangerous’ social group and acted as a type of ticket issuing authority to entry into

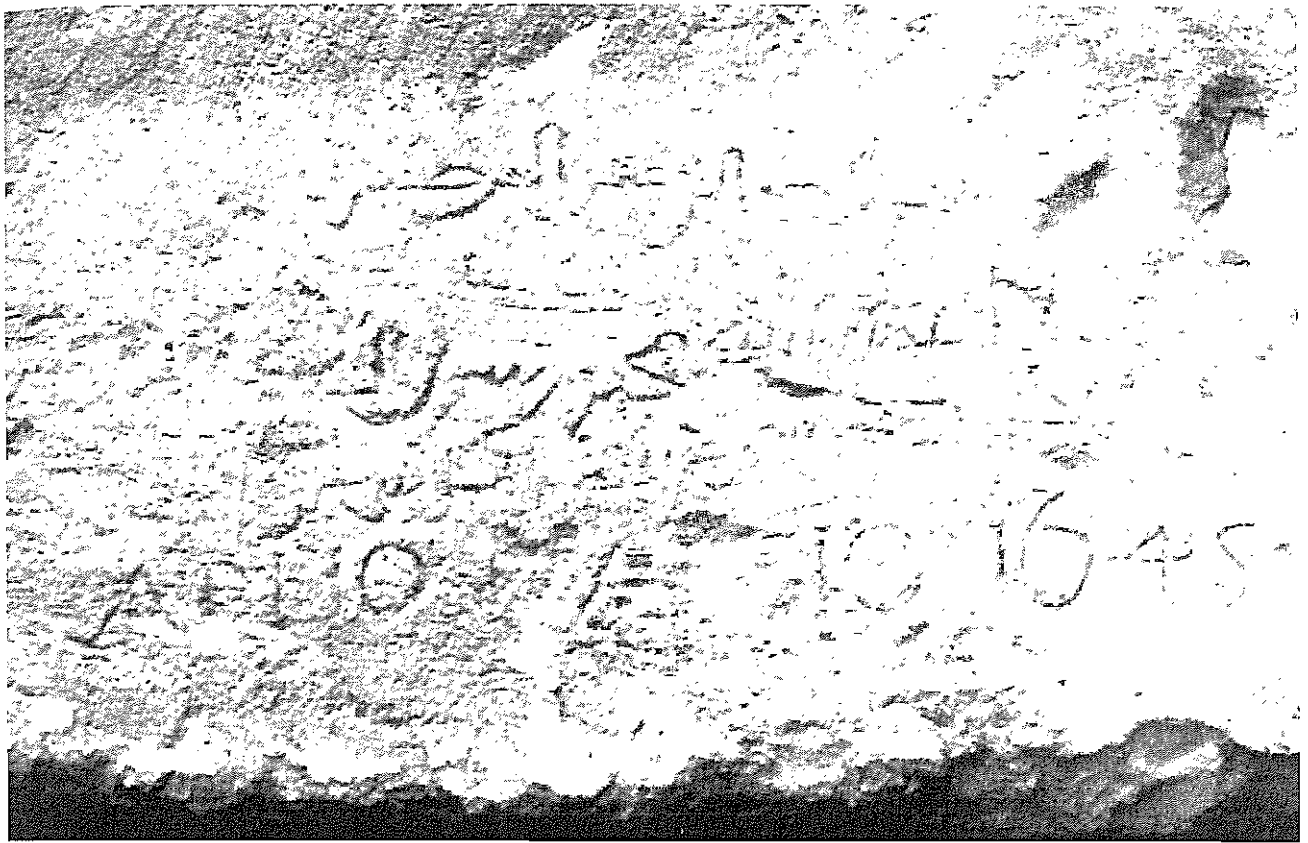
30 Accusations of love magic form part of the archives of the Roman Inquisition. In one particular case of 1625 no less than forty Valletta women, mostly prostitutes, were accused of love magic. Most of them were found guilty and given a sentence. Archives of the Inquisition Criminal Proceedings, vol.44B case 100.

31 *Figolli*, singular *figolla*, is a Maltese Easter cake.

32 James Debono cites the activities of the Dingli physician Giovanni Battista Dingli who in the late seventeenth century was ostracized by the medical community because of his unorthodox methods which included abortive medicines. Debono, 59-60.

33 B. Benassaer et al., *Les chrétiens d'Allah* (Paris, 1989); M. Xuereb, ‘Apostasy and the Inquisition in Malta 1720-1730 (unpublished B.A. (Hons) thesis, University of Malta, 1998).

34 Wettinger (2006).



Graffiti found in the Inquisitor's Palace indicating the presence of Arabic speaking detainees
(photo courtesy Christian Formosa)

Maltese society.³⁵ The potential social loss of status at having fathered a child by a black (or white) female slave could be meritoriously compensated through the child's incorporation in the Christian community through baptism – a type of spiritual god-parenthood (*compadrazgo*).

Ciappara argues that the Inquisition in Malta appears to have been primarily employed to separate popular beliefs from official Catholicism – a far from easy task, given that a good number of accused tended to be the clergy themselves. Even the priests seemed to be confused about religious method. He shows convincingly that the Inquisition was dominated by lawyers rather than theologians, and that its legalistic, bureaucratized, rational, even scientific approach can

even make it appear less arbitrary to us than secular justice of this period.³⁶ Indeed, for certain segments of the population the Inquisition appears to have been viewed as fairer than the other forms of religious justice or even secular justice, oriented as the latter was towards the display of an increasing absolutist secular power. This is why the elite and well established appear to have had alliances with the Inquisitors as a counterbalance to secular knightly power.³⁷ By contrast the Inquisition appears to have been viewed with unconcealed terror by the slaves or the marginal, suggesting that its impact on the elite must have been much less threatening.³⁸ Here one should remember that the penalties for a fabricated conversion were high, and for the illiterate unaccustomed to the workings of a ponderous, alien, even linguistically

35 Ciappara, 223-60.

36 Ibid., 64.

37 The most notable Maltese families, like the Testaferrata, sought to become familiars of the Inquisition, thus falling under the direct jurisdiction of the Inquisitor, and indirectly of that of the Holy See.

38 In reality the Holy Office was very threatening to all sections of society in its early years. Don Francesco Gesualdo – a French member of the Order and a heretic – was burned at the stake by the Inquisition for his views. Matteo Falson – owner of Palazzo Falson – was burned in effigy as he managed to escape to Sicily, and his lands confiscated. Parish priests who performed solicitation during confession were tortured and given tough sentences. Likewise Simon Provost, Master of the Mint and Flemish member of the Order, was tortured even though he complained of suffering from *mal francese* – venereal disease – and needed to carry out some gilding on the grandmaster's galley. C. Cassar, 'The Reformation and sixteenth century Malta', *Melita Historica*, x/1 (1988), 51-68. There is even an index of knights who were accused by a special tribunal and given sentences by the Holy Office between 1564 and 1698. C. Cassar, '1564-1696: The Inquisition index of Knights Hospitallers of the Order of St John', *Melita Historica*, xi/2 (1993), 157-196. Probably things changed with the passing of time but not only for the top echelons of society. There was a time in the mid-eighteenth century that the Inquisition's prisons were empty and at one point, when the inquisitor wanted to carry out the strappado on an accused man, he had to borrow the equipment from the grandmaster's law courts as they had not tortured anyone for a good number of years.

impenetrable, and socially distant caste, the operations of the Inquisition must have seemed particularly intimidating. The difficulty of demonstrating true repentance especially for those (such as slaves or the marginal) unaccustomed to the required cultural codes, clearly set by the elite, must have rendered the workings of the Inquisition somewhat arbitrary and terrifying. Here one must be cautious in relying on internal evidence, such as records, without questioning what the records were the product of. Although the records show that in most cases the Inquisition was scrupulously fair in its workings as a rational and bureaucratic machinery, for many it was precisely this scrupulosity that must have appeared terrifying. Seen from the outside – for those who had no means of understanding its workings – that scrupulous legality must have appeared even more terrifying to its unfortunate victims. In a way it was precisely that very legality of form that was repressive.

The Inquisition in Malta appears to have been a means for the policing and manufacture of civil society through the production of deviance as deviance. That it appears to have been benign, that not many people were put to death, would not to our mind suggest it was politically inconsequential as a means of repression.³⁹ We suggest that it was not the punishment *per se* that was socially significant, but that it was a system of signs, a codification of behaviour and rules, that only the elite knew properly and controlled. It must have been exceedingly difficult for ordinary people to distinguish between the commissioning of a cure from a slave (illicit) to the purchase of an indulgence from a village priest (licit). Even the latter were often confused themselves.⁴⁰ Communities often presented a united front to the abjurations of the Inquisitors.

The authors

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39 The Inquisition made use of Roman Law where torture was part of the normal procedure. Similar methods were used by secular courts all over the continent at the time.

40 The fine distinction between the magical and the religious was most often blurred. Often the clergy themselves failed to distinguish between popular healing traditions and prayer and religious invocations. The confusion was very often unintentionally encouraged by the clergy, particularly the very generous religious congregations who shared their lives with the people, and took pity on the plights of the poor. In 1667 the Holy Congregation of the Inquisition ordered the inquisitor to prohibit the Franciscan friars from preparing 'superstitious medicaments'. It was said that these Franciscans prepared small paper covered in wafers inscribed with the words 'Immacolata Maria Virginis Conceptio sit nobis semper salus et protectio' (Immaculate Conception Virgin Mary is always the protector of our health) which they distribute to the people. Archives of the Inquisition of Malta, Correspondence, vol.11, fol.256.